

The Ontological Function of Education: Respect for Life

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The noumenon function of education is an important topic in the basic theoretical research of education, which refers to the most basic and fundamental value and role of education itself on the subject. Driven by many modern western philosophical schools, especially the development of philosophy of life and other thoughts, the core connotation of the function of education noumenon has changed, and has gradually been humanistic-oriented, that is, from focusing on knowledge to respecting life. This fundamental change in the basic values and positions of education has also directly affected a series of education and teaching concepts from the grass-roots level, promoting education from cognition to aesthetics, from common thinking to empathy, and the pursuit of quality orientation. Its specific proposition is that the ontological function of education is to “let life surpass life”, promote people’s freedom and self-understanding, so as to achieve the extensibility, creativity, and experience of life.

Keywords: life, the ontological function of education, ductility, creativity, experiential

Introduction

The ontological function of education refers to the value and significance of education itself to individuals, reflecting the essential characteristics of education, and its definition also depends on the definition of the essence of education. However, the nature of education has always been discussed by various scholars, and there is no completely fixed rule in the academic circle. Therefore, the definition of the ontological function of education also has ambiguity and ambiguity. However, this does not mean that the nature and function of education are confused and unknowable. In other words, education is a complex social science that is not easily defined by explicit language, and its definition has a humanistic orientation and a scientific orientation. For example, in terms of humanistic orientation, the essence of education can be said to be “the education of the soul, the establishment of culture, the promotion of the realm, and the lofty vision” (Gao, 2017, pp. 143-149). In the words of Max Van Manen (2019), education can also be a process of “infatuation with the growth of others”. Similarly, the educational function also has a certain humanistic orientation and scientific orientation. However, as an activity of cultivating people, the ontological function of education should be biased towards humanism.

With the development of social economy and the progress of spiritual culture, the educational function has neither slipped into the mechanical omnipotence theory nor into the extreme incompetence theory, but tends to be a moderate and stable highlight, and gradually transits from focusing on knowledge to respecting the subject and life. At the beginning of last century, the philosophy of life was developed from the thought of irrational philosophy. It has made a certain camp in modern western philosophy and has become a philosophical school

throughout the 20th century. Until today, it still has an impact on pedagogy, and there are many references and merits. Among them, life philosophy emphasizes the extensibility, creativity, and experience of life, which is the vivid embodiment of “respecting life” as the function of education noumenon.

Extendibility of Life: Let “Life Exceed Life”

The ontological function of education refers to the value of education itself to people, and the object of its function is people as the subject. Man is a living being with thinking and consciousness, which is qualitatively different from the creatures in nature. From an objective point of view, an individual’s life is a time span from birth to death, and this process has both a beginning and an end. However, as far as the subject is concerned, the meaning of life does not lie in the mechanical search for destination, but more reflected in the process of continuous progress and movement. Moreover, from the macro standpoint of all mankind, the extension of life is the cause of intergenerational transmission of the entire human group, and it has no end. The ontological function of education is to respect life and promote the extension and movement of life. The representative of life philosophy school, Zirmey, put forward the proposition that “life exceeds life” and “life is more than life” (Liu et al., 2000), and its core connotation is focused on the extension of life. The “extension” pursued by the ontological function of education is a dynamic, transcendental, and progressive process, including horizontal individual life extension and vertical group life extension.

Individual Life Extension in Cross Direction

In essence, education should teach and educate people. Today in China, it is the fundamental task to establish morality and cultivate people. It is not difficult to find that the key here lies in the problem of “people”. More precisely, the ontological function of education is to cultivate people and promote their development. However, the good education is not only enough for adults to become talents. What kind of people should be cultivated and how to promote the development of people to achieve the ontological function of education are the issues that should be clarified. The ontological function of education is not to cultivate a talent or to promote any ultimate result, but to respect life from beginning to end. It is to promote the movement of individual life, promote students to explore their own potential, correctly understand their own defects, enable students to feel the existence of their own subjects, and realize that life is not simply from birth to death, but requires the subject to constantly surpass themselves, continue to accumulate, and enjoy the process of life operation, so as to realize the extension of individual life, that is, the horizontal extension of life.

Collective Life Extension in Vertical Direction

The ontological function of education is also reflected in the extension of group life. Although individual life is limited, the whole human life is infinite. A person has a biological end point from birth to death, but individual knowledge, ideas, and other cultural factors will achieve “eternal life” with intergenerational transmission and group interaction. This kind of transmission and interaction cannot be completed by simple communication between people. To make these cultural factors truly universal and effective, education must be relied on. Therefore, the vertical life extension can also be said to be a cultural extension and cultural inheritance promoted by education. In fact, some scholars pointed out that “the basic function of education is cultural function, which is to promote the development of culture and people by realizing the two-way construction of culture and people.” (Zhang, 1999, p. 32). Therefore, the importance of cultural elements in the ontological function of education is self-evident. Education, as a national plan, is a cause that the whole world attaches great importance

to. To respect the inheritance of culture is to respect the vertical extension of life; On the other hand, to realize the ontological function of “respecting life”, education should not only enable everyone to develop for life, but also promote cultural inheritance among groups, so that “life exceeds life”.

Creativity of Life: Promoting Human Freedom

Dewey (2009) once put forward the theory that education has no purpose in his book *Democracy and Education*, that is, he believed that the ultimate purpose of education is to have no purpose, that is, to maintain people’s internal growth. In other words, “There are two purposes of education, one is the ‘limited purpose’, that is, the external purpose of making a living; the other is the more important ‘unlimited purpose’, that is, the internal purpose of human self-creation, self-development and self-realization.” (Xia & Feng, 2006, pp. 5-8). So is the ontological function of education. Its external function is a limited function, such as improving people’s educational background, enabling people to learn certain livelihood skills, realizing certain social functions, screening talents to different jobs, etc. However, in fact, these are just the most obvious educational functions, or a phenomenon that does not count as functions. Through analyzing the essence of the phenomenon, we can find that the most basic value and significance of education is how to truly liberate life, feel spiritual freedom, and enhance internal spirituality.

Freedom Is Self-creation

Life can be extended through education, but it is not enough for education only to stay at this level, and it should promote people’s freedom. “Freedom” is a relatively abstract concept. In the view of life philosophy theorist Pagson, “freedom is a pure process of self-creation” (Liu et al., 2000). Therefore, in order to achieve freedom, we must complete self-creation. Self-creation must be imaginative and artistic. This process means that people should have the spirit of constantly seeking new things, breaking through new stages, and pursuing new self. This is the basic positive function of education. Under the active and promising education, students can correctly understand the meaning of self-life to bring forth the new, and can also maintain a more stable curiosity and spirit of exploration for new things, create meaningful and regular objects, such as art, knowledge, etc., to achieve cultural reproduction, self-creation, and real freedom.

Whole Life Development and Free Development

Today’s education reform has been carried out with great efforts, such as the development of school-based curriculum, the reform of the new college entrance examination, the upsurge of core literacy, etc. However, no matter how we update the curriculum system, improve the evaluation method, and strengthen the teaching path, education seems to have many thorny problems: many of our students lack creativity and problem awareness, and some science and engineering students lack humanity and emotion. Its root lies in the orientation of basic educational theories and values. That is to say, the core of educational reform is to realize the development of students, and this development is not the perfection of a single personality or knowledge structure, but the full life development and free development of the subject. Here, “whole life” and “freedom” are not contradictory. Education should not only promote students’ all-round development, but also ensure their freedom and individuality; In the face of freedom, we should grasp the problem of “degree”, therefore, let students improve their knowledge system, and also give them free space to cultivate their creativity; let students understand discipline and respect their major, and should not prevent them from daring to question and ask questions of authority; let students cultivate rigorous thinking and rational attitude of science and engineering, and let them

have love and social emotions. Such as this, the ontological function of education is to promote the free progress of life and individual self-creation within a reasonable range.

The Experiencing of Life: Realizing People's Self Understanding

When we consider the ontology of educational function from the perspective of life philosophy, we will find that both the individual function and social function of education are too external. Usually, many people think that the biggest role of education is to let individuals gain survival experience, make society prosperous and develop, or more "progress" to let students achieve greater development. However, these educational functions "have a very strong instrumental rational nature, and less involve the inner essence and realm of human soul and spiritual life." (Miao, 2017, pp. 17-21). The ontological function of education must touch the essence of this internality, which is related to people's self-experience, so as to reflect its ontological characteristics.

The Intrinsic of Ontological Function of Education

Life needs to be experienced and comprehended with heart. Although the achievement of a person's life value is affected by objective things and external environment, it does not completely depend on the definition of the outside world, but ultimately depends on his inner realm, and depends on his own initiative and understanding. In fact, as for the experience of life, Taoism in China has similar ideas. Chapter 47 of the Tao Te Ching mentions that "when it is far away, it is little known. It is based on the fact that saints do not know, but they know when they do not see." Lao Tzu (2005) thinks that the farther a person goes, the less he knows. This sentence seems to overturn a conventional cognition, but it does not refute the role of exogenous, but emphasizes the importance of individual thinking, introspection, and insight. In addition, in the history of western philosophy, existential philosophy believed that human existence could not be described in logical language, and philosophical hermeneutics also advocated the fusion of the horizon of the comprehended and the objective object. Both emphasize the key significance of "understanding" for people to understand the world. In a word, both the introspection in the thoughts of Lao Zhuang in ancient China and the concept of "understanding" put forward by western philosophy point to the subjective initiative of individuals. It is from this perspective that education has its ontological function, namely, to respect the experience of life and the initiative of individuals.

Life Experience and Self Understanding

Based on the above discussion, we can see that the ontological function of education is to enable individuals to seek internal experience, enrich their spiritual life, and finally reach a state of self-understanding. However, it is very difficult to understand self correctly, because "self" is a complex and abstract concept. Freud (1986) used "ego", "id", and "superego" to stratify personality. "Self" refers to the conscious part of an individual, which is the middle layer between the "id" and "superego", used to contain the desire of the "id" and reconcile the contradiction between the "id" and "superego". It can be seen that "self" is an important embodiment of individual subjective initiative. Life philosophy also regards "self" as a kind of active consciousness. They believe that the real "self" cannot be simply explained by experience and language. The real self is a constantly changing and introspective psychological state. However, in the specific practice of education, we often pay attention to the explicit performance of students' achievements, classroom state, etc., and will not and it is difficult to pay attention to the potential inner state of each student subject. In this way of education, it is easy for students to lose themselves: students do not have a clear self-positioning, and often fall into role confusion and weak spiritual will. The value of education is to enable individuals to have a strong will and rich spirit. Through good education,

individuals will gain a more peaceful attitude in the imperceptible influence, and will be able to correctly recognize and understand themselves from all angles. Thus, the more individuals can understand themselves, the more they can experience the value of life; On the other hand, individuals can have more profound life experience through education, and thus obtain more comprehensive self-understanding.

Conclusion

To investigate the noumenon of educational function, we must not just stay in the survival value of individuals, because relying on education to obtain life skills is only a means of educational technology, which cannot be called educational function. In other words, educational function should be a more superior concept, which must involve human life as the subject.

To correctly understand the significance of “respecting life” as the ontological function of education is to understand that the basic role of education lies in the extension, creativity, and experience of life. Specifically, education is the most effective way to promote students’ sustainable development and life experience. Even with the rapid development of social civilization, the theory of screening the labor market only by diploma is still timeless. The false high academic qualifications make some students lose important practical ability, and solidify people with equal personality in the occupational class; Even though the concept of respecting subject and life has permeated teaching in various disciplines, and the practice of focusing on quality education and all-round development has been carried out for many years, school education still cannot change the habit of taking exams and screening talents with scores. The fundamental reason lies in the deviation of value orientation in the ontological function of education, which is still biased towards social function and individual survival value.

Therefore, it is necessary to explore the ontological nature of educational functions. Only by clarifying this problem can we find a more effective solution fundamentally. Taking respecting life as the ontological function of education is to enable students to constantly pursue new knowledge, create new knowledge, create themselves, enjoy reasonable and moderate freedom, extend the length of life, experience the enrichment of knowledge, emotional touch, and the value of life, and gradually obtain spiritual guidance, fully understand themselves, and break the dilemma of survival and development. In this way, our education is no longer a screening tool that simply layers people by relying on diplomas, and schools will not become the “symbol violence” that Bourdieu (2012) said causes unfair education.

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