

On Feng Youlan's View of Freedom

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Abstract: Feng Youlan's philosophy of life is a hot topic of discussion in the academic world, and his concept of freedom is closely related to the philosophy of life based on the four realms. Whether it is the realm theory expounded in *The New Original Man* or the realistic concern expressed in *The New Thing Theory*, it can be seen that freedom is a hidden theme running through the philosophical thought of Mr Feng Youlan. This paper focuses on *The New Original Man* to explore the connotation of Feng Youlan's concept of freedom and the path to its realisation.

Keywords: Freedom; Feng Youlan; Realm of life

Feng Youlan's philosophy of life is a hot topic of discussion in the academic world, and his concept of freedom is closely related to his philosophy of life based on the four realms. Although Feng Youlan's concept of freedom does not stand out in the framework of 'New Science', both the theory of realm he discussed in 'The New Original Man' and the concern for reality he expressed in 'The New Theory of Things' show that freedom as a potential theme runs through his philosophical thinking. As a representative of modern Neo-Confucianism, Feng Youlan's view of freedom can help us understand the modern Confucian concept of freedom more deeply.

1. Access to freedom

Although Feng Youlan's view of freedom includes an awareness of socio-political and moral principles, he does not intend to promote the absolute respect and independence of reason advocated by political liberals, nor does he stand on the side of individual liberalism to express the opinion that the subject should be free from the constraints of politics and morality in pursuit of absolute self-consciousness. Feng Youlan puts reason in his freedom in the context of knowing the morality of the universe. Although people are still in actuality, and although they are still superficially doing the work of sweeping and responding to the situation, their degree of awareness has reached the realm of heaven and earth, where external objects can no longer restrict or oppress them, and everything they do can satisfy their self-consciousness. At this point the subject is not bound by reality; he is in the same heavenly realm and has realised freedom and transcendence.

1.1 Beyond Limits

The limitations mentioned here are actually human desires, and from the perspective of the realm, human freedom is essentially about limiting one's desires rather than doing whatever one wants to do with the desires of one's heart. It is said in *The New Original Man - Talents and Fortunes*: 'Beyond limitations, i.e. without limitations. To be free from limitations is to be free.[Feng Youlan, *The Six Books of the Chaste Yuan* (third edition), vol. 5, Zhonghua Shuju, 2014, p. 737.]' This transcendence includes both transcendence of external nature and transcendence of internal nature. If the subject is able to dominate his desires with universal reason, he can be said to have realised true freedom. He is able to exercise permanent, planning control over his desires, to restrain them on the basis of reason, and to satisfy greater desires by restraining them.

In addition, he argues for the relationship between freedom and free will in terms of the responsibility dimension of virtue. This freedom is not active freedom, but passive freedom. The 'free man' here, in particular, is neither bound by nature nor controlled by fate, and so is not subject to the constraints of the lower classes in the real world. Freedom does not evolve slowly from the transcendence of desires; it is a mission that one is born with. It requires one to transcend the bondage of desire and to pursue it constantly. A person is a free person only when he feels unfree and pursues freedom. It is only on the basis of feeling unfree that the subject can become free. 'In the moral realm, or in the realm of heaven and earth, a man's will is not determined by the desire for gain, and his behaviour is not limited by his talents or his destiny.[Feng Youlan, *The Six Books of the Chaste Yuan* (Third Edition), vol. 5, China Bookstore, 2014, pp. 738-739].' In this context, unrestricted freedom actually means the absence of the limitations of talent and destiny.

As man presents the ability to limit his desires in his sprinkling response, so he also possesses the ability to create beyond them. This act of limiting primitive desires to satisfy moral aspirations, such as the transcendence of sacrificing one's life for justice, may even sometimes be superficially indistinguishable from everyday scientific research or star gazing, but in reality the realm of this category of people is already in the realm of morality or the realm of heaven and earth. One can only fulfil the role of transcendence to a greater extent if one continually cultivates the abil-

ity to limit one's desires, and these things certainly include working for the good of humanity, the goal of all human behaviour is ultimately truth, goodness and beauty, and this capacity for transcendence and creativity, which emerges gradually from the history of human life, is freedom.

1.2 Breaking free

In Feng Youlan's view of freedom, freedom also contains the connotation of not being bound. Such constraints arise from the relationship between the individual and the group, such as the legal system and moral norms established to stabilise the state and society, which are, to a certain extent, constraints imposed by the group on the individual. However, he did not favour the abolition of such rules in the pursuit of true freedom. For Feng Youlan, the moral laws of society were not a form of bondage, but 'as necessary as human nature', and they did not oppress the individual. On the contrary, he objected to political philosophies, such as those of the Taoists, which in part advocated extreme individual freedom.

'Freedom speaks of a bondage, and to strive for freedom is to strive for the breaking or breaking away of a bondage. [Philosophy of Life. Since the preface', Sansongtang quanji, vol. 1, p. 347. The First Edition of Mr Feng Youlan's Annals, edited by Cai Zhongde, Henan People's Publishing House, 1994, pp. 51-53]'. As mentioned above, Feng Youlan's concept of freedom is 'to be free from or to break a particular bondage'. Being born free is a basic possibility for man, not a reality. Man can only become truly free if he constantly seeks his freedom. Man only pursues freedom and wants to break free from his chains if he feels unfree, and in this sense, the man who pursues freedom is usually the man who is not free. Thus, a truly free man is not the same as a potentially free man: although they are both in bondage, the former constantly liberates and breaks the bondage, becoming freer and freer, whereas the latter recognises the bondage and imprisons himself, his freedom in a state of sleep. True freedom manifests itself as a historical process.

1.3 Dominant Self

According to Feng Youlan, one of the manifestations of the realisation of freedom is that the subject has the ability to dominate the self, that is, the subject is able to be the master of all the actions it controls. This freedom is not the absence of certain restrictions or prohibitions, but the ability to do what it wants to do. The subject not only has the freedom to be free from limitations and restrictions, but also the freedom to do what he or she wants. There is a need to focus on the connotation of 'I'. Feng Youlan also used Mencius' idea that 'the rich and powerful cannot be obscene, the poor and lowly cannot be moved, and the mighty and powerful cannot be subjugated.' He added to this the view that a person who can truly master himself, i.e., one who has a true 'I,' has a true 'I'. Thus, the mastery of the self by a person in the realm of heaven and earth is the mastery of the whole universe in its entirety.

This domination of the self is embodied in the freedom of choice, which involves a rational trade-off but is ultimately based on arbitrariness, i.e., choosing one over the other. But the problem with this freedom is that choice is offered in advance, and we can only choose what is already possible. So the choice is free, but the possibilities available are not freely determined. So this freedom, while a level above the freedom to resist, is still not complete freedom.

1.4 Immortality of the soul

'True metaphysics makes such endeavours possible, but does not prove that there is, in fact, a God, as the ordinary religions call him, and that the soul is inherently indestructible and the will is inherently free. As in the case of the Book, the attainment of immortality and freedom is an 'ought', not a fact. ['The Position of the New Science in Philosophy and Its Methods', Sansongtang Quanshu, vol. 11, Henan People's Publishing House, 1992, pp. 443-444]'. This freedom is the spiritual realm obtained by man's participation in the realm of heaven and earth. In the realm of heaven and earth, man is not only undetermined by his interests, but also not limited by his talents or his life, thus attaining both immortality and freedom.

2. Paths to Freedom

Feng Youlan's concept of freedom is mainly based on the judgement and understanding of morality, and is put forward in order to raise the realm of self-worth realisation. The significance of awareness of the existence of the universe is to make meaningless things meaningful through awareness, to realise a world of value from the real world, and to discover the meaning of human life in this world of value. Only through the continuous development of the mind's spiritual awareness can a person realise his or her nature, and the highest goal of realisation is to know and fulfil one's nature. The highest goal of enlightenment is to know and fulfil one's nature. The purpose of enlightenment is also to realise freedom. In this section, we will discuss the path to freedom under enlightenment.

2.1 Work of Learning and Cultivation

'If the freedom of the will is said to come from learning, then the freedom of the will seems to be determined by learning, and is not completely undetermined. [Feng Youlan, The Six Books of the Chaste Yuan (Third Edition), vol. 5, China Bookstore, 2014, p. 738.]' In Feng Youlan's view, the path to freedom cannot be separated from the work of learning and cultivation. Freedom is based on learning and cultivation. According to Feng Youlan, to achieve spiritual transcendence, it is necessary to eliminate movement and achieve complete enlightenment. 'Reason flows in the realm of truth, and one needs to know reason through awareness and understanding. One needs to achieve unity with

reason through learning and cultivation, transcend from reality, and reach the state of “all things are in me”. The realm of ‘all things are in me’ is reached, and the boundaries between inside and outside are completely bridged.

2.2 Ethical behaviour after awareness

Awareness is a prerequisite for freedom in life, and awareness is closely linked to morality. It is only through awareness that a person can act morally and know whether his or her behaviour is moral or not. Some ‘Actions without awareness, although they may be in accordance with the moral law, are not, strictly speaking, moral. [Feng Youlan, *The Six Books of Zhenyuan* (Third Edition), vol. 5, Zhonghua Shuju, 2014, p. 585.]’ The criterion for freedom is whether or not awareness and morality are united. What people do in the realm of heaven and earth is moral. Human beings are the sum total of their social relations, which are based on various norms. In the broadest sense, they are moral norms through which people fulfil their obligations and complete the moral acts they must perform as members of society, it makes more sense for a person who is aware of morality to do moral things than for a person who is not aware of morality to do moral things.

2.3 Silence, Sense and Sensibility

Feng Youlan succeeded Cheng Zhu's view that ‘as things are not natural, they are also not natural’ and advocated the idea of ‘being silent and motionless, feeling and then being able to understand’. Cultivating one's spiritual silence, one should remain quiet in all situations; in both good and bad situations, one should be able to stop all sorts of distractions in one's mind and remain silent and motionless, just like heaven and earth. In fact, if a person can do so, he or she has already transcended the real world and reached the realm of heaven and earth. The ‘freedom’ that a person who has reached this state can enjoy is no longer limited to the real world, and his outwardly manifested behaviour and attitude will have a look of enlightenment, clarity and transcendence after ‘awareness’.

3. Problems

Feng Youlan's conception of freedom is elaborated in terms of both the real and the actual, and its core is the pursuit of the transcendent and supreme ‘reason’, which is precisely the quality of his ‘new science’. However, this quality is also the problem faced by his concept of freedom. This ethereal spirit reveals the flaw that it ignores the reality of worldly desires. Another contradiction lies in the fact that Feng Youlan restricts freedom to the moral realm and the realm of heaven and earth, but in the process of awakening, the natural realm and the utilitarian realm are necessary stages, and this transgression of freedom makes the freedom of the natural realm and the utilitarian realm seem meaningless. This implies that the perception of ‘reality’ is nothing more than a means of realising true freedom, without recognising the material and utilitarian interests pursued in the realm of nature. The so-called freedom is only to be free from the shackles of the world and to achieve a state of spiritual self-sufficiency. In actual practice, the so-called true spiritual freedom cannot be realised at all, and this spiritual freedom avoids the defects and criticisms of reality, and lacks the role and value that freedom needs to play in the real society.

Of course, Feng Youlan's conception of freedom is based on the principle of ‘detachment from reality’, and thus it negates the pre-modern social values carried by the ‘reason’ ontology of the Song and Ming philosophies, and is no longer in line with the traditional Confucian spiritual freedom. However, this tendency to go beyond the content of values also clearly demonstrates the connotation of the Buddha's freedom to escape into emptiness. Indeed, Feng Youlan himself has stated that ‘Taoism is jealous of talking about its proximity to metaphysics and Zen, while the new science openly declares its proximity to metaphysics and Zen.’ This also exposes the problem that while freely rejecting the values of pre-modern societies, it does not subscribe to modern values but favours an ethereal purity of form, denying all substance and accepting all change without being influenced by any values.

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