

On the Logical Path of Teachers' Professional Ethics

Yiyun Liu

Faculty of Education, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, Guangxi, China

Abstract: *The professional development of teachers is the main trend in current teacher education reforms and a central topic in research on teacher education. Teachers' professional ethics, as a crucial aspect of their professional development, is a significant indicator of their professional maturity. At present, China is in a key transitional stage from teacher occupational morality to professional ethics. Starting from the identity of teachers as individuals, this paper delves into three core dimensions: teachers' natural life and morality, teachers' social life and ethics, and teachers' spiritual life and professional ethics. This deep exploration of the logical path of teachers' professional ethics further reveals the ethical dilemmas and essential problems faced by teachers in contemporary society, while also aiming to discover, from an ethical perspective, a path toward future identity recognition.*

Keywords: Teacher professionalism, Professional ethics, Logical path.

1. Introduction

Teachers' professional ethics is first and foremost "ethical," then "professional," and ultimately it should be about "teachers" [1]. Whether in logical reasoning or real-life contexts, an individual exists first as a "person" before assuming any specific social role. Therefore, in their professional life, teachers exist primarily as individual beings [2]. Ethics, as an essential mechanism for the continuity of teachers' personal lives and the enrichment of their professional lives, serves as a critical gateway that sustains their professional beliefs and spiritual domain. It permeates all aspects of teachers' work and is closely related to the individual development, health, and well-being of both teachers and students. The ethical cultivation of teachers implicitly shapes the deepest spiritual foundations of their personal lives, while students, through the ethical expressions of their teachers, gain diverse perceptions and opportunities for multifaceted development. Fundamentally, both teachers and students, as individual life forms, exist within ethically charged interpersonal interactions and in the domain of the teacher. Therefore, the ethical formation of teachers is not only a response to the challenges of the times and societal expectations but also a pursuit of harmonious teacher-student relationships and long-term individual development. From this ontological standpoint, exploring teachers' natural life and morality, their social life and ethics, and their spiritual life and professional ethics helps clarify the internal trajectory of teachers' ethical development and serves as a complementary expression of the teacher's role as a cultivator of humanistic values.

2. Teachers' Natural Life and Morality

Herschel, A.J. once said, "The tragedy of man lies in his forgetting the question of 'who' he is, leading him to adopt a false identity" [3]. In contemporary society, the focus is often on the professional role of teachers, but questions like "What is a teacher?" "What does it mean to be a teacher?" and "What makes a good teacher?" are essential for understanding the inner dignity and life development of the teaching profession. By returning all these questions to the fundamental concept of "the human being," we can focus on the ontological consciousness that "teachers are first and foremost human beings." Recognizing teachers' identity as the internal driver of their moral development, with self-identification as its

intrinsic source, is a crucial starting point for exploring the challenges of teachers' identity in today's world.

2.1 The Origin of Teachers' Natural Life

In the context of the times, traditional ethical entities have gradually become dispersed, fragmented, and dissolved. As a result, individuals' sense of ethical belonging to the broader social fabric has weakened. As Professor Bu Yuhua pointed out, "The shift from a single to a plural value system has loosened the fixed identity between individuals and institutions. This change expands our living space and degree of freedom, allowing us to script our own life story without having to play roles that others have assigned to us. We are now facing a society—and a challenge—where we can shape or even reshape ourselves" [4]. From the perspective of individual existence, two characteristics emerge: first, a shift from a dependent lifestyle to a more autonomous one, and second, a shift from a relatively static, closed lifestyle to one of constant transformation. Individuals now take on multiple roles within society, navigating complex social relations as autonomous subjects with an increasingly pronounced sense of self-awareness and autonomy. This transformation enables individuals to realize their potential and achieve personal value in a unique way. With the rapid development of China's economy and society, the country has transitioned from a "familiar society" to a "stranger society", characterized by uncertainty, openness, and fluidity, as well as growing indifference and a crisis of trust between individuals. Confronted with various cultural groups or subgroups, individuals often struggle with moral judgment and decision-making, leading to anxiety and even psychological upheaval. All of this inevitably contributes to an identity crisis, as modern individuals often grapple with questions such as "Where did I come from?" and "Where am I headed?" These reflect a sense of confusion and uncertainty about their place in a broader group.

2.2 The Connection between Teachers' Natural Life and Morality

The China Moral Development Report [5] points out that morality and happiness are inherently aligned. In Chinese culture, ethics and morality have always been interwoven, with both considered equally important. The Axial Age philosopher Mencius famously asserted, "Without education,

human beings are reduced to animals" [6], a metaphysical expression of the importance of morality. The moral relationships between "the individual and the collective, individual good and social good," "heart and body, spiritual freedom and society," and "self-consciousness and social consciousness" present contradictions that create a space for personal life development. These contradictions provide a platform for individuals to realize their life value. In today's rapidly evolving society, marked by ongoing social transformation and widespread educational reforms, teachers are on the frontlines of change. How can they confront societal challenges and navigate the demands of the times? This question involves both the individual teacher and the external environment and also requires teachers to reconcile their personal identities with the collective destiny of the nation and their social responsibilities. This challenge has become a fundamental issue in reconstructing the modern teacher's identity. In this dimension, teachers have many expectations of themselves—some pertain to professional knowledge and skills, while others involve moral cultivation, such as personal charisma and ambition. The transition from morality to ethics reveals an evolving trajectory, moving from "moral issues, to social trust, and then to ethical polarization."

3. Teachers' Social Life and Professional Ethics

3.1 The Four Dimensions of Teachers' Social Relational Life

Teachers exist within relationships, and these relationships logically precede the individual self. From the perspective of ethical and value relationships, human value relationships are essentially ethical in nature, as every ethical relationship is an expression of a value relationship. Ethical relationships, as value relationships guided by normative principles, involve recognizing and managing the relationship between social and personal values in order to achieve unity between the two. In terms of the relationship between teachers and society, teachers work in the classroom, directly influencing students, while simultaneously bearing the expectations of both the school and society. These societal expectations largely determine the overall direction of student education. As for the relationship between teachers and change, in an era of transformation, teachers must position themselves within the broader context of societal change, using this relationship to understand and reshape their identity. In terms of the relationship between teachers and their profession, the knowledge, understanding, and emotional identification with their profession all serve their professional role. In relation to students, the primary focus of the teaching profession is student growth, which relies on the genuine care and attention of teachers. Placing students at the forefront is the foundational premise for understanding teacher ethics and the most critical dimension in teacher identity relations.

First, ethical order defines the attributes of teacher identity. Every social role exists within a particular ethical relationship. As noted in *The Book of Song: Biography of Wang Sengda*, "One should reflect on one's own identity and repay the deep kindness bestowed upon them; how could one fail to recognize the appropriate time for such a repayment?" Here, "identity" refers to social status and standing [7], which inherently belongs to an ethical relationship. Ultimately, all

relationships between individuals and society are ethical in nature, with identity being inseparable from ethical existence. From a social standpoint, the most common manifestation of identity is its institutional significance—identity implies social rank, rights, power, interests, and responsibilities. Ethics serves as the foundation for teachers' identity recognition. Second, at the individual level, only through recognizing one's own moral character and embracing the rational pursuit of the ultimate good, as well as accepting and internalizing the moral standards that guide behavior, can individuals develop a meaningful understanding of life and its purpose. Third, from a societal perspective, the customs, values, and norms shared by members of a community serve as the foundation for maintaining harmony and order within that community. Individuals internalize these customs and values, which form the ethical foundation for their identity recognition [8].

3.2 The Ethical Connotations of Teachers' Social Life

The ethical value orientation embodied in ethics is reflected in the intrinsic unity of "social order" and "individual spiritual life" [9]. Ethics expresses the inseparable connection between the individual and the entity, constructed and conveyed through the spirit, and thus constitutes the deeply rooted spiritual homeland of the individual. Therefore, ethical questions are fundamentally concerned with the relationship between individual actions and these universal interests and demands. The realization of individual life value belongs to the "infinite" within the whole, and only by situating oneself within the larger context of humanity can individual fulfillment become possible. Thus, the realization of life value is not only a matter of self-creation but also a continuous process of interacting, integrating, and harmonizing with social order. It represents the dual unity of internal self-realization and external social realization. Consequently, the realization of individual life value can only be achieved within the context of social ethical order. The ethical contradictions inherent in relationships between "the individual and the collective, personal good and societal good," "heart and body, spiritual freedom and society," and "self-consciousness and social consciousness, inward reflection and outward aspiration" provide the space for personal life development. These contradictions create a platform for individuals to realize their life value. The "ethical spirit" does not refer to specific ethical ideas but rather to the essential and spiritual qualities embodied by those ideas, the abstract and universal essence of ethics. More specifically, "ethical spirit is the spirit of social order," and the realization of self-value is the fulfillment of social demands, aligning personal value with societal needs. In *Educational Ethics*, Fan Hao points out: "As a principle of human relationships, ethics does not require individuals to sacrifice their personal interests to maintain an abstract whole, nor does it demand constant self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Rather, ethics seeks mutual benefit between individuals and the collective, achieving a rational balance between personal and collective interests through interaction" [10]. Ethics condenses the overall societal interest and individual benefit in the form of value, enabling the dual realization of individual and collective interests through human interaction.

In light of this, we must reflect on teachers' identity

recognition, their ethical relationships, ethical spirit, and ethical values by examining their life situations. This reflection also informs our thinking on how to construct teachers' identity recognition in order to enhance their life quality and intrinsic spiritual value. Moreover, from this perspective, we must address the issue of directionality in teacher identity recognition, where the pursuit of life value becomes the foundational point and ultimate destination in understanding teacher identity. This is the realm that ethics bestows upon individual life and the value through which individual life manifests ethics.

4. Teachers' Spiritual Life and Professional Ethics

4.1 The Connotation of Teachers' Spiritual Life

"Truly effective teaching cannot be reduced to mere techniques; it comes from the teacher's self-identity and wholeness" [11]. Parker Palmer points out that teachers' identity operates on two levels: first, the teacher's self-identification, and second, the self's identification with the role of a teacher. Only when teachers integrate their professional identity with a clear, enriched, and beautiful spiritual world can they fully recognize the ethical connotation embedded in their professional identity. The ethical nature of this identity is defined by the purpose of education, as education involves the intentional and positive influence of the educator on the physical and mental development of individuals. This inherently prescribes the ethical nature of the teacher's identity. The traditional purpose of education in China has always been directed toward an individual's life, with the cultivation of a perfect moral character at its core. The ideal figures in traditional society were sages and wise men, revered for their virtuous character. For example, Mencius's notion of "exhausting one's heart" leads one to understand their nature and heaven: "If a scholar truly knows the order of priorities, it will be like a tree with roots, or water with a source; as education progresses, changes will occur over months and years, impervious to obstacles... The decline of learning and the loss of the Way, when scholars fail to meet the enlightened, leads to confusion and a misguided focus on trivial matters, no longer following the ancient path" [12]. Mencius emphasized that the teacher's role is to teach people to be human: "In life, between heaven and earth, one must fulfill the way of being human. The essence of learning is learning to be human. Even without knowing a single word, one must remain an upright person." Wang Shouren (Wang Yangming) held a similar view, prioritizing moral education in schools, asserting that "school education should first aim to cultivate virtue, with talents being secondary." The Xue Ji (Record of Learning) posits that "teachers and students mutually enhance each other," advocating that teachers' love and respect for students should foster mutual growth. In *Lishi Chunqiu*, it is noted that "teachers should regard their students as themselves, teaching through self-reflection, with teacher and student as one." Han Yu argued that "students do not necessarily fall short of teachers, nor must teachers always surpass their students." Traditional Chinese educational thought emphasizes that teachers should guide students with patience and compassion, aspiring to cultivate virtuous individuals, or "gentlemen." The distinction between a "gentleman" and a "petty person" lies in

their virtue, with the core of a gentleman's virtue being "benevolence"—to love others, measure others by oneself, and "what one does not desire, one should not impose on others". In educating individuals to become "gentlemen," the teacher's influence emphasizes mutual understanding and a reciprocal relationship, ensuring that only through mutual respect can the impact of education be realized. Additionally, achieving virtue requires self-cultivation: "Only by establishing oneself can one help others to establish themselves."

4.2 The Ethical Implications of Teachers' Spiritual Life

In recent years, the term "teacher professional ethics" has gained prominence in China. In the United States, teacher professional ethics mainly encompass four aspects: responsibility to students, responsibility to the public, responsibility to the profession, and responsibility to professional employment practices [13]. In the United Kingdom, teacher professional ethics emphasize commitments to colleagues, schools, and other stakeholders. Chinese scholars define teacher professional ethics as "a set of moral norms established by professional organizations to better fulfill professional responsibilities and self-regulation, thereby upholding professional reputation, while also adhering to specific ethical standards." Other scholars view "teacher professional ethics" as the overall principles and standards that teachers must follow in educational activities [14]. Thus, teacher professional ethics can be understood as the standards or norms that guide teachers in their professional activities. Teachers' virtues, in essence, represent a form of professional moral character that enables them to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. In this rapidly transforming society, moral standards should evolve in tandem with scientific and technological advancements. As modern society grows increasingly abundant in both material and spiritual resources, moral cultivation has been marginalized. Therefore, teachers, as individuals responsible for guiding the healthy growth of young people, bear a higher level of responsibility in upholding public morality. This does not necessarily mean that teachers must possess exceptional moral virtues, but they should have an inherent moral consciousness—a willingness to be moral and a commitment to guiding students toward physical and mental well-being. If teachers lack virtue, they hinder education from achieving its intrinsic benefits. Since teacher virtue is a necessary quality for engaging in educational practice, what, then, is the intrinsic significance of educational practice? This relates to the core spirit of education and the underlying laws of "what education is"—a matter deeply rooted in educational values. In fact, these intrinsic benefits represent the spiritual essence of education, namely, its highest good or ultimate value orientation. Promoting students' comprehensive development must be based on an understanding of education's highest good and the pursuit of freedom, enabling every student to seek truth, goodness, and beauty, and to become ideal individuals who contribute to a harmonious society [15].

The teaching profession is an ethical relationship. Teachers are creators of social, political, and historical realities, as well as coordinators of student relationships and social life. The interaction between "subject and subject" is fundamental to the ethical distinction of the teaching profession from other

occupations. In the professional ethical relationship of teachers, they serve as the "creative center" of moral and intellectual recognition, evaluation, aesthetics, decision-making, belief, and practice [16]. This is both a manifestation of their general and specific roles, making teachers' responsibilities distinct from other ethical requirements. Teachers must act according to laws and regulations; otherwise, they are neglecting their duties. Therefore, the professional ethics of teachers are fundamentally a moral requirement for maintaining relationships with students and society. Traditional ethics provide a strong foundation, while the professionalization movement in Europe and the United States offers valuable guidance. Moving from occupational ethics to professional ethics is a more mature condition, and China's current efforts to build teacher professional ethics should be guided by professional learning, morality, politics, science, law, and other relevant theories, or what may be referred to as major deductive frameworks [17]. This approach maximizes the role of theoretical guidance, avoiding blind practice and accelerating the process of teacher professionalization.

Humans always exist in society with a specific identity, gradually realizing their developmental goals through the construction and recognition of identity [18]. The identity crisis that teachers face, along with the contradictions emerging in educational practice, undeniably stems from the uniqueness of the teacher's identity: teachers are neither fully constrained by societal expectations nor entirely autonomous subjects. The uniqueness of the teaching profession, with its aim of promoting human development, is both a defining feature of teacher identity and a determinant of the ethical nature of this identity. Only by being immersed in the ethical pursuit of "human" values can teachers protect their spiritual homeland and realize the ultimate value of education. However, the existential crisis of modern society is equally evident in teachers—mental fragmentation, loss of meaning, and spiritual confusion have eroded the spiritual pillars upon which teachers once relied [19]. To truly address the internal issue of teacher identity recognition, it is essential to examine the multiple identities of teachers as natural beings, social beings, and knowledge beings from an ethical perspective, grounding this analysis in teachers' moral practice to explore the value of life and realize the "life care" of education. Education is the cornerstone of national rejuvenation and social development. As transmitters and creators of human civilization, teachers are the primary resource for educational development and the key to improving educational quality. In the current industrialized and rationalist society, where moral dilemmas are rampant and individuals experience isolation and fragmentation, teachers are not exempt. When teachers present themselves as atomized individuals, they may suffer from "ethical deficiency," becoming "hollow people" in the spiritual world. This underscores the need for national ethical support to provide teachers with the moral and ethical foundation required for identity recognition.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Innovation Project of

Guangxi Graduate Education, (grant number YCSW2024215).

References

- [1] Campbell, E. *The Ethical Teacher*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2003.
- [2] Luo, S. Q., & Liu, Z. H. (2015). On the Communal Logic of Teacher Ethics Development. *Educational Research*, 36(07), 81-88.
- [3] Hermans, H. J. M. (2002). *The Dialogical Self: One Person, Different Stories*. In Kashima, Y., Foddy, M., & Platow, M. J. *Self and Identity: Personal, Social, and Symbolic* (pp. 71-100). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associate Publishers.
- [4] Bu, Y. H. (2011). *Classroom Life and the Cultivation of Public Spirit*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Education Press.
- [5] Fan, H. (2012). *China's Report on Ethics and Morality*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- [6] Yang, B. J. (1960). *Annotations on Mencius* (Vol. 2). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [7] Ding, F. L. (1997). Punctuation Edition "Zizhi Tongjian" Reading Notes. *Cultural and Educational Materials*, 1997(03), 103-112.
- [8] Fan, H. (1995). *The Spirit of Chinese Ethics*. Taiwan: Wunan Book Publishing Company.
- [9] Palmer, P. (2005). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (W. Guozhen & Y. Wei, Trans.). Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.
- [10] Jin, P. L. (2006). *Mencius Quotations*. Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing House.
- [11] Fan, H. (1994). *The Historical Construction of Chinese Ethical Spirit*. Taiwan: Wen Shi Zhe Publishing House.
- [12] Tang, D. X. (2016). The Path of Thought in the Historical Construction of Chinese Ethical Spirit: A Glimpse of Professor Fan Hao's "Philosophy of History" and "Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy Analysis*, 2016(6), 21-40.
- [13] Zhao, S. J. (2016). The Modern Form of Ethical Identity and Its Development Direction. *Xuehai*, 2016(2), 36-41.
- [14] Ren, C. (2016). How Life and Ethics Generate Ethical Life. *Jilin University Journal of Social Sciences*, 2016(1).
- [15] Fan, H. (2015). How Does Ethics Really Care for Life? *Tianjin Social Sciences*, 2015(6), 4-15.
- [16] Luo, S. Q., & Liu, Z. H. (2015). On the Communal Logic of Teacher Ethics Development. *Educational Research*, 36(07), 81-88.
- [17] Xu, T. F. (2005). The Construction of Teacher Professional Ethics in the United States and Its Implications. *Comparative Education Research*, 2005(05), 71-75+83.
- [18] Tan, C. B. (2020). The Characteristics of Educational Stages and the Temporal Dimension of Teacher Ethics. *Educational Research*, 41(12), 14-17.
- [19] Xu, T. F. (2006). On the Construction of Teacher Professional Ethics in China. *Educational Research*, 2006(07), 48-51.