Essence and Mirror - Reflection on Educational Essence Research

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ABSTRACT. *Philosophy tells us: essence is the thing that makes a thing be exactly that thing. It is the fundamental attribute of things and the internal connection of basic elements of things. It used to be an important topic of education to observe education according to the mirror of Essence. This paper discusses the issue of educational essence from the aspects of mirror, observed mirror, mirror as a whole and how the practitioner does it.*

KEYWORDS: *Philosophical essence; Educational essence; Mirror*

1. Introduction

Kierkegaard said: "The first thing to do is not to look at the mirror, not observed mirror, but to observe yourself in the mirror." (1) This truth is so simple in life that it doesn't need to be mentioned. However, once you step into education theory, the problem becomes extremely complicated. Whether education should have a mirror, what is education through it? Marx said that: if the form of things and the essence of things would become one, all science would be superfluous. The task of science is to see essence through phenomena. To understand what education is, we need to look at it through the mirror of philosophical essence (thinking method of essence discussion).

Philosophy tells us: essence is the thing that makes a thing be exactly that thing. It is the fundamental attribute of things and the internal connection of basic elements of things. It used to be an important topic of education to observe education according to the mirror of Essence. Not knowing what education is seems like not knowing what you look like. In this way, it seems impossible to define and talk about education at all. This paper discusses the issue of educational essence from the aspects of mirror, observed mirror, mirror as a whole and how the practitioner does it.

2. Look in the mirror

As soon as one takes up the mirror of essence and looks at himself/herself, there is an infinite variety of education faces. The discussion on educational essence can be traced back to the publication of *What is Education?* in the first issue of *People's Daily* in May 1950. In 1978, Yu Guangyuan published the *Activities of Attaching Importance to Cultivating People* in the journal *Academic Research*, which officially kicked off the discussion of educational essence. It became a hot issue in education from the end of 1970s to 1990s. Zheng Jinzhou pointed out: "there are many views in the dispute of educational essence, but it is difficult to get the whole idea. Here, as far as the eye can see, there are the following types of Caolu: 'productivity theory', 'superstructure theory', 'theory of basically belonging to superstructure', 'production department theory', 'non-production department theory', 'dual attribute theory', 'unity theory', 'bridge theory', 'multiple attribute theory', 'special category theory', 'social practice theory', 'production practice theory', 'spiritual practice theory', 'practice theory of human accelerating self-construction and transformation', 'cultivating person theory', 'socialization theory', 'individuation theory', 'perfection theory of individual socialization', 'way theory of promoting the nature of mankind essence', 'theory of imparting knowledge', 'ability transfer theory', 'industry theory', 'non-industry theory', 'relativity theory (transformation theory)'. These are 24 theories. There are several other slightly affected, such as 'mother of productivity theory', 'theory of affecting the soul', 'social heredity theory', 'social life theory', etc. There are total 28 types. There may be omissions, but only so far. A glimpse of the diversity of educational essence's views can be found." (2) From the late 1970s to the 1990s, nearly 300 papers were published, covering more than two million words and more than 20 articles in total. It looks something like this: If you look at the mirror and decide to look into the mirror image completely, you are bound to be dazed! Anyway, people believe in the mirror itself (thinking method of essence discussion): Everything has essence, essence is objective, and the understanding of things is to look at essence through

phenomena. This is the platform where people talk about educational essence (at this point, there is an academic "boundary" --- a common platform for discussion).

3. Observation mirror

With continuous translation and introduction of modern and contemporary western academic thoughts, especially philosophical thoughts, the monotone state of original academic thoughts has been broken. The academic discussion changed its thinking and began to question the ideological approach of educational essence. The representative doubt is Shi Zhongying's article *Essentialism, anti-essentialism and Chinese Pedagogy Research* in 2004. The author draws lessons from the western postmodernism's anti-essence doctrine thought, characterizes essence as a kind of knowledge view and epistemological route with the basic characteristics of "essence category", "essence belief" and "essence pursuit". It believes that the distinction between "essence" and "phenomenon" provides basic conceptual schema of all things observed by human being, and defines the task of scientific knowledge as the only essence that reveals things through phenomenon. Moreover, the author points out that: the influence of essence on Chinese education in the 20th century has a historical process from small to large, from point to surface and from weak to strong, and gradually occupies a dominant position in Chinese education circle. (3) The author reflects on the discussion of educational essence since the end of 1970s and characterizes the discussion of educational essence as "Essence". The educational essence research has undergone a change due to the discussion of education under the postmodernism thought: it no longer looks at itself (education) through mirror, but observed mirror.

From look mirror to observe mirror, it increases the difficulty of theoretical discussion. There are three points worth thinking about: First, there are fewer and fewer dialogues in education circle. As far as the discussion of educational essence is concerned, the scholars are based on common knowledge background, which is mainly the Marxist philosophy epistemological principle based on philosophical textbooks. At that time, people believe that the theoretical basis of education is Marxist philosophy epistemology --- the theoretical background of discussion is single. To take the discussion further, people are deemed to know Kant and Hegel at most, in addition to the Marxist philosophy. The challenge of anti-essence doctrine creates a totally unfamiliar context (for the past discussion). What is anti-essence doctrine? Shi Zhongying said: "like postmodernism, anti-essence doctrine does not form a clear schools of theory, but spread its basic ideas in different fields of knowledge and expressed them through the studies of scholars in different fields. From the perspective of western thought in the 20th century, the main representatives of anti-essence doctrine are Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Mannheim, Davidson, Ayer, Rorty, Popper, Derrida, Polanyi, Saussure, Austin, etc. Dewey and Heidegger are the thinkers with anti-essence doctrine tendency to some extent." (4) These figures and their ideas are unheard of for many in the educational essence debate. It will take at least three or five years to understand the ideas of someone who is anti-essence doctrine, let alone all of them! Previous educational essence discussion was based on the same intellectual background, where everyone could step in and refute each other. The challenge of anti-essence doctrine is "multifarious" and has many representatives. If I talk about education from the point of view of Austin, you from the point of view of Rorty, he from the point of view of Polanyi, etc., due to different knowledge backgrounds, there may be different opinions, which cannot be argued or refuted. The discussion on the issue of anti-essence doctrine is though scattered, could not result in a big debate like the educational essence discussion, for example, Zhang Tianxue wrote *Talking about Anti-essence Doctrine and Chinese Education Research* in 2005, Dr. Tang Ankui wrote *A Reflection on the Pursuit of Certainty in Chinese Education Research --- A Discussion with Mr. Shi Zhongying's Anti-essence Doctrine Education* in 2007, etc. Because of constant intervention of new knowledge, it seems unlikely that educational essence will ever again have the decades-long, universal discussion that everyone can participate in. Some scholars pointed out that: "In recent years, China's educational theoretical research, neither has a clear macro theme, nor provides a set of core practical concepts for educational practice." (5) The reason is that it is difficult for us to form an academic community today (common research paradigms, discourse, academic beliefs, etc.). There is a situation of "learning" but not "boundary" (common thought platform) in academic circle.

Secondly, there is the problem of "aphasia" in the discussion of educational theory. "Aphasia" in the discussion of educational theory is to say such a phenomenon: some academic researchers always think of a new idea from the west. They rush to study it and then cite it. Researchers speak other people's words and lose their own (national, native, individual) language. However, no one thought that there was another kind of "aphasia", in which old knowledge had nothing to say to new knowledge. In the face of new knowledge, because they have nothing to say, but pointed out that the speaker (a person who speaks a new language) suffers from "aphasia".

It is often lamented that many hot issues in education are discussed in the same way: At first, it was very enthusiastic, with a large number of participants, but after a period of time, it was difficult to continue and go deep, and finally nothing was done and the idea stayed at the level of original question. This phenomenon is

often used as an example to accuse some theories of "pseudo-problems" that cannot stand the test of time and theory. In fact, the main reason for this phenomenon is that the original "knowledge community" has gradually disintegrated due to continuous intervention of new knowledge (including academic environment, knowledge background, change of thinking path, etc.).

As for the discussion of educational essence, some scholars at that time sighed: which discussion has more views than educational essence? What other rebuttal is more heated than educational essence? In theory, the challenge of anti-essence doctrine would touch the intellectual nerve of many people. However, there are few takers. One has only to look at the rhetoric of anti-essence doctrine to see this. Shi Zhongying pointed out that: "the researcher must become a linguist, especially a pragmatist, who must conduct in-depth analysis and research on the academic research languages he or she uses to understand their historical and social nature as well as their intentionality and limitations in the expression of thoughts, he or she resolutely banishes 'Essence', 'Truth' and 'Law' what Nietzsche and Rorty called 'big words'from epistemology. He or she dismisses all the problems of such conceptual statements as false, and does not use these 'golden signs' to disguise any of his limited and fallible cognitive experience." (6) If you are not or do not understand "linguist", "pragmatic scientist", how to deal with this challenge? Difficult to deal with, and how to continue the discussion in depth?

Thirdly, why does theoretical research follow others? Some scholars pointed out that: "If theories are based solely on foreign philosophical schools, how can local studies be considered? Chinese educational theory does not have its own roots, because we do not have our own philosophical basis." Of course, this is reasonable. Chinese education research cannot break away from Chinese traditional culture and cannot always follow others. In the abstract, everyone agrees. Once reality is taken into account, however, things may not be the same. Our education was originally established on the basis of introducing western academic ideas. Educational essence is an important problem in educational theory. Around this issue, Chinese education theory has been discussed for decades, and no one can avoid or ignore this history. To face up to this period of history cannot avoid or ignore the anti-essence thought of western posterity, which can better stimulate people's thinking. Since there is no question about essence and anti-essence doctrine in Chinese traditional culture, and there is no anti-essence doctrine in educational essence discussion (refers to the education discussion before the intervention of postmodern thinking), sometimes I have to follow others. If we do not consider the idea of anti-essence doctrine at all, we still think on the original road, the academic seems a little lag and insensitive.

Today's theoretical research presents a contradiction: The development of theory has its own logical relations (from affirming the existence of essence to anti-essence doctrine reflects the progressive thinking from positive to negative in academic study), which shows that the theory itself (from A to B) has internal relations. Since the "from positive to negative" thinking is stimulated by postmodern thought, the relationship between researchers and theories is manifested as the external (introduction, citation) relationship -- it is not the original I think, I say, I am. This problem is common in educational research. Perform new plays by borrowing other people's names, slogans and clothes. This is not because we particularly like other people's things, but because for decades we wore almost the same outfit ourselves (for example, educational essence was just traditional textbook thinking in philosophy) and there was little academic accumulation. As with economic development, there has to be an outward learning process to create an academic brand (to achieve the ideal education localization with worldwide influence).

4. One body and two sides of a mirror

Can educational essence discussion be written off from the angle of anti-essence doctrine? In this way, there is no continuity of the academic, decades of discussion has become a "drama". Who then has any respect for scholarship? Today's theoretical discussion tends to be one-sided (although a few disagree with anti-essence doctrine), many papers often refer to the old ideas of education as "essence doctrine", it seems that otherwise the ideas are not "avant-garde". For some researchers, there is a "dead dog" of essence in education theory.

Zhang Shiying, professor of philosophy at Peking University, wrote the *Double Meaning of Essence: Natural Science and Human Science*. The author investigates essence from its philosophical origin (ancient Greek philosophy): "Aristotle thought that the essence of things was its 'genus and species', ... on the one hand, What Aristotle meant by 'essence' was the universal, for both the species and the genus were universal. The 'genus of species' is the 'form' what Aristotle calls. But is 'form' universal or individual? That's still a problem. Because the genus of species may be divided down from one level to another, and the lower the genera, the nearer they come to the individual; and the 'form' becomes the individual. " (7) This is a very different way of thinking about essence, which has both universality and individuality. This helps us re-observed essence the mirror, which is two sides of the same body: On the one hand, the universal is reflected; on the other, the individual is reflected; the former is the reflection of natural sciences, the latter of the humanities.

Zhang Shiying pointed out that the study of natural science emphasizes universality, while the study of human science emphasizes individuality. For example, he said: "for a particular flower, we can abstract it step by step as 'plant' and 'biology' from the perspective of natural science...Even abstract identity expressed in mathematical formulas. But from the point of view of the humanities, we can reverse the journey from the uniformity of mathematical formulas to the organic unity of various special meanings ['biology' –'plants' – 'flowers' –'plum blossoms' (for example) – 'plum blossoms' with traditional Chinese cultural connotations...] step by step, so as to show specific personality of the plum blossom in the life world of Chinese people, for example, the plum blossom is described as 'fallen in mud and ground to dust, she seems no more, but her fragrance is still the same', which is the real, concrete personality and objectivity of the plum blossom in the life world of Chinese people. In this way, the essence of plum blossom not only has the scientific understanding meaning of 'biology', 'plant' and 'flower', but also has the moral, aesthetic and philosophical meaning of traditional Chinese culture." (8)

Previous educational essence discussion only focused on the meaning of universality of essence and emphasized the grasp of commonness of things. It is precisely this universal meaning that the anti-essence doctrine objects to, and their thinking only reflects on one side of mirror. The "double meaning" of Zhang Shiying's essence observed the two sides of mirror, which gives the following enlightenment to education: firstly, there is no universal essence of uniqueness in education. Educational essence discussion tries to find a unique universal essence that everyone agrees on to obliterate the distinction between natural science education and human science education. If you are a biology teacher, so that the students know plum blossom, it should be abstracted into flowers - plants - biology and so on (to find its universality) from the perspective of natural science step by step. If you are a Chinese teacher, you should start from the point of view of humanities when you are teaching poems about "fallen in mud and ground to dust, she seems no more, but her fragrance is still the same", you need to transfer from the abstract to the concrete, exceed the abstract identity (flower-plant-biology, etc.), display the specific personality of "proud snow welcome spring" in Chinese culture of plum blossom, and put it into the unity of the meaning of "three friends of pine, bamboo and plum" (looking for its individuality). Different kinds of education cannot be summarized and grasped in a general educational essence. Secondly, both educational essence discussion and anti-essence doctrine question have some merits. The former believes that things have their essence, which is objective and universal. This kind of thinking adapts to the natural science education. The latter question revealed the futility of trying to find a unique and ultimate universality for educational essence, and the futility of making such research the supreme and ultimate goal, and struck at the heart of the debate about educational essence (an attempt was then made to find the supreme essence of education). However, the discussion of educational essence cannot be completely denied.

Zhang Shiying pointed out that: "From natural objects to cultural objects, it is a transformation process from universality as essence to individuality as essence. From the attitude of natural science to the attitude of humanistic science, it is a process from universality (generalization) to individuation, and also a process from the emphasis on commonality to the emphasis on specificity. If we blindly seek common ground in the field of humanities and society, the result will be no more than to reduce the humanities to natural sciences and people to things." (9) In view of the fact that educational essence has been discussed for decades mainly around the universal essence, and that the anti-essence doctrine also starts from the anti-universal essence, we should highlight the individual essence of human science today. "Highlight" is not to smash the original mirror (like the post-modernism anti-essence doctrine), but to see two sides of mirror.

From educational essence discussion to anti-essence doctrine education thinking, and then to the "double meaning" of essence, it presents a trend of positive——negative—— combination in theoretical discussion. This gives people inspiration. Although the discussion of educational essence changes from heat to cold, it can be seen from the follow-up research that there is still an effective process of academic knowledge accumulation. Without the great discussion of educational essence, there would be no anti-essence doctrine education thinking. There is no denial of essence, and there will be no textual research into the double meaning of "essence" (a textual research is particularly meaningful for today's education). This kind of textual research results in a view that includes both the first two reasonable things, but also suspends its unreasonable factors.

It is rash to completely deny the previous discussions in the academic field, and there is no guarantee that any new ideas will emerge later --- a surprising reversal or partial reversal of the theory. We can review the previous doctrine and find out the problems, but whether to the preceding doctrine or the succeeding doctrine, we should have an open and open-minded attitude.

5. What about practitioners?

The theory not only has the logical relationship between the theory itself, the relationship between the theory

and the researcher (which may be internal or external), but also has the relationship between the theory and the practitioner.

Today, understanding education is becoming more and more difficult, especially for academic researchers, it becomes more and more difficult every year. If you are a practitioner, the mirror of essence may be at a crossroads. Mirror has many different interpretations of your own image (think decades of debates)! Now it develops the observed mirror, which is further separated from the "own image". There are so many scholars, so many viewpoints --- not only of the educational scholars of anti-essence doctrine, but also of the postmodern thinkers to understand the problem (it takes a lot of energy and complex thought processes to get to know these characters). Not only that, you may also want to know Plato, Aristotle, and have the ability to trace the source of the textual research. Doesn't that seem endless? The practitioner always expects the theorist to offer something, but the theorist offers so much. Sometimes the difficulty of communication between theory and practice appears in the mirror and people have too many ideas.

If the practitioner also comes to observe mirror, he has to study, contemplate, meditate and demonstrate. He may gradually become knowledgeable -- knowing Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, postmodern thinkers...But they may never be able to act. Kierkegaard said: "year after year, sit quietly in the long day and observed mirror, --- this is very close to being able to close your eyes completely in front of the mirror, as opposed to being able to see yourself in the mirror." (10) This is something practitioners need to be vigilant about. What about the practitioner? Be able to understand the theory as a mirror and view education. What does it mean? Look at education and act with your own experience and understanding in the light of what you know -- even a few words about essence and educational essence (principles of philosophy or principles of education), some point of view in some article, instead of sitting down and thinking about an infinite number of unknowns (views on "own image", views on observed mirror, and views on mirror textual research…….).

Acknowledgment

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