

## *Original Paper*

# The Comparison and Modern Significance of Moral Education between Dewey and Confucius

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### ***Abstract***

*Dewey's Pragmatism philosophy and moral education thoughts are the representatives of values in western modern society, and Confucius is the founder of China's excellent traditional moral education. Both of them have made outstanding contributions to moral education research. Comparing the moral education ideas of Dewey and Confucius, we can discover the similarities and differences between the two. This article mainly elaborates on the purpose, content, and methods of moral education, and compares and summarizes the similarities and differences. Finally, by absorbing the connotations of ancient and modern moral education, we continuously improve and enrich the content and system of modern moral education in China, and enrich the theory of modern moral education in China.*

### ***Keywords***

*Dewey, Confucius, Moral education, compare*

## **1. Introduction**

Education has the power to change social order, and to a certain extent, no other institution except the state itself has this characteristic. Dewey (1994) is one of the greatest educational reformers in the modern West. In order to adapt to social development and change, he criticized the traditional school education from the perspective of Pragmatism empiricism, so that education can adapt to the development of market economy. His moral education ideology also represents the values of modern Western society. He proposed the goal of cultivating “useful and good citizens” for society, as well as focusing on practical education in daily life, as well as moral education methods such as “learning by doing” and subject combination. Dewey’s moral education philosophy not only solved a series of moral education problems that emerged during the period of Western social transformation, but also injected fresh energy into the academic community, providing reference experience for the moral development of other countries.

Confucius is the founder of the excellent moral tradition of the Chinese nation. In his long-term educational practice, he explored the moral education purpose centered on shaping a “gentleman”, the moral education content centered on “benevolence” and “etiquette”, and explored a series of moral education methods such as: teaching based on materials, introspection and external observation, inspiration and induction, emotional cultivation, and incorporating moral education into teaching. Confucius laid the foundation of ancient Chinese moral education. Has made indelible contributions to the development of moral education in China.

Dewey was often referred to as the “second Confucius” during his two years of studying in China in 1919. Although Dewey and Confucius have some similarities in educational ideas, due to their different social backgrounds and significant differences in the development and changes of times, there are certain differences in their educational ideas. And with the development and changes of the times, the moral requirements of individuals in the social and cultural environment are gradually changing, presenting different requirements and focuses. Therefore, we need to continuously explore a moral education content system suitable for the development of modern society in China. Dewey is the founder of modern Pragmatism education. His moral education idea is based on the moral education idea that can better adapt to modern social life under the great social transformation, great development and vigorous changes of modern civilization at the beginning of the 20th century. Confucius is a famous, traditional and far-reaching educational thinker in China. His moral education idea is still deeply influencing our moral education idea today, His moral education ideology has penetrated into the bone marrow of every Chinese people, and behind the numerous moral education contents, all of them reflect the glorious content of his ideology. Comparing the moral education thoughts of Dewey and Confucius, we can discover the similarities and differences between the two. In today’s society where social development and changes have led to changes in moral education thoughts, simply changing the traditional moral thoughts represented by Confucianism cannot fully meet the needs of social development. Therefore, it is necessary to compare and collide ancient and modern moral education thoughts, and continuously improve and enrich the content and system of modern moral education in China by absorbing the connotations of ancient and modern moral education in the West. We can better explore the path suitable for the development of moral education in modern society in China, further deepen the school moral education system, improve the content of moral education, and truly realize the educational function of modern school education.

This article compares Dewey’s and Confucius’ moral education thoughts, takes its essence and discards its dross, further improves China’s modern moral education theory, explores the moral education methods suitable for the development of China’s modern moral education, and contributes to the development of China’s moral construction in the new period.

## 2. Comparative Analysis of Moral Education between Dewey and Confucius

### 2.1 Purpose of Moral Education

#### 2.1.1 Dewey's Moral Education Objectives

Dewey (1985) believed that “morality is the ultimate goal of education”, and he proposed that “the purpose of all education is to form personality” (Dewey, 1981). That is to say, moral education ultimately aims to cultivate individuals as citizens with a perfect personality, mature behavior and thinking, and the necessary skills to adapt to social development. Moral education not only cultivates people's character, but also cultivates “good citizens” suitable for the sustainable development of democratic society. This requires citizens to have a certain ability to share and pass on their experiences, and to develop their abilities based on practical problems and existing experiences to adapt to social life.

The moral and social characteristics of behavior are the same as each other (Dewey, 1994), which is Dewey's understanding of morality and society. Although the two are unified, they are more focused on sociality. Morality cannot be limited to clearly defined behaviors in tradition, but rather to consider the social significance of moral behavior; We should not confine morality to the high buildings of the school, but rather connect internal learning with external social environment for learning. This is also consistent with Dewey's principles of “school is society” and “education is life”.

Dewey delivered a speech on social issues during his stay in China. The basic concepts, purposes, and methods of education must be social and applicable to all social living conditions. Previously, education did not have a social concept, but now it is education that seeks happiness for society. Therefore, the purpose of setting up schools is not to seek personal happiness, but to seek social happiness, and to provide opportunities for everyone to enhance social happiness

#### 2.1.2 Confucius' Moral Education Purpose

The goal of Confucius' moral education is to shape a person's ideal personality through moral education, and “gentleman” is the paradigm of ideal personality. The standard for judging a gentleman does not depend on his personal social status or wealth. A gentleman with an ideal personality should not only have certain attainments in etiquette and music, but also possess noble moral sentiments. Xu Mengying pointed out that Confucius' educational purpose was to cultivate gentlemen, that is, to cultivate “intellectuals with moral knowledge”; A gentleman advocates morality, possesses political talent, and possesses cultivation in skills, etiquette, music, and other aspects (Xu, 1982).

To become an ideal gentleman with an ideal personality, certain standards need to be met. For example, Confucius emphasized the cultivation of a person's concept of self-interest and righteousness, and placed greater emphasis on collective interests and social morality in the face of personal and collective interests, that is, “A gentleman is compared to righteousness, while a villain is compared to profit; In the face of personal interests and the interests of others, a gentleman pays more attention to helping others, that is, “A gentleman is the beauty of becoming a person, not the evil of becoming a person, but the villain is the opposite.” (The Analects of Confucius, Yan Yuan); When it comes to personal interests,

a gentleman views them as a floating cloud, that is to say, 'Food and water are sparse, and music is also present in it. Being unjust and rich and expensive is like a floating cloud to me.' (The Analects of Confucius, Shuer, 2006).

Confucius paid attention to personal cultivation. He was strict with himself and lenient with others in personal conduct, that is, "a gentleman seeks all himself and a villain seeks all others" (Duke Ling of Wey, The Analects of Confucius, 2006). A gentleman is open and aboveboard in his work (Shuer, The Analects of Confucius, 2006); A gentleman adheres to the truth and distinguishes right from wrong in matters of right and wrong, that is, "A gentleman is harmonious but different, and a villain is harmonious but not harmonious" (The Analects of Confucius, Zilu, 2006).

Another important purpose of Confucius' moral education is to stabilize social order. During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States period, the feudal lords were in turmoil, the society was in turmoil, and the people were in dire need of a stable social environment and a unified situation. Confucius advocated the cultivation of political talents through moral education, in order to stabilize the social situation, that is, "if one is upright, they should act without orders; if one is not upright, they should not follow orders. Huang Zhao pointed out that Confucius conducted moral education in order to achieve his political goals. On the one hand, Confucius hoped that the monarch would "govern with virtue" and play a moral role as a model. On the other hand, he demanded that the people should be "treated with virtue and treated with propriety" to make them aware of honor and disgrace, and to abide by certain moral norms, in order to stabilize social and political order (Huang, 2004).

Confucius' moral education emphasizes the cultivation of "gentlemen" and emphasizes the individual value of moral education, while cultivating "virtuous talents" emphasizes the social value of moral education. These two are closely related, and individual value should serve social value, which in turn affects individual value. In summary, Confucius' moral education goals include two aspects: one is to cultivate gentlemen and "wise men", and the other is to infiltrate moral education into politics, with moral education subordinate to political purposes.

### 2.1.3 Differences and Similarities in the Purposes of Moral Education between Dewey and Confucius

Dewey and Confucius both believed that moral education should be integrated into the educational process, developing moral education while cultivating knowledge and abilities, and integrating moral education into daily teaching. Therefore, the two have similar views on the relationship between moral education and education. Confucius and Dewey both established political orientation at the starting point of their moral education. Dewey's moral education aims to cultivate "good citizens" who are suitable for the sustainable development of democratic society, and to develop social democratic consciousness in moral education, which has strong social and democratic characteristics. Confucius' moral education aims to stabilize social order, cultivate "gentlemen" and "sages", and thus improve social atmosphere from top to bottom. Therefore, both moral education guide the development of social politics.

The purpose of Dewey's moral education is to promote the survival value and quality of life of

individuals, take individuals as the standard, and make people become free and democratic moral subjects. The purpose of Confucius' moral education is to maintain social stability and unity, and to stabilize social order through "governing the country and ensuring the stability of the state", with a social centered attribute; Dewey and Confucius also have certain differences in the scope of the educated group. Due to different social environments, Dewey's moral education ideas were influenced by the industrial era and put forward higher requirements for the quality of citizens. Therefore, the educated group has universality and universality. The social environment in which Confucius lived did not have the conditions to support universal access to education. Despite Confucius' proposal of 'education without discrimination', only a few people were able to receive education. Therefore, there are significant differences in the educated population between the two, which is also due to differences in times.

## 2.2 Moral Education Content

### 2.2.1 Dewey's Moral Education Content

The issue of moral education in schools is the issue of acquiring knowledge. Dewey believed that moral education in schools should be integrated into daily life and other subject teaching content, without the need for specialized moral education courses. He made a strict distinction between "moral concepts" and "ideas about morality". The so-called lesson on morality is of course a lesson on others' ideas about morality and obligations, "which directly imparts moral norms or rules through teaching; The so-called "moral concept" refers to the concept of "seeing results in behavior, improving behavior, and becoming better than others". It is formed through participation in social activities, which is conducive to social development, thereby enhancing personal literacy, shaping good character, and correct behavioral norms.

Dewey advocates for "moral concept" education, which involves incorporating moral education into school life and teaching in various disciplines, and opposes "ideas about morality". If education does not focus on emotional attitudes, but instead on direct moral education, it is ineffective for students' moral education. Only when students empathize with others, pay attention to their thoughts and emotions with respect, and are motivated can such classes be effective. Knowledge heard from others may lead to certain actions, but this knowledge cannot cultivate personal initiative and self belief. Only knowledge obtained directly through various requirements of experience can have a significant impact on behavior.

### 2.2.2 Confucius' Moral Education Content

The core content of Confucius' moral education is "benevolence" and "propriety", covering contents such as "loyalty", "wisdom", "faith", "filial piety", and "love". Feng (2013) pointed out that Confucius used narration as his work, took his own book, the Six Classics, as his teaching content, and focused on exploring its moral significance. Huang (1995) believed that the moral education content designed by Confucius includes two aspects: "benevolence" and "propriety". 'Ren' is a regulation of moral sentiment, 'Li' is a regulation of moral behavior, and other moral education content revolves around

these two aspects.

The viewpoints and propositions on “benevolence” in the *Analects of Confucius* are countless, and the discussion of “benevolence” in the dialogue between Confucius and his disciples also has many different meanings. Most of the virtues of Confucianism, such as loyalty, forgiveness, filial piety, fraternity, sensitivity, wisdom, sincerity, and trustworthiness, which are considered as external human virtues, can be included in the general term of the moral norm of “benevolence”. It can be said that “benevolence” covers most of the content of Confucius’ moral education. Confucius believed that “kinship” was the beginning of “benevolence”. Of course, Confucius’ “benevolence” does not only involve family members, but also extends to the universal love among the general public, that is, “universal love for the masses”. “Benevolent people love their loved ones”, and more importantly, “love others”. In terms of national governance, rulers should adhere to the principle of “governing with morality”. Confucius said, “governing with morality, such as the North Star, where all the stars are present” (*The Analects of Confucius: Governing*, 2006). Therefore, the moral education connotation of Confucius’ “benevolence” is reflected in the education of “benevolence” in ideology, “benevolence” in personal cultural cultivation, and “benevolence” in politics.

As a moral concept second only to “benevolence”, “propriety” has three meanings in Confucian theory, namely “propriety, righteousness, and propriety”. Rites and laws are the political embodiment of “propriety”, as Confucius said: “To serve the country with propriety” (*Analects of Confucius: Advanced*, 2006); *Li Yi* is the embodiment of “Li” in social norms, as Confucius said: “*Dao* is based on virtue and *Qi* is based on *Li*” (“*The Analects of Confucius: Politics*”, 2006); *Etiquette* is the embodiment of “propriety” in personal communication. Confucius (2006) said, “Harmony is precious in the use of propriety. In short, the moral code of ‘etiquette’ should be followed in interpersonal relationships, personal cultivation, and national governance.

### 2.2.3 Differences and Similarities in the Content of Moral Education between Dewey and Confucius

Dewey believed that morality runs through all aspects of life, enabling people to become useful good people and assume the responsibilities entrusted to them by society; Confucius’ moral education also aims to cultivate a “gentleman” who contributes to society. From this, it can be seen that both Dewey and Confucius advocated for the improvement of personal abilities and the contribution to social development, emphasizing the combination of moral content and cultural knowledge.

Dewey and Confucius have different focuses on moral education. Confucius places more emphasis on ethical and moral education. He regards the study of cultural knowledge as the foundation of moral character. Although he also emphasizes the teaching of cultural knowledge, the core content of his education is still ethical education that emphasizes human ethics. Dewey pays more attention to the needs of social development, believing that moral education changes with social development. He believes that morality runs through specific problem situations, and the natural divergence of good in solving problems is a process of improving personal experience from bad to good.

Although both consider individuals as social beings, Confucius’ “benevolence” emphasizes the role of

community more than Dewey's. Dewey's goal is to correct rather than completely reject liberalism, so he emphasizes the role of individual choice more than Confucius (Chen, 2004). Confucius' education on "benevolence" and "benevolence" aims to cultivate people into individuals with good moral character who maintain national and social security and stability. "Benevolent governance" education aims to achieve political unity from top to bottom, emphasizing the community role of society.

### *2.3 Moral Education Methods*

#### *2.3.1 The Methods of Dewey's Moral Education*

Dewey believes that students should acquire knowledge from experience, rather than using traditional indoctrination methods. They should apply the moral knowledge learned in the classroom to practical life. "Learning by doing" only knowledge obtained and tested through experience has moral significance, that is, "learning from experience". Dewey's "learning by doing" approach to "doing" refers to the process in which students engage in rational activities that are truly educational, interesting, and capable of solving practical problems. When a subject is taught in a way that connects social life, it has positive theoretical significance (Dewey, 1994). When conducting teaching, moral issues are used to guide students, and direct teaching is replaced by exploration and discussion, allowing students to think deeply and combine theory with practice. Treating each subject as a tool for children to understand social activities (Dewey, 1994). In participating in social activities, moral judgment is formed, advocating for students to form a concept of knowledge and action that integrates knowledge and action, and organizing children to directly participate in social life.

Dewey (1994) believes that on campus learning should be connected to off campus learning. Due to the lack of a social environment in schools, they are isolated from society, and the knowledge in schools cannot be applied to daily life, thus it is not conducive to moral character. When learning on campus and off campus are organically combined, 'learning is a necessity and a reward'. Moral education should not only teach students to be a person with good moral cultivation, but also be a good person who is useful to the society and whose contribution to the society can keep balance with his benefits. All necessary purposes and values in education are inherently moral. The ability to maintain a balanced experience is the essence of morality.

Dewey believed that morality is not an independent discipline from other subjects, and each subject has its own unique moral value. The purpose of morality is the common and primary goal of teaching in various subjects. It is necessary to break the boundary between moral education and other subjects, combine moral education with other subjects and textbooks, and unleash the moral value of each subject.

#### *2.3.2 The Methods of Confucius' Moral Education*

Confucius continuously summarized his experience in teaching practice, explored and innovated many moral education methods, which are still in use today, such as the method of teaching according to materials, the method of introspection and external observation, the method of inspiration and induction, the method of emotional cultivation, and the integration of moral education into teaching, all

of which have laid a good foundation for the development of modern moral education.

The individualized teaching method refers to selecting teaching methods suitable for different students and providing targeted guidance in moral education teaching based on their individual characteristics. In the *Analects of Confucius*' Advanced Chapter, Confucius provided targeted guidance and teaching based on the different personality traits and hobbies of his disciples, enabling them to maximize their personal abilities and avoid weaknesses. The moral introspection method is a self-cultivation method that checks one's words and actions for errors through self reflection. Introspection is not about checking one's moral beliefs within oneself, but rather about reflecting on objective moral standards. Yang (2006) believes that in Confucius' moral education methods, "introspection and external observation" is an important way to improve moral awareness and personal qualities. The methods of "introspection and external inspection" include being strict with oneself and lenient with others, restraining oneself from self litigation, and assisting teachers and friends with benevolence.

The heuristic induction method refers to the practice of not directly providing answers to students during problem-solving, but by guiding and inspiring students to think independently and explore the answers to the problem. Yu (2010) studied the "enlightenment and guidance method" of Confucius and pointed out that Confucius strongly advocated the "automatic spirit", focusing on guiding students to think independently and actively express their views; Teachers only play an auxiliary role in teaching, and their responsibility is to help students "rely on others to rely on their own strength".

Human moral behavior is often influenced by emotions. Confucius is good at cultivating a person's moral level through the power of emotions. Emotional cultivation emphasizes the transformation of external moral concepts into internal emotional identification, achieving the goal of internalizing moral education. The *Analects of Confucius: Yongye* reflects Confucius' moral education method of incorporating moral education into teaching, which states that a gentleman is knowledgeable in literature, and can be bound by etiquette. Integrating moral education into teaching requires students to not only learn a wide range of knowledge, but also comply with ethical and moral standards.

### 2.3.3 Differences and Similarities in the Methods of Moral Education between Dewey and Confucius

Dewey and Confucius both valued the subjective initiative of individuals in the process of moral education, emphasizing that the subject consciously and actively engages in moral practice. Dewey believes that students' moral cognition is formed through independent exploration and discussion with others, rather than simply telling or forcing students to acquire moral knowledge. Dewey has always criticized the use of traditional indoctrination in moral education. Confucius also emphasized the important role of individual subjective initiative. He believed that the subject needs to form a moral understanding of objective things, and through individual subjective initiative, moral understanding is transformed into moral beliefs, ultimately forming moral behavior.

Dewey's teaching method of "learning by doing" and Confucius' "integrating moral education into teaching" both advocate the principle of "unity of knowledge and action" in the process of moral education. However, Dewey's moral education method emphasizes that students can freely explore



through socialized school life practices, form correct moral judgments through practical activities, and indirectly enable students to acquire moral knowledge, with the characteristic of “knowing first and then”. This is completely different from the moral education model adopted by Confucius. Confucius is a ‘prophet before action’. Through certain moral education methods, students first have a certain moral understanding, possess a sense of right and wrong between good and evil, form moral beliefs, and then convert them into specific moral behaviors, cultivate a certain behavioral habit, and ultimately internalize moral cognition and behavior into the mind and externalize them into actions.

### **3. The Enlightenment of the Development of Moral Education on Modern Education**

#### *3.1 Fully Leverage the Role of Schools in Cultivating Students' Moral Education*

Dewey and Confucius both believed that moral education should be integrated into the educational process, developing moral education while cultivating knowledge and abilities, integrating moral education into daily teaching, and fully leveraging the role of schools in cultivating students' moral education. Enable moral education to guide the development of social politics and promote the stability and unity of the country and society. Improve the school education system, enhance the performance of school moral education work, and cultivate “gentlemen” and “good citizens” who can adapt to the development of modern society.

In recent years, due to the excessive emphasis on enrollment and employment rates in some schools, the focus of work has been on how to improve students' academic performance, neglecting the cultivation of students' personalities and moral education. It even believes that the cultivation of students' morality is the content of ideological and political courses, and the education of various disciplines does not attach importance to the cultivation of students' personality, resulting in the talents cultivated by the school becoming “sophisticated Egoism”. Secondly, the negative atmosphere in society has a negative impact on students' thoughts and behaviors, and it also brings huge challenges to the moral education work in schools. Therefore, schools should attach importance to cultivating students' moral character and fully leverage the role of schools in cultivating students' moral education. On the one hand, schools should adhere to the correct educational policy and implement the educational philosophy of “putting education first and moral education first”. They cannot overemphasize scores and enrollment rates, but should prioritize students' ideological and moral qualities, promote the improvement and development of students' individual personalities, and fully leverage the role of moral education in shaping personality and cultivating talents. Secondly, moral education should be integrated into the teaching of various disciplines in schools, and moral education activities should be actively carried out. Dewey believed that morality is not an independent discipline from other subjects, and each subject has its unique moral value. Only by fully exploring the moral factors in each subject's curriculum can the scope of moral education be expanded, and the influence and inspiration of moral education on students be strengthened.

### *3.2 Give Full Play to the Subjectivity of Students' Moral Education Practice*

Both Dewey and Confucius advocated for the improvement of personal abilities and contributions to social development, emphasizing the combination of moral content and cultural knowledge. Dewey emphasized the improvement of individual's survival value and quality of life, and made people become free and democratic moral subjects based on individuals. This requires schools to fully leverage the subjectivity of students' moral education practice when conducting moral education. Respecting the subjectivity of students' moral practice can not only improve their personal abilities and moral level, but also promote the development of social moral education through students' proactive moral practice.

Students are the subject of moral practice. The development of moral education is based on the premise of individual development of students. Moral education is not an education of "listening" but an education of "doing". It requires students, namely the educated, to internalize the content of moral education in their hearts, externalize the acquired moral cognition in their actions, and ultimately form a moral habit. Only by respecting the subjectivity of moral education objects can we mobilize the enthusiasm and initiative of the educated and make moral education work effective.

Respecting the subjectivity of the educated does not mean giving up the leading role of moral education workers, neither of which is indispensable. Moral education work is a process of actively accepting the influence of moral education under the guidance of educators. The more effective the leading role of educators is, the more the subjectivity of the educated can be maximized. Therefore, it is necessary to attach importance to the leading role and subjectivity in moral education work, cultivate the subject consciousness of moral education objects, improve their participation in activities and self-education abilities, and encourage them to actively construct their moral education knowledge framework and carry out moral education practical activities.

### *3.3 Emphasizing the Unity of Individuality and Sociality in the Cultivation of Students' Moral Education*

Dewey and Confucius both valued the subjective initiative of individuals in the process of moral education, emphasizing that the subject consciously and actively engages in moral practice. When applying theoretical knowledge to the real environment and cultivating students' moral acquisition, attention should be paid to unifying students' individuality and sociality. Personal development and social development complement each other, and the improvement of personal moral literacy is conducive to the improvement of social moral level. A good social moral environment also provides a breeding ground for the development of individual moral education. Moral educators should correctly grasp the relationship between individuals and society, organically combine the two to complement each other, promote an inseparable whole, and jointly create a civilized country. Dewey believed that good moral literacy is formed by the interaction between individuals and the environment.

At the same time, moral education workers should consider multiple aspects when formulating moral education goals and content, promoting both personal development and social development. It is

necessary to consider the various needs of society, politics, economy, culture, etc., to enhance the quality of the educated, promote the comprehensive development of individuals and society, and achieve the unity of individuality and sociality in student moral education.

### 3.4 Innovative Moral Education Model

Dewey's moral education ideology advocates for "experiential and open moral education models", in order to obtain effective moral knowledge and guide moral practice. The moral education model in our country is still limited to traditional educational concepts and lacks innovative models, which makes students' understanding of moral education content not thorough enough and superficial. Conducting immersive and experiential moral education teaching can not only enhance the interest of educators in moral education, but also enable them to complete moral practice. We should actively encourage educators to broaden their horizons and cultivate their ability to participate in social life.

In the process of moral education in schools, the main role of educators should be fully played, allowing students to learn by doing. Create a pleasant and harmonious atmosphere, and stimulate the active and proactive enthusiasm of the educated. In moral education, it is possible to openly allow the educated to speak freely, express their moral concepts, organize students to jointly explore moral conflict issues, carry out special moral education activities, and let students' moral education activities go out of the campus.

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