

Research on the Cultivation Paths of Ecological Ethics in Ideological and Political Education for College Students in the New Era

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Abstract: Contemporary higher education requires students to make their own moral judgment on the relation between humanity and nature. Despite having some basic knowledge about environmental protection among most young people currently, they have no ability to do deep ethical reasoning and stable behavioral motivation. This paper analyzed this problem from theoretical basis level, examined the current situation, and constructed its path. We found that there existed a structural coupling between ecological ethics and college students' moral awareness, however, students' knowledge reserves were shallow; There was a tension between value identification and emotional acceptance; Students had low degree of ethical self-awareness; Mode of educational presentation faced a disconnect. We proposed four paths including reshaping cognitive schemas, stimulating ethical sensitivity and emotional resonance, apply critical reflection, and internalize and transform ideas into behavior—an integrated framework of cognition – emotion – reasoning – behavior.

Keywords: college students; ideological and political education; ecological ethics; cultivation paths; ethical self-awareness

Introduction

The integration of ecological ethics into the ideology and political education system for college students is important from both research and practical perspectives. From theory perspective, our moral awareness cannot just regulate interpersonal relations: we should judge what kind of responsibilities we have towards the natural environment too—otherwise there will be loopholes in our moral cognition. From an educational perspective, college students are at a crucial point shaping their own values – their level of ecological ethical cognition not only affects their personal lifestyle choice but indirectly shapes how society views the nature. However, currently when addressing issues of ecological ethics within ideological and political education, it mostly takes the form of embedding, themes or implicitly presenting them. And usually faces challenges such as lacking ethical reasoning training, insufficiency in simulating value conflict situation and lack of diagnostic response on existing cognition. In other words, merely adding up ecological ethics content is insufficient—we need a systematic set of cultivation paths which can bridge the gaps between cognition and behavior, between ideas and practice. This paper aims to address that need. Based upon sorting out the theoretical basis of integrating ecological ethics into ideological and political education and analyzing the current status of college students' ecological ethical cognition, constructing cultivation paths with internal logical consistency so as to provide theoretical support for relevant educational practice.

1. The Theoretical Basis for Integrating Ecological Ethics into Ideological and Political Education

1.1 The Core Essence of Ecological Ethics and Its Educational Value

In essence, ecological ethics questions our moral relationship between humanity and the natural environment by transcending the limitation of traditional anthropocentrism (nature as a mere instrument), which argues that there exists an intrinsic value in nature and humanity has moral responsibilities towards ecosystems and their constituents. We can reflect on the educational value of ecological ethics in the context of ideological and political education for college students at two levels: Firstly, it fosters the formation among students' sense of respecting the natural environment so they are

able to perceive the causal link between themselves and the ecological whole; Secondly, it provides them a moral reasoning framework helping students make judgments based on both self-interest and altruism when facing daily decisions such as resource utilization or consumption choices. Its educational value lies not outside but embedded in the complete moral literacy that contemporary youth should have. To bring ecological ethics into ideological and political education is actually extending the scope of moral cognition of those being educated from interpersonal ethics to including the ethics between humanity and nature.

1.2 The Logical Starting Point of Ecological Ethics in the Context of Ideological and Political Education

Logic start of ideological and political education is how one should live. Ideological and political education intends to shape learner's values and orientation. Why embed ecological ethics? There exists a core judgment: the quality of human life and the degree of human moral perfection cannot be separated from the natural environmental conditions where we live. The logical start of ecological ethics is "there exist moral obligations between humanity and nature that can be rationally justified", starting with three progressive levels: First, the health and stability of the natural environment is the foundation prerequisite for our survival and development; Second, human intervention in the natural environment is morally evaluable; Third, as a group receiving higher education, college students are at the stage of value formation, which is exactly a critical window period for introducing ecological ethical awareness. So it is intrinsic rationality rather than an external imposition when combining ideological and political education and ecological ethics^[1].

1.3 The Coupling Relationship Between Ecological Ethics and College Students' Moral Awareness

The general aspects of college students' moral awareness include a sense of justice, a sense of responsibility, and empathy; ecological ethics has structural coupling with them. Intergenerational justice (i.e., the responsibility of the current generation to guarantee future generations a sound natural environment) advocated by ecological ethics highly compatible with college students' conception of justice. It's easy for students to understand that excessive consumption of natural resources would deprive future generations of their range of survival choices. Empathy towards nature in ecological ethics—that is extending our empathy properly to sentient animals and even the whole ecosystem—will trigger college students' existing network of moral emotions. Such coupling isn't just an accumulation of knowledge but reorganization of cognitive schema: the pattern of thinking formed by students in dealing with interpersonal moral dilemmas can be extended to human – nature interactions. Reflection about the boundary of responsibility based on ecological ethics will also prompt students to rethink the neglected indirect effects in interpersonal ethics. Establishing this kind of coupling relationship gives us psychological and cognitive level supports when we design further cultivation paths^[2].

1.4 The Theoretical Presuppositions and Boundaries of Cultivation Path Construction

Each cultivation path has some theory presupposition which must recognize its applicable boundary condition. Here are three points included in our theoretical presuppositions put forth in this chapter:

College students' ecological ethical concepts can be shaped and optimized through systematic educational intervention instead of relying on innate factors or spontaneous experience alone;

The process of cultivating ecological ethics needs to adopt an integrated model of cognitive enhancement, emotional activation, and behavioral guidance as its basic framework because only one path won't have lasting effect;

Respect college students' existing capacity for independent judgment so that educators play a role of facilitator and interlocutor but not coercive indoctrinator. Meanwhile, we also need to define the boundaries of such cultivation path: Introducing ecological ethics doesn't mean replacing students' mastery of professional knowledge or forcing them to shoulder moral responsibility for nature conservation beyond their capacity for action. Also, the effectiveness of cultivation paths depend upon context, and student group from different institution and different discipline background might vary in their starting point of ecological ethical cognition. Acknowledging the boundaries would help us avoid having unrealistic expectation about the outcome of cultivation whilst making path design targeting and operable.

2. Examination of the Current Situation of College Students' Ecological Ethical Cognition

2.1 Structural Characteristics of Ecological Ethics Knowledge Reserves

There are obvious characteristics of stratification and imbalance in the knowledge reserves about ecological ethics in college students. Superficial knowledge means fragmentary understanding of some specific issues such as environmental pollution and resource scarcity, most of them come from the daily media dissemination or life experiences. Deep-level knowledge covers the core concepts of ecological ethics including the intrinsic value of nature, the theoretical division between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, and the distinction between intergenerational justice and intragenerational justice; the whole degree of mastering this part of knowledge is relatively low. Regarding knowledge structure, the reserves of factual knowledge (such as the environmental hazards of a certain type of pollutant) far exceed that of normative knowledge (such as what moral obligations humans have towards nature) and procedural knowledge (such as how to conduct ethical reasoning when facing ecological conflicts); thus, they can recognize the surface manifestation of ecological problems but find difficulty justifying from an ethical level if their behavior is right or wrong. There is also a significant characteristic caused by disciplinary background – students who take environment-related courses or participate in nature experience activities have a relatively higher ratio of normative knowledge in their knowledge reserves. The structural shortcoming in knowledge reserves focuses on lack of an ethical reasoning framework which provides an entry point for designing subsequent cultivation paths^[3].

2.2 The Tension Between Ecological Value Identification and Emotional Acceptance

Students normally experience a conflict in the area of ecological ethics: although most students are able to cognitively recognize the significance of protecting ecological environment and agree on value statements such as "humanity and nature should coexist in harmony"; yet resist turning these value identifications into emotional acceptance in some cases. Emotional acceptance refers to people's positive emotions towards ecological ethical concepts (e.g., being distressed by seeing the destruction of nature, appreciating when seeing other people practicing environmentally-friendly behaviors, guilty for doing environmentally-unfriendly actions). The survey results show that students' degree of identification at the abstract value level is quite high, however, their degree of emotional acceptance drops significantly under real or simulated ethical dilemmas. Such as knowing animals have the right to survive, but emotionally detached when facing animal welfare issues in food consumption. It is due to value identification mostly comes from the internalization of social norms or rational persuasion, whereas emotional acceptance needs a deep empathy mechanism and nature-contact experiences. In absence of an emotional basis, ecological ethical concepts will remain at the level of verbal statements and it is hard to become stable personality traits^[4].

2.3 The Degree of Ethical Self-Awareness in Daily Ecological Behavior

In regard to behavioral frequency, behavioral stability and behavioral attribution, we illustrate how much ethical self-awareness students have for daily ecological behavior: For frequency, low investment/high reward behaviors (turning off lights when you leave a room; reduce using disposable tableware) occur frequently while behaviors involving extra time/economic cost (active participation in ecological restoration activities; choose green products when balancing price with environmental protection) happen rarely. As regards stability, students display a high level of eco-friendly behavior when there's external supervision or peer presence, however, their behavioral consistency is notably lower when they are alone - implying that behavior is influenced by situational factors rather than intrinsic ethical motivation. With respect to attribution, if students were asked to explain why they adopt a certain ecological behavior, common reasons given will be saving money, everyone does this, school regulations etc., and only a small portion of them attributed their behavior to I believe doing so stems from a responsibility toward nature. It shows that the degree of ethical self-awareness behind daily behavior is still at a relatively low level, and most behavior is at a pre-ethical or quasi-ethical stage without rising up to an autonomous choice based on clear moral principles. This judgment does not deny students' goodwill, instead, it emphasizes the existence of a cognitive gap between behavioral habits and ethical self-awareness that need to be bridged.

2.4 The Presentation of Ecological Ethics in Existing Educational Components and Its Limitations

The current ideological and political education in colleges and universities mainly uses these three

forms to present the issue of ecological ethics. The embedded presentation puts ecological ethics as an auxiliary content attached to the main theme. Advantage is no additional teaching burden but disadvantage is they are easy to marginalize and hard for students to systemically understand. Thematic presentation emphasizes introduction of ecological ethical concepts and principles dedicated chapters/lectures so that knowledge is complete, but mostly just list concepts without connecting them with the life world. Implicit presentation indirectly conveys the idea of the relationship between humanity and nature by means of natural aesthetic experience, outdoor activities etc., which has relatively good impact on emotional awakening although lacking explicit concept tools makes it difficult for students to distil transferable ethical principles. Common shortcoming of all three forms: lack of ethical reasoning training, insufficiency in simulating value-conflict situations, absent diagnosis of and response to existing cognition. Emphasizing educational component "what should be known", instead of how students actually think results in disconnecting what is presented from cognitive starting point.^[5]

3. Construction of Cultivation Paths for Ecological Ethics

3.1 Reshaping the Cognitive Schema of Ecological Ethical Awareness

Changing the cognitive schema implies changing the way that college students perceive the relationship between humanity and nature. The majority of students have a detached cognitive schema (i.e., treating the natural environment as a repository of resources or background) by simplifying the interaction between humanity and nature into a utilitarian relationship wherein humans utilize nature while being utilized. Our goal is to transform such a schema into a relational one in the first stage of our cultivation path, making students aware about the ecological chains lurking behind each of their acts of consumption and each of their trips, and the cumulative impact of these actions on natural systems. For example, we can show them the circulation paths of matter and energy in ecosystems so they understand that humanity is not separated from nature, rather, a node embedded in it. Changing the cognitive schema doesn't imply rejecting the original framework altogether, instead based on keeping the reasonable parts of instrumental rationality, superimpose upon it a relational mode of thinking; facing an ecological decision, what activates in their mind are no longer just "what benefit does this bring to me", but also, "what does this behavior mean for soil, water bodies, and other species". This dual activation needs multiple cognitive conflicts and case comparisons until the new mode of thinking gradually turns from deliberate use to automatic operation.

3.2 The Activation Mechanism of Ethical Sensitivity and Emotional Resonance

To be ethically sensitive is to detect an ethical aspect of a situation. The lack of ethical sensitivity observed among ecology students seems like students ignoring the behaviors damaging the natural environment (if they see it, they have difficulty defining it as moral). To activate such sensitivity means to open the channel from cognition to emotion. A possible way of doing that could be presenting concretized stories transforming abstract ecological damage into perceivable local scenes: disappearance of a certain type of aquatic insect in a polluted stream, obstruction of animal migration in a woodland due to road fragmentation... This story doesn't depend on exaggeration of emotional appeal but awakening students' empathy using authentic details. Working in concert with emotional resonance consists of creating a feedback loop – i.e., make students feel the positive change caused by their own attention and goodwill – measurable data showing how a little conservation effort really reduces resource consumption. Emotional resonance must be well-moderated because too much sentimentality triggers psychological defense- the best activation mechanism would be letting students feel the vulnerability of nature at a safe distance while keeping a sufficient sense of action efficacy, thus awakening emotions without becoming a sense of powerlessness.^[6]

3.3 The Application of Critical Reflection in Ecological Ethical Reasoning

Critical reflection implies that students can reflect over how these concepts were formed; what assumptions are there? Students's environmental protection concepts come from family customs, peers or media propaganda – and these concepts may contain internal contradictions. For example, someone claiming animals should not suffer unnecessary pain yet consuming industrially farmed meat for the sake of taste will ignore the contradiction as everyday consciousness overlooks it. We reveal it via critical reflection. Regarding specific operations: students can be guided to break down the chain of

reasons he depends on when making some ecologically-related decisions, check whether the reasons are coherent and able withstanding counter-questioning. Critical reflection does not lead us into relativism - it doesn't mean demonstrating that all views are equally good or equally bad, rather it helps students see which beliefs are capable of passing rational examination whereas other ones are just unexamined habituated thinking. The value of this ability in ecological ethical reasoning is that when faced with dilemmas (the dilemma between protecting a certain habitat versus meeting the livelihoods of local residents), students can go beyond simple either/or judgment, identifying the ethical presuppositions underlying each party's claim, and then take their own stand based on that. Such a reasoning quality cannot be substituted by mere memorizing of superficial knowledge.

3.4 Internalization and Transformation Strategies for Ecological Ethics from Concept to Behavior

The distance between concept and behavior is also one of issues in cultivating ecological ethics. In developing internalization and transformation strategies, it should consider a fact - even though students have formed a complete cognitive structure of ecological ethics and reach a certain level of emotional acceptance, their actual behavior decisions will be influenced by various factors (situational resistance, degree of convenience, etc) in real situations. It means, when developing transformation strategies, we cannot hope for a single jump forward; instead, we need a tiered approach. The first-tier is low-threshold behavior anchoring - we choose those behaviors which require almost no extra cost as practice objects (e.g., replace purchasing bottled water with use of your own water bottle); not due to the size of ecological benefit brought by such behaviors, but establishing a self-attribution pattern ("my ethical concepts can drive me to act"), the second-tier is making behavioral chains visible - let students record all ecologically relevant decision nodes within a certain period of time, identify where conceptual transformation goes smooth or ruptures occurs; third-tier is self-negotiate responsibility boundaries - help students actively delineate a range of ecological responsibility they are willing to take on - not infinite responsibility, but a limited commitment reached after balancing academic study, social life, and personal development. Essence of this strategy is: internalization doesn't mean the automatic flow from concepts to behavior - we need to design intermediate links so that every behavior confirms our ethical self. Accumulated confirmations makes the strength of the link between concepts and behavior grows gradually while the interfering effect of external situations relatively weaken.

Conclusion

This paper explores cultivating ecological ethics in ideological and political education for college students in the new era by studying its theoretical basis, exploring the current situation, and constructing the path. It finds out that incorporating ecological ethics into it is not an add-on, but an intrinsic supplementation to the completeness of college students' moral awareness; there are structural gaps between knowledge level, emotional level and behavioral level as a reality target for designing cultivation paths. The reshaping of cognitive schema, activation of ethical sensitivity, application of critical reflection, and internalization and transformation strategies form a progressive chain from adjusting the underlying framework to anchoring surface-level behavior.

Future research might go in the following directions: First, explore the differences among the ecological ethical cognition of students with different disciplinary background and different places of origin as well as its moderation effect on their sensitivity to cultivation paths; Second, develop quantifiable assessment tools so that we can track and compare the real effects of cultivation paths over time; Third, integrate the cultivation of ecological ethics with technological means (digital media or virtual reality), creating a new scenario for emotional resonance and ethical reasoning training. Advancement of these directions will help us move the cultivation of ecological ethics from theory construction into more adaptive practical operations.

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