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The Moral Philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám: Human Nature, Self-Cultivation, and Ethical Governance in Vietnamese Thought

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Abstract

One of the greatest philosophers in Vietnam in the late eighteenth century is Ngô ThìNhám (1746-1803). In his works related to ethics, politics, religion, etc., he establishes a particular theory of morality focusing on human morality. In this paper, the four main aspects of his ethical philosophy will be examined: the place and function of morality in human life; the moral essence of human nature; obstacles against the development of human morality; and the ways that human beings might restore and develop their morality. The analysis indicates that Ngô ThìNhám did not directly adopt Confucianism's morality into his thought, but re-interpreted those categories to respond to the problems of that time, such as moral decay and the crisis within the society and politics. The philosophical system of Ngô ThìNhám includes many aspects from Buddhism and Taoism while preserving many aspects of Confucianism, especially moral virtues and ethics of leadership and governance. The study of his moral philosophy suggests that this philosopher is valuable in two aspects: first, his ideas provide us with an understanding of the Vietnamese intellectual life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; secondly, we can draw some resources for modern ethical life.

Keywords: Ngô ThìNhám; moral philosophy; human nature; self-cultivation; ethical governance; Vietnamese philosophy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of Vietnamese philosophy of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Ngô ThìNhám (1746–1803) is a philosopher whose views have reached a high level and extend not only to the political events of his time but to other spheres of the human being such as the socio-political aspect, the educational aspect, the religious aspect, and even the moral aspect. Living in a time of great political, social, and cultural changes, Ngô ThìNhám formed a wide philosophical idea of the human being that can be seen as an understanding of many different aspects of human nature. However, among all those aspects, the moral aspect occupies the leading position since the situation was characterized by the necessity of reestablishing the moral order in the society.

At the present time, when Vietnam faces problems connected with the decrease in moral standards of people, fragmentation of society, and the contradiction between economic development and ethics, the analysis of moral views of Ngô ThìNhám takes on more meaning than ever. This is due to the fact that these moral ideas contribute both to the revival of interest in Vietnam's national philosophical heritage with eternal value for ethics and to the establishment of norms of action necessary for reconstruction of society's moral foundations. According to Ngô ThìNhám, moral reconstruction cannot take place solely with the help of slogans and control but involves a special philosophical process consisting of self-examination, self-realization, and moral rebirth of people in their family, social, and state roles.

The main goal of this essay is thus to examine the primary elements of the moral philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám as well as its historical relevance and applicability for the cultivation of an ethical way of life in present-day Vietnam. The thesis of this essay is that the moral philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám cannot be regarded as a mere restatement of Confucian doctrine but as an ethically oriented system with a historical context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no systematic study on the moral philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám at this point. Previous research has addressed certain aspects of his philosophical theory; however, such works tend to be general, thematic, or focused on particular concepts. According to [1], what was most essential about Ngô ThìNhám were the moral way of being a person and the sense of life of human beings. Through several examples provided by the author, the essence of the moral philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám can be explained as follows: the link between morality and rebirth of man; the necessity of moral life in terms of service to the nation and the citizens; and the significance of loyalty and righteousness as key elements of ethical life.

[2] investigates the moral philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám based on major relational dimensions, including family relations (father–son; husband–wife; brotherhood among elder and younger brothers); and political relations (ruler–subjects and official–citizens). According to the author, Ngô ThìNhám defines the moral dimension as the basis for order in social relations and stresses its mutual rather than one-sided aspect. According to [3], the indispensability of morality in the lives of human beings consists in the need to protect oneself from moral chaos and restore one's inherent good qualities; thus, contributing to the development of the surrounding society. Loyalty (trung), filial piety (hiu), propriety (l), righteousness (nghĩa), and norms of social conduct (cng thng) become the most important aspects of self-control and discipline.

Nguyn Văn Trng [4] reveals the conditions, premises, and content of the concepts of *loyalty* and *righteousness* of Ngô ThìNhám, as well as assesses their values and disadvantages. According to the results of the analysis, benevolence and righteousness (*nhân nghĩa*) for him was both the origin and the highest aim of the moral way of life. One of the innovations in his theory consists of his respect for human dignity and concern for human rights, including women's, who were among the disadvantaged social groups at that time. Lê Đc Th [5] considers the worldview of Ngô ThìNhám's idea of moral life associated with practical activities aimed at serving other people as the ideal moral principles of Confucian scholar. His view about the manifestation of morality through interaction between individuals in family relations is emphasized. Morality cannot be implemented in a forced manner.

Nguyn Thanh Ngân H [6] suggests that in Ngô ThìNhám's view of the person, there is an implementation of the Confucian principle of personal development, family regulation, state management, and harmony in the world (*tu thân, t gia, tr quc, bình thiên h*). Lu Đình Vinh [7] holds that the views of the thinker go beyond mere patriotism and become the objects of theoretical consideration due to his thoughts about lightening the burden on the people (*khoan th sc dân*), interpretation of *trung* and national self-respect.

The presented research results can serve as useful bases for further investigation of the ethical position of Ngô ThìNhám. At present, however, there are no comprehensive investigations related to the study of moral philosophy of the thinker. The main goals of the present paper include identification of the role of morality, moral structure of human nature, reasons for moral degradation, moral cultivation techniques, and significance of his ethical thought both in history and in modern times.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the present work is based on the dialectical materialist approach typical of the Marxist–Leninist philosophical methodology, which acts as the general paradigm of researching the issue. Thus, such approaches as

objectivity, wholeness, historicity, development, and practicability can be identified in this study of Ngô ThìNhám's moral philosophy, which allows exploring how his thoughts developed under the influence of certain conditions as well as how they were relevant to the practical situation in which he found himself.

In addition to the above-mentioned general methodologies of studying Ngô ThìNhám's moral philosophy, some special methods were also applied. In particular, the historical–logical method allowed putting the ideas of Ngô ThìNhám into a historical and cultural context by considering the specifics of the political and social situation at the end of the eighteenth century. As regards Ngô ThìNhám's moral philosophy specifically, such methods as analytical–synthetic and systematization were applied to explore the internal structure of his moral philosophy and to interconnect its basic components. Moreover, the hermeneutics, textual interpretation, and comparative methods also contributed to the exploration of this topic.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. HUMAN BEING AS A MORAL BEING

In the philosophical views of Ngô ThìNhám, man is basically a moral being. Morality forms the initial nature of the human being. One turns into a real human being only if he/she acts in the moral dimension. Thus, research into the moral philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám can also serve to illustrate not only the nature of man but also how one can become his/her real self when dominated by selfishness.

The significance and role of morality in the life of man. For Ngô ThìNhám, morality represents the source and key prerequisite for man becoming really human. Therefore, morality should be regarded not as a set of behavioral norms but rather as a manifestation of heavenly nature (*thiên tính*) of each individual. A man will be considered really human if he/she is able to recognize the difference between good and evil, feel disgraceful emotions, restrain oneself from evil deeds and perform his/her obligations. He states the following:

> Human beings are human, devils are devils, animals are animals. Once one has his mind up, devils spring up; once his mind is put down, devils disappear—both originate from the mind of human beings. There exists an inherent moral principle of human beings; where Heavenly conscience (*thiên lng*) is absent, human nature vanishes and one has to go through animal ways [8].

In his interpretation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Ngô ThìNhám asserts that man without morality will descend into the state of animalism. He says:

> The sage applied rituals and ceremonies (*l*) to stop the moral degradation and ensure man won't degenerate into beasts. Look at herds of deer or swarms of sparrows; their behavior is united, but once some food emerges, they fight each other—because there is nothing to hold them back [9].

According to Ngô ThìNhám, morality is what makes man link to Heaven and Earth. The Way of Heaven (*Thiên đo*) is a kind of objective moral order that does not lie within the scope of human calculations. Should men behave virtuously, heaven will be in peace, but when they do evil, heaven will make its revenge through events. As he wrote:

> Heaven, even though only a large empty space, is capable of rewarding virtue and punishing evil. It does not follow human activities but sees and knows everything in the creation of the universe. If a great malefactor is not punished by human actions and enjoys all kinds of pleasures, then heaven will use the help of others to punish him—this is the natural law. The role of the king is to rule on behalf of heaven in the world; therefore, if he fails to reward and punish people but relies on heaven, then having a ruler means nothing different from lacking one [9].

The philosopher denied the fatalistic views about fate (*thiên mnh*), saying that man, as agents of heaven on Earth, should take actions to bring harmony to the world. As he put it:

> People who practice the Way progress, and those who don't stand still. Knowing the Way means knowing, and knowing means understanding, which brings happiness; ignoring the Way means being obstructed, which ends in misery [8].

Accordingly, morality enables humanity to shoulder huge responsibilities. It is the starting point of any great enterprise that concerns the welfare of the nation and the people. Ngô ThìNhám asserts that:

> The Path of the sages, if kept within, is virtue; if put into practice, is great enterprise. If it hides, it resembles layers of mountains—visible but unreachable. If it shows, it is like an open road available for everyone. The man of narrow wisdom grasps what is visible and manages the state (*tr quc*); the man of wide capacity sees what is hidden and sustains the state (*trì quc*) [8].

Therefore, those of narrow wisdom only handle outward affairs, while those of great ability recognize the role of morality in government. Thanks to moral strength, the community can maintain order without depending on force alone. In contrast, the individual who neglects his moral obligations disconnects himself from Heaven and the moral law of nature. That is why Ngô ThìNhám placed great importance on moral virtue rather than status or authority:

> If one honors only the king's throne, one would teach the whole world to respect rank rather than righteousness, profit more than virtue [9].

4.2. ETHICAL CODES FOR HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Benevolence (nhân). Benevolence, according to Ngô ThìNhám, is the vehicle through which one navigates the stormy seas of life toward peace and happiness. Benevolence grants man the ability to shoulder heavy responsibilities. No one who is benevolent can injure anyone for his own benefit. He says,

> When benevolence is cultivated, all greed vanishes. There are two kinds of greed: the evil kind is greed of gain; the virtuous kind is greed for benevolence. The virtuous desire righteousness while the vicious covet sensual advantage [10].

Propriety (l).

Ngô ThìNhám connected benevolence (*nhân*) with propriety (*l*), considering the former to be the substance and the latter to be the form. He proposed a distinctive concept of *l* as a principle grounded in the moral laws of heaven and earth and as a rule that guides human actions. He defines *l nghi* as follows:

> Propriety is a great instrument of restriction in this world; restriction implies a certain boundary. Wine being served, even those who thirst do not dare to drink; meat being offered, even those who are hungry do not dare to eat — as they would never break propriety for their desires. This way, social hierarchy is respected, and the hearts of people remain steady [10].

In this regard, *l* helps draw lines in the moral spectrum to ensure human beings do not slip into wicked ways. *l* also maintains societal order. According to Ngô ThìNhám, propriety emanates from human emotions with the aim of creating moral degrees and that propriety forms the basis of the state and holds the hearts of the people together [11]. To Ngô ThìNhám, *l* is the benchmark of human civilization. Learning propriety means self-establishment and living by propriety means practicing benevolence. Through propriety, one is taught to be meticulous about trivial issues to avoid bigger dangers.
Righteousness (nghĩa). To Ngô ThìNhám, benevolence ensures humanity thrives whereas righteousness leads to the harmony of all things [12]. Righteousness separates the good from the bad. He says:

> The sage scorned those who were interested in material gains and overlooked righteousness. A man of honor holds on to righteousness and doesn't seek selfish personal gains [10].

He also cautions that the king does not look at the profit and neglect the righteousness for governing well is to regard righteousness as gain, whereas treating the profit as gain leads to destruction [10]. Ngô ThìNhám clarifies the concept of *nghĩa* through the differentiation between good and bad. The notion of good is personified in great figures like Yao, Shun, and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva who embody universal morality. Greater righteousness surpasses the individual and strives to render goodness for all under Heaven (*kiêm thin thiên h*).
Loyalty (trung). Loyalty is another cardinal quality emphasized in the moral philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám in the sense that it plays a crucial role in relations between subjects and sovereign and between children and parents. According to Ngô ThìNhám, when someone is the subject, he or she must be loyal to the ruler, and, being a child, he or she must show respect to the father. These are the main bases [10]. Besides, he notes that education means seeking the root of the way, but the way itself consists only of loyalty and respectfulness [8].

The idea of loyalty elaborated by Ngô ThìNhám appears to be quite flexible and reasonable. It seems that the author considered it to depend not only on the virtue of the ruler but also on the essence of the deed performed by the subject. Thus, he states as follows:

> Sometimes ministers should die, sometimes they should live. There are deaths appropriate, and inappropriate. When ministers hold offices but betray their lords, can that be righteousness? Death due to devotion to duty is real righteousness. However, when ministers seduce their sovereigns into misconduct and die in vain in order to manifest their loyalty, can that be correct? [10]

The notion of loyalty thus moved beyond the traditional sense of blind loyalty in Ngô ThìNhám's conception. In the intricate political context of the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, the author formulated loyalty as devotion to the people and country, as evidenced by his involvement in the Tây Sn cause.

Filial piety (hiu). Filial piety is a moral norm regulating relations between parents and children. Similar to loyalty, filial piety is defined using rationality (*lý*) and righteousness (*nghĩa*). Ngô ThìNhám states:

> Even if the father is unkind to the son, he cannot be unfilial; even if the ruler is inhumane to his subjects, they cannot be disloyal; even if the elder brother is ungracious to the younger, he cannot be disrespectful [10].

This quote illustrates the Confucian hierarchy of responsibilities in familial and political spheres, but at the same time shows that those responsibilities need to be viewed from the moral perspective.

4.3. CHALLENGES TO MORAL CULTIVATION

Ngô ThìNhám paid special attention to challenges to moral development. According to him, men and women possess some innate characteristics, which are associated with morality, however, desire, ignorance, and social problems tend to suppress these natural inclinations. As a consequence, he saw moral degradation not as a result of lack of moral standards and principles but as a consequence of man's distance from his/her natural moral qualities. Therefore, he wondered why it happens that man loses its moral sense and society plunges into chaos, while humans fall victim to beasts [8].

In the view of Ngô ThìNhám, the main difficulty is associated with the dominance of selfish passions that leads to imbalance of the unity of Heavenly nature and human nature. When such an imbalance occurs, then man's actions become driven by instinctive desires, and moral values are no longer followed. That is why he states that when heaven is blurred, then men become corrupt, and the prevalence of human desire leads to corruption [11].

Consequently, he considers the problem of moral decline to be connected with inner problems of man and specifically with his/her inability to keep the Heavenly endowment in itself. It is claimed that Heavenly nature is virtuous, that losing contact with it results in being lost, and that sages are those who preserve Heavenly nature [11]. It means that the moral crisis is a crisis of consciousness and self-improvement. Only when individuals restore their innate moral qualities, society is able to return order to it.

4.4. METHODS OF MORAL CULTIVATION

With his analysis of moral decline, Ngô ThìNhám introduced practical ways of moral cultivation. Though based on interaction between different philosophies, his moral cultivation was ultimately influenced by Confucianism. In his opinion, moral cultivation of the individual was necessary for returning human morality to its previous glory.

According to Ngô ThìNhám, one should begin with self-reflection (*t k*). Self-reflection involves constant attention to one's thoughts and actions in order to avoid moral degradation. The philosopher states that ruling oneself consists in awakening the mind; and the mind should awaken human nature [11]. Secondly, he argues in favor of unity between knowing and doing (*tri hành hp nht*). For Ngô ThìNhám, moral excellence cannot be purely theoretical; instead, it represents the realization of certain morals in action. According to him, to know without doing is not to really know; but to act without knowing results in wrong action [11]. Lastly, he emphasizes the role of compassion and benevolence (*nhân nghĩa*) in moral development. These virtues unite self-cultivation and other individuals in a higher form of virtue.

In accordance with his philosophical ideas, Ngô ThìNhám suggests a lifelong process of attunement to Heaven, people, and oneself. As a conclusion to all of these, he says: When the way of kings (*vng đo*) is established, then the ruler is humane toward the people and the people get along even with those who were once rebels [8]. Thus, moral cultivation is both personal and social in its essence. It is a dynamic process through which human beings recover their true nature and contribute to the establishment of a humane and orderly world.

4.5. THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS OF NGÔ THÌNHÁM

Theoretical and historical importance. The investigation of the Vietnamese philosopher Ngô ThìNhám's moral philosophy allows comprehending the specifics of a moral tradition that significantly influenced the formation of the intellectual environment of the country during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unlike the other representatives of the Vietnamese school, who followed their predecessors in reproducing the ideas borrowed from classical Confucianism, Ngô ThìNhám was more creative and could interpret these values in a novel way according to the challenges of his times. As a result, the scholar managed to demonstrate his unique capacity to develop a moral tradition based on the revival of classical principles.

Moreover, thanks to the connection established between the ethical norms and the topical problems of Ngô ThìNhám's period such as political instability, the decline of ethics, and the loss of social trust, the philosopher was able to transform an abstract moral doctrine into an active and reform-oriented ideological system. Thus, Ngô ThìNhám focused on such key factors as the person's efforts and moral independence as the basis of self-cultivation and showed that there existed a deep correlation between personal virtues and society's moral order. Therefore, his ethical views, despite the fact that they emerged during a definite historical period, reflect the eternal human concern with moral decline in any epoch.

Additionally, Ngô ThìNhám embodied his ethical philosophy in political practice because as an adviser of Emperor Quang Trung of Tây Sn dynasty, he participated in educational reforms, civil service examinations, and the moral training of bureaucrats. Moreover, the scholar advocated for the moral education of the entire population of the country. Therefore, his views on the issue of exemplary character of those who occupy positions in government and the importance of integrity in politics can be viewed as one of the first attempts to understand the concepts of moral management of state activities. The prediction expressed by him that unless the ruling group builds its activities on moral values, the society will face chaos is also highly valuable.

Relevance to the present day and universal value. Ngô ThìNhám's ethical views still remain topical for the discussion of such topics as the problem of human morals, governance and its morality, and moral education. Firstly, the main postulate proclaimed by the philosopher and which implies that a human being should become the point of orientation for society in the process of construction of a moral order is based on universal humanism and the principles of virtue ethics.

Moreover, Ngô ThìNhám stated that moral values cannot be imposed externally and have to emerge in people's moral consciousness. In the current age characterized by the process of globalization, rapid technological transformations, and problems with values, the scholar's considerations related to self-cultivation, integrity, and the mutual interconnection of personal virtue and social order can help people realize the importance of maintaining moral standards today. Hence, he encouraged modern people to find a balance between spiritual and material development, pay special attention to moral education, and support such institutions as the guarantee of integrity of moral norms.

Most importantly, the views of Ngô ThìNhám regarding moral exemplarity in politics have much in common with the global discussion on ethical leadership, responsibility of governors towards society, and the issue of integrity. Thus, his moral philosophy transcends the framework of historical and cultural contexts and becomes part of the modern global philosophical discussion about the role of moral responsibility in the power.

5. CONCLUSION

It should be concluded that the philosophy of morality by Ngô ThìNhám represents a holistic and profound system of ideas, developed against the background of challenging times in Vietnamese history. Ngô ThìNhám successfully managed to create an ideological and theoretical system of ethics combining the elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism with specific requirements and peculiarities of that time. Therefore, we can state that morality is a core of all things in the life of human beings, making their personality respectable, virtuous, and valuable.

Morality is the key issue in the development of the ethical character and maintenance of social order. It forms the backbone of good management, nationhood, and human relationships. The ideas and notions of moral philosophy by Ngô ThìNhám are characteristic of that particular period; however, they are still significant from both theoretical and practical points of view. With a stress on the issues of moral cultivation, benevolence, ritual propriety, rectitude, loyalty, filial piety, and ethical management, Ngô ThìNhám provided us with the notion of morality of that age.

The analysis of ethics proposed by Ngô ThìNhám can serve as a theoretical basis for studying the importance of ethics in the development of personality, civic duties, and social life. The analysis also helps develop practical directions for the development of moral qualities among the present-day citizens of Vietnam. Therefore, the philosophy of Ngô ThìNhám is considered to be a valuable source of wisdom for the contemporary era.

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