

Li Zehou's ethics and the structure of Confucian pragmatic reason

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Li Zehou believes that human psychology, just like humanness or “human nature”, is not fixed or given, but is rather something characterized by changing developmental forms of human pragmatic reason, which is formed over millions of years, and is still continuously accumulating and changing. However, reason alone is by no means something that would absolutely separate humans from their sensuality and thus from other animals. The difference between human beings and other animals primarily occurs somewhere else, namely in the very realm of specifically human social existence, which is defined by subjectivity and includes specific human values. In this context, Li shows that Confucian pragmatic reason is formed and functions within the “emotio-rational formation” (qingli jiegou 情理結構), which is deeply rooted in the human world. It is based on actual human conditions and arises from human social emotionality, transforming these culturally integrated general communal emotions through rites in the process of “condensation of reason” (lixing ningju 理性凝聚) into rational concepts of right and wrong, good and evil. The rationality of these concepts governs subjective personal feelings of each member of a community; the pragmatic nature of this rationality, however, was tightly linked to and intertwined with human emotions. In the concrete social life, these rational concepts can namely nevertheless dissolve—through the process of the “melting of reason” (lixing ronghua 理性融化)—in the heart-minds of people and thus become an integral part of individual emotions. This presentation aims to posit the Confucian pragmatic reason into the framework of Li Zehou's political axiology.