

On the Discussion of ‘Reason and Desire’ and Its Theoretical Significance in Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationship between the ‘heaven reason’ and the ‘Human Desire’ in Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties and its theoretical significance for personal cultivation, social ethics, and political governance. Firstly, the author will introduce the definition and interpretation of ‘reason’ and ‘desire’, and describe their importance in Song Ming philosophy. Next, we will discuss and compare the different interpretations and views of different philosophers on the concept of reason and desire. Finally, we will discuss the significance and value of ‘reason and desire’ in Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties, while pointing out its advantages and disadvantages.

Keywords: Song Ming Neo Confucianism; Theory; Significance

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and purpose of the study

During the Song and Ming dynasties, social change and political upheaval deepened concerns about social order and human nature; the traditions and challenges of Confucianism fuelled the development of Confucianism; and economic and cultural prosperity provided an environment for scholars to pursue knowledge. All these factors together contributed to the rise and prosperity of Song and Ming ethics, making it an important school of Chinese philosophical thought at the time. Then came the Qing Dynasty, although the Qing Dynasty reflected on and criticised the entire Ming Dynasty, but after the middle of the Qing Dynasty, there was a shift in the academic direction from the science of science to the science of simplicity, that is to say, sinology, and the science of science was slowly declining. It was not until the Xinhai Revolution and the May Fourth Movement that some modern scholars criticised the Song Ming Neo-Confucianism for the idea of ‘keeping the reason of heaven and extinguishing the desires of mankind’. They argued that the idea of ‘keeping the Heaven reason and extinguishing human desires’ ignored human nature and individual needs, and that the doctrine was a form of asceticism. The ‘Heaven reason’ is a nebulous concept that lacks practicality. People should focus on reality and practicality rather than pursuing the abstract ‘Heaven reason’. Human nature contains both the pursuit of the Heaven reason and the concern for individual desires and needs.

In the author's opinion, this kind of point of view is a misunderstanding of the meaning of the core idea of ‘reason’. What the Song and Ming Confucians said, ‘Keeping heavenly reason and removing human desires’, in the direct sense, ‘heavenly reason’ refers to the universal moral law of the society. In the direct sense, ‘heavenly law’ refers to the universal moral law of society, while ‘human desires’ does not refer to all sensual desires in general, but refers to sensual desires that are in conflict with the moral law. The ‘human desires’ that Rigaku is trying to remove do not refer specifically to sexual desires, as modern literary scholars understand them, nor do they refer to all the natural physical desires of human beings. Therefore, it is not entirely appropriate to call Rigaku asceticism.

Based on this, the author will look at the formation and development of reason and desire from the basic definitions and connotations of ‘reason’ and ‘desire’ in the Song Ming Neo-Confucianism, and summarise the different interpretations and views of different scholars on the concept of reason and desire, and then analyse its role and significance in the aspects of individual cultivation, social ethics and political governance.

2. Different definitions of "reason" and "desire" and the concepts of reason and desire

2.1 Definitions of ‘reason’ and ‘desire’ from different perspectives in Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties

How did the word ‘reason’ permeate the Song and Ming philosophical system and its development? The ‘reason’ mentioned in Song

Mingxiology appeared in ancient China, and one of the most direct sources is the concept of 'heavenly reason' in pre-Qin Confucianism, so we can simply say that the first meaning of 'reason' in Song Mingxiology is 'heavenly reason'. Therefore, it can be simply said that the first meaning of 'reason' in Songming philosophy is 'heavenly reason', and this concept has already appeared in the pre-Qin Dynasty's 'Records of the Rites': 'If you can't reflect on your own body, the heavenly reason will be extinguished. If the thing of the infinite sense of man, and man's good and bad no section, it is the thing to and man compounds also. People also compounds also, extinguish the reason of heaven and the poor people desire also.' The heavenly reason here actually speaks of the ethical and moral principles that govern human temperament. Therefore, the concept of heavenly reason is not an invention of the Song Ming philosophy. Including the Taoist Zhuangzi, which also talks about the relationship between the Way of Heaven and the Way of Man, as well as the idea that man should be in harmony with the Way of Heaven, but Confucianism points more to the ethical and moral principles of society, and puts forward the 'heavenly reason' as opposed to the 'Human Desire', which is stated in the Song Ming philosophy. In the Song Ming Neo-Confucianism, the idea of 'keeping the heavenly reason and removing human desires' is also derived from this opposition in the Book of Rites.

However, the understanding of 'reason' in Song Ming philosophy did not just stay in the understanding of the Book of Rites. Roy Cheng, one of the founders of Song Ming philosophy, said a very famous sentence, which has also received attention in the history of science: 'Although I have received something from my studies, the word "heavenly reason" is my own personal favourite.' The word 'heavenly reason' is self-posted, meaning that although his academic thinking has a teacher to teach, to inspire him, but 'the principle of heaven' two words are their own posting out, which can be said to be the founder of science for the creation of the science of self-consciousness, self-description. The word 'heavenly reason' had already existed in the Confucianism of the pre-Qin Dynasty, so how could they say that they came up with it by themselves? This lies in the word 'considerate', not that this conceptual form was put forward by him, but the understanding of this concept and a new Confucian system established through this understanding, which they had their own unique experience. Therefore, the author believes that in the Song Ming Neo-Confucianism, when they talk about 'preserving the principles of heaven and removing human desires', the principles of heaven refer to the general moral law of the society. The specific understanding of this law varied among Confucian scholars of each era, depending on the historical and cultural circumstances and conditions of the time.

'Desire' reflects the psychological needs of human beings. The development of a sound personality should satisfy physiological needs, the need for self-esteem, the need for development, the need for creativity, and the need for self-realisation. While rationalists talk about 'no desire', 'remove desire' and 'extinguish desire', the general public tends to understand 'desire' simply as Generally, people tend to understand 'desire' simply as lust, appetite, greed, and so on. In fact, the scope of 'desire' is very wide, and all intentional actions can be called 'desire', so the idea of 'no desire' also includes the meaning of 'doing nothing'. Therefore, the idea of 'no desire' also includes the meaning of 'doing nothing'. In Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, the idea of 'no desire' is linked to their idea of natural inaction. The rationalists recast the idea of 'no desire', and to a certain extent accepted the idea of 'non-action', such as the rationalist Zhou Dunyi put forward the idea of 'no desire, therefore quietness' and at the same time put forward the idea of 'sincerity is no matter'. 'Sincerity is nothing'. 'Sincerity, when there is nothing to do, is good.' Excluding artificiality, the mind is left to its own nature. According to Chengs, 'If there is nothing that can be done, and if there is nothing that can be done, it is the heavenly reason'.

In the author's view, human desire does not mean all sensual desires in the Song Ming Neo-Confucianism, but refers to those sensual desires that are in conflict with the moral law, so removing human desire does not mean removing all sensual desires of human beings. According to Mencius, the most important of human sensual desires is eating and drinking - the manifestation of food and sex-centred nature.

2.2 Understanding and Interpretation of the Concept of Reason and Desire in Song Ming Neo-Confucianism by Different Philosophers

The foundation for the development of Song Ming Neo-Confucianism was laid by Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi. They analysed 'reason' and 'desire' dialectically in the Confucian classics, emphasising the inherent goodness of human nature and arguing that moral wisdom and goodness are inherent in human nature. Zhu Xi further developed the reasoning, arguing that all desires beyond the basic needs of human beings are attributed to human desires. Subsequently, Wang Yangming, a Ming Dynasty rationalist, further put forward the rationale of 'keeping heaven's reason and extinguishing human desires'. The author will introduce the ideas and interpretations of several major rationalists during the Song and Ming dynasties, with an emphasis on the views of Cheng Hao&Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi.

Zhou Dunyi believed that one should achieve inner tranquility through desirelessness. He advocated that one should transcend the pursuit of desires and get rid of attachment and greed for external things so as to achieve inner peace. According to him, desirelessness means non-attachment, and non-attachment leads to a stable mind.

cheng's 'heart of the Way' is the 'heavenly reason', while the 'heart of the people' is the 'selfish desires'. According to chengs, the op-

position between the 'human heart' and the 'Taoist mind' is the opposition between 'human desires' and the 'heavenly reason'. The 'heavenly reason' is the highest principle of social ethics and morality as well as the ideal state of truth, goodness and beauty. 'The difference between man and beast lies in the existence of the heavenly reason, so we must "extinguish selfish desires" and "fulfil the heavenly reason" so as not to be reduced to the level of animals. Therefore, it is necessary to 'extinguish selfish desires' and 'uphold the heavenly reason' so as not to be reduced to the level of beasts. According to Cheng, 'To do what one does not want to do, to achieve what one does not want to achieve, is the heavenly reason'.

In Zhu Xi's reasoning, he attributes all desires beyond the basic needs of man to human desires, and is not completely denying man's natural desires and equating them with asceticism. 'The mouth of the desire to eat, the eyes of the desire for colour, the ears of the desire to hear, the nose of the desire to smell, the limbs of the desire to be comfortable, how since it will think? This is the naturalness of the heavenly reason. However, the reason is attached to the gas, this much is issued from the blood and gas shell. Therefore, a gentleman should not take this as the main thing, but take the reason of heaven as the main thing, and do not put that in question, but see how this reason fits.' ('Class of Words' Volume 61) Zhu Xi believes that there is a criterion between what should be and what should not be, between what is good and what is evil, and this criterion is the reason. Conform to this reason is should, is the reason of heaven, good; and does not conform to this reason is should not, is human desire, evil. At the same time, however, Zhu Xi regarded desires that were 'natural but not necessary' as human desires and advocated their elimination. In fact, 'food and seek delicious' is also a natural desire of human beings, in their own conditions allow, make material life more abundant, higher quality, in fact, is reasonable and natural, only purely for material gain, to do things that violate the interests of other people and society, is not legitimate desire, should be opposed. Zhu Xi recognised that if the pursuit of personal material interests is allowed and advocated, then the possibility of plunging people into purely material pursuits and doing anything for the sake of material enjoyment will increase. Therefore, Zhu Xi advocated the complete extinction of human desires, and that all demands beyond the most basic needs of existence were unjustified.

In Wang Yangming's thought, he further developed the concept of 'discrimination of reason and desire' and emphasised the importance of one's inner intuition and conscience. According to Wang Yangming, the human heart is endowed with intuition and conscience, and is capable of perceiving moral truths and the difference between good and evil. He advocated that one should rely on one's inner intuition to judge and act, and to realise one's moral state and life value through practice and cultivation. He emphasised the importance of one's inner intuition and self-consciousness for moral cultivation and the pursuit of meaning in life.

The rational and desirous concepts of Cheng and Zhu's rationality and desires, especially those of Cheng, had a great influence on later generations. Some modern scholars have pointed out that there are three kinds of rationality and desire in Chinese history: first, 'rationality exists in desire'; second, 'to restrain desire with rationality'; and third, 'to extinguish desire with rationality'. It is believed that Cheng's view of reason and desire is a summary and inheritance of the historical discourse of reason and desire, and at the same time, it is deeply imprinted with the marks of the times. They resolutely oppose the view of 'reason exists in the context of desire' with a tendency towards materialism, and strongly advocate 'the existence of reason and the extinction of desire', and at the same time, they have more or less absorbed the concept of 'the use of reason to restrain desires' and 'the use of reason to restrain desires'. At the same time, they also somewhat absorbed some of the insights of 'abstaining from desire by reason' and formed their own unique view of reason and desire. This view of Er Cheng's view of reason and desire is similar to the view of many scholars of Zhu Xi's view of reason and desire, that Zhu Xi's view of 'keeping the reason of heaven and extinguishing the desire of man' pitted 'the reason of heaven' against 'the desire of man' and put the feudal ethical principles against each other. The view that Zhu Xi, 'the existence of the heavenly reason, extinguish human desires', the 'heavenly reason' and 'human desires' in opposition to the feudal ethics to see the most good and beautiful things, and do not allow people to have any objections. However, there are scholars who disagree, arguing that the rational desire concept of Cheng Zhu rationalism affirms the basic desires of men and women, and that it is on this basis that they resolutely oppose the asceticism of Buddhism.

3. The significance of the discernment of reason and desire

3.1 Exploring the significance of the discernment of reason and desire for the understanding of human nature and moral cultivation

Zhu Xi advocated the use of order and norms to regulate people's daily behaviour, and the use of 'reason' to deal with ethical relationships between people, and this reason is 'ritual'. Wang Yangming advocated 'unity of knowledge and action' and 'nothing outside the mind', claiming that one should rely on one's own inner intuition to judge and act, and to achieve one's own moral state and value of life through practice and cultivation. It can be seen that the concept of rational desire in the Song and Ming dynasties was not only conducive to people's pursuit of a lofty moral realm, but also to the development of people's moral qualities. In the face of the temptation of desire, some people who

lack moral qualities have difficulty in controlling their excessive desires, Zhu Xi's ideological vein of the concept of reason and desire from the inside out contains the ethical light that promotes the development of people's moral qualities. The material civilisation of today's society has gained a high speed development, but the spiritual civilisation is difficult to keep pace with the material civilisation. In the development of society, we need to grasp both material and spiritual civilisation together, and recognise that raising people's moral awareness, strengthening their moral cultivation, and developing their moral qualities are indispensable to raising the level of spiritual civilisation in the whole society.

3.2 Analysing the application of reason and desire in social ethics and governance

As the author mentioned above, in Song Ming Neo-Confucianism, both Chengs, Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming regard reason as man's rationality and the universal social and moral code that he must abide by, whereas desire is man's sensibility and the behaviour of his individual desires. They emphasise the importance of reason in guiding and restraining desires, arguing that through rational inhibition and accommodation, desires can be made to conform to moral principles and realise the pursuit of morality. On the one hand, morality becomes the most important yardstick of political evaluation in this view. Moral rationality becomes the basis for the existence of all things, and this moral ideal becomes the ultimate driving force of objective historical development, thus taking the a priori supreme ethical ontology of the Heaven Reason as the only value standard that can be affirmed for the course of human history. Whether or not to follow the Three Principles and the Five Constants plays a decisive role in the rise and fall of social governance, and the discernment of reason and desire becomes a major criterion for judging the reality of political governance. On the other hand, morality has become the ultimate basis for driving human society towards the ultimate good, while the despicable materialistic and emotional desires are the causes of greed, plunder and strife in society. The basic characteristic of morality lies in its requirement that the individual's sensual passions should restrain the individual's self-interested behaviour. The science of reason advocates the suppression of individual lust, aiming to turn morality from the external constraints of norms into the internal requirements of individuals, and to make people change from the inevitable endeavour of sensibility to the free mastery of reason, and consciously undertake the mission of regulating the morality of the society. The pursuit of the satisfaction of one's material desires certainly has the potential to increase the likelihood of one's moving towards immorality and sin, but the sensual needs of human beings are in fact the true driving force originating from the potentials of life, and are the 'source of living water' for all human intelligent behaviours and their creative activities, so Confucianism represses the natural desires of human beings while at the same time repressing. Therefore, while suppressing man's natural desires, Confucianism also suppresses man's pursuit of achievement and the driving force for social development. As Chen Lai points out, 'A society in which such a moral philosophy as rationality, which focuses only on social stability, is absolutely dominant, is bound to have an inhibiting effect on the momentum of social development. Although rationality was adapted to the needs of Chinese society itself, it in turn deepened the stabilising mechanism of late feudal society in China and made the growth of capitalist relations of production difficult'. In a certain sense, rationality achieved social stability at the expense of individual interests as well as social development.

4. Conclusion

Based on the above, the author believes that the Song Ming Neo-Confucianism of 'reason and desire' still have positive and progressive significance in modern times. There are two kinds of considerations for this viewpoint. One is that the principle of 'keeping heavenly principles and eliminating human desires' is an absolute moral law, which may be expressed differently in different times, but the correctness of the principle of dealing with the relationship between the public and the private, and dealing with the interests of the group and the interests of the individual is eternal; the other is that there are a lot of phenomena of 'keeping heavenly principles and eliminating human desires' in the life of the modern society which can lead to the phenomenon of 'keeping heavenly principles and eliminating human desires'. Another consideration is that in modern social life, there are also many phenomena of forgetfulness of profit and excessive human desires, which can be limited and overcome by the idea of 'keeping heaven's justice and putting an end to human desires'. At the same time, the author believes that the development of the times should also be combined with specific problems and specific analysis, 'the survival of the Divine Principle, extinguish human desires' of the reason and desire to identify the specific historical conditions (monarchical dictatorship, the family-oriented social environment), and nowadays the era of respect for science, the nation and freedom to measure the progress of a certain ideology is mainly to see whether it is adapted to social development, the laws of morality must be adapted to social development. The progress of an idea is measured mainly by its adaptation to the development of society, and the laws of morality must be adapted to the laws of social development, thus the moral law is not eternal and supreme.

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