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How to Cultivate the Modern Self: Development of the Concept of Mental Discipline in the University History of the United States

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Abstract: The development of the concept of mental discipline can be understood from three clues, as a puritanical phenomenon, as a phenomenon rooted in the classics, and, on the other hand, as one rooted in faculty psychology. The aim of this research is to explore whether there has been a fracture in the evolution of the concept of mental discipline and explain how and why it evolved in three stages. Centered on three figures, Timothy Dwight, William Torrey Harris, and Irving Babbitt, it can be found that mental discipline evolved into three contexts during its development. Harris's ideas, to a large extent, reflected his absorption of the ideas of Hegelianism and the transcendental philosophy of Kant, and they also included Unitarianism. Babbitt hoped to solve the problem of how the general will formed by the individual of modern society not only guaranteed the public interest but also avoided excessively eroded individual spiritual freedom. Babbitt's issue horizon was similar to that of Harris, but they slightly differed. A brief overview of the research may imply that, using the perspective of intellectual history, mental discipline is no longer regarded as a static and continuous ideal but as a concept embedded in different contexts and facing different issue horizons.

Keywords: the concept of mental discipline; intellectual history; Timothy Dwight; William Torrey Harris; Irving Babbitt; the modern self



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1. Introduction

Regarding the concept of mental discipline, quite a few researchers have considered its important role as an educational goal of many elite colleges and universities. For example, Noah Porter noted the educational goal of mental discipline in American colleges and understood discipline as “to culture”, which means cultivating intellect. The educational contents were classical language courses [1]. Lawrence R. Vesey proposed that from 1865 to 1901, mental discipline was highly praised by college educators and became the goal of college education. The concept was based on the educational theory of faculty psychology, Christian theology, and Scottish common-sense philosophy, attaching importance to the teaching of classical courses. At the end of the 19th century, it waned to extinction, which was one of the signs of the decline of Puritanism in the 17th century [2]. In addition, mental discipline could also be interpreted as a part of faculty psychology theory, which was recognized by Kliebard, H. M., and Tanner, D. and Tanner, L.N. [3]. Kliebard explored the reasons for the decline in the concept of mental discipline at the end of the 19th century with the perspective of discourse struggle [4]. In general, it was an old but classic concept that ran through American middle and higher education in the 19th century.

Previously, researchers have paid attention to the practical characteristics of the concept of mental discipline in the history of secondary and higher education. Researchers generally regard the concept of mental discipline in history as an ideal with internal continuity and consistency. John Dewey listed mental discipline as one of the three “traditional” educational concepts of the United States in *Democracy and Education* [5]. Paul Monroe believed that the concept of mental discipline originated from the formalism of medieval

scholasticism, Christian sin ideal, and traditional psychology, such as Aristotle's faculty psychology, as well as Locke's and Bacon's psychology [6]. Thus, mental discipline was a concept relating to educational philosophy, psychology, Catholic theology, Christian theology, etc. Joel Spring's research regarded the ideal of mental discipline as a part of faculty psychology, in which the human mind could be divided into moral faculties and intelligent faculties. According to Joel Spring, faculty psychology and the ideal of the discipline of faculties of the mind appeared in Horace Mann's educational ideals and Yale Report of 1828 [7]. Roger Geiger stated that after the civil war, the high legislative era came, and a large number of extracurricular activities in the college provided a democratic atmosphere for the cultivation of students' character. The task of the college of mental discipline transformed into the formation of the "whole man" [8].

The above research interpreted mental discipline as a very coherent ideal. However, some other researchers have given a contextual description of mental discipline. Under the description of context, there seems to be a split in the evolution of the concept of mental discipline. Mental discipline is sometimes described as a Christian educational concept. George M. Marsden posited that the mental discipline in the Yale report should be understood from the perspective of the evangelical tradition of the college. Mental discipline was a Christian teaching concept. Its concept connotation included two levels, namely, to cultivate the rational and moral faculties of human beings with classical courses. Mental faculties, such as physical strength, could be cultivated through training [9].

However, some researchers believe that mental discipline is a cultural educational concept. The culture mentioned here is a secular culture, a social culture in which individuals live as citizens. For instance, Caroline Winter focused on how to discipline students' minds in classical languages, specifically in Greek drama language courses [10]. Howard M. Wach [11] and Charles Capper [12] showed that the concept of mental discipline means culture, which aimed at producing self-educated individuals to acquire "self-improvement" and free will. Christopher J. Lucas' opinion, as given in the Yale Report of 1828, defined the educational goal of the college as discipline of the mind, which was actually a universal education concept. The concept emphasized that undergraduate education was the preparatory education for higher professional education, and attention should, therefore, be paid to the development of intelligence [13].

As early as 1903, Yan Fu translated Spencer's *Sociology* and published it in the Chinese Mainland as "Qun xue Yi Yan", in which Yan Fu translated mental discipline into the Chinese word Shan-Xing. He understood Shan-Xing according to the concept of human nature of an ancient scholar named Zhuang Zhou. He believed that Shan-Xing meant the complement of human minds [14]. Several researchers have studied the concept of John Henry Newman's intellectual training. Shen Wen Qin focuses on Newman's concept of intellectual training [15]. Wang Chen studies the evolution of ideas from Newman to Hutchins. Newman understood mental discipline as the training of reason, and Hutchins understood it as the improvement of manhood [16]. These studies also show that there seems to be a split in the development of the concept of mental discipline. To sum up, there is a problem that needs to be further explored: do the mental discipline concepts in different historical periods have the same essential structure? In other words, has the concept of mental discipline in different historical periods been endowed with similar social value expectations by similar social groups?

2. Literature and Method

An overall view of the concept of mental discipline can help us to discover its development characteristics and find a suitable research entry point. The development of the concept of mental discipline went through different historical stages throughout the history of American education, from the early 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. Firstly, mental discipline evolved as a puritanical phenomenon.

2.1. Mental Discipline as a Puritanical Phenomenon

At the end of the 18th century, mental discipline was a puritanical phenomenon. Among various sectarian colleges, such as Harvard College and Yale College, mental discipline was regarded as an educational goal with corresponding educational methods, means, and processes. The implementation of mental discipline included daily instruction, sermons, prayer ceremonies, and other means. It refers to the process of disciplining the human body with divine laws, allowing people to achieve unselfishness and holiness gradually through embracing divine will. This kind of puritanical phenomenon was able to constantly infiltrate into the teaching objectives and curriculum through small colleges that strictly adhered to Calvinism. In the early 19th century, mental discipline, as a puritanical phenomenon, split. The main cause was that a more liberal theology, namely Unitarianism, emerged in New England. The election of Hollis Professor at Harvard in 1803 reflected this split within the higher education institutions in New England [17].

The orthodox Calvinist sectarian, represented by Jedidiah Morse, who was the overseer of Harvard College, wrote the article “True reason on which the election of a Hollis Professor of Divinity in Harvard College” to oppose the succession of Henry Ware, a Unitarian, to the Chair of Hollis Professor [18] (pp. 13, 21). The traditional college teachers represented by Morse did not regard this event as an accidental case but regarded it as a threat from Unitarianism. Morse, Dwight Timothy, and others were actively participating in the social reform movement in Massachusetts to help civilians fight for political rights. The orthodox Calvinists threatened the cultural leadership of the federalist in Massachusetts. Morse felt that orthodoxy was in crisis [19]. With the death of Joseph Willard in 1804, the president of Harvard and a Calvinist, Samuel Weber, a Unitarian, succeeded as the new president of Harvard College. Then, Morse quit Harvard. Afterwards, Morse, Timothy Dwight, Oliver Wendell, Moses Brown, and others created the Andover Theological Seminary in 1808. As mentioned in the speech of Timothy Dwight at the opening ceremony of the seminary, the educational aim was to furnish the mind and renew the joy in order to see an “immortal mind” [20]. Eliphalet Pearson, an orthodox Calvinist, who was defeated in the election for the President of Harvard College, became the President of the seminary [21]. The institution insisted on the concept of mental discipline based on the idea of puritanical sin. Timothy Dwight, Lyman Beecher, and other educators devoted themselves to charitable education [22] or establishing print media to maintain and promote their educational concepts.

2.2. The Development of the Concept of Mental Discipline Rooted in Classics

Under the influence of the relatively more liberal theology of Unitarians, there appeared two new branches of mental discipline. One of these was rooted in classics, which insisted that ancient Greek and Roman languages and literature were the best materials to cultivate mental taste and develop mental strength and emphasized the formal training value of classics. The concept of “mental discipline” was understood as “rational training” in the sense of experiential psychology, not in the sense of the puritanical idea of sin. It referred to the stimulation and training of rational faculty. Its conception was mainly derived from young scholars who travelled in Europe, especially in the German Universities in the early 19th century.

From 1819 to 1820, George Ticknor, Edward Everett, George Bancroft, and Joseph Green Cogswell returned to North America and worked at Harvard to teach after travelling and studying in Europe. From their European travelling experience, Everett and Ticknor recognized that the goal of university education should be cultivating rationality [23]. Ticknor initiated educational reform at Harvard. He even proposed changing Harvard into a “well-disciplined high school” [24]. In the reform proposal, he proposed that, if Harvard College were to be a real university, the “discipline” system must be improved [25]. His understanding was that mental discipline meant stimulating students’ mental vitality and cultivate their mental habits rather than paying too much attention to content and knowledge recitation. At the same time, mental discipline requires sufficient intensity and a

long learning period [26]. Cogswell resigned from Harvard in 1823 and founded the Round Hill School. He understood the concept of mental discipline in the sense of the pedagogy practiced in “gymnasiums” in Germany and “colleges in France [27]. In Round Hill School, mental discipline mainly centered on ancient Greek, ancient Latin, and mathematics teaching, and later expanded to a wide range of subjects. Mental discipline mainly refers to arousing students’ perception, attention, memory, imagination, judgment, reasoning faculty, and creativity [28]. The pattern of mental discipline practiced in this institution had completely abandoned the Christian idea of sin in children. Instead, it adopted the principle of “love” and assumed the existence of “mental faculties”. It was rooted in classical literature, including the ancient Latin works of Quintus Horatius Flaccus, Titus Livius, Cornelius Tacitus, and Publius Ovidius Naso, as well as ancient Greek dramas [29].

In 1827, it was said in “The substance of two reports of the Faculty of Amherst College to the Board of Trustees” that Amherst College would follow the progressive trend of the era to carry out educational reform. According to the report, the college would not only take natural sciences and business curriculums seriously but also firmly believe in the value of classics in mental culture. The report proposed that even if Amherst College reformed its curriculum system, it would still include the previous classics teaching in the new curriculum system [30]. In 1828, the Yale Report stated that the educational goal of Yale College was the discipline and furnishing of the mind. It emphasized not only the teaching methods of faculty exercising but also thorough and profound classical education by which teachers believed the mental taste would be shaped [31].

The phrase “spiritual faculty” developed a completed meaning in Margaret Fuller’s concept of formal discipline. In the women’s education movement led by Margaret Fuller, formal discipline was not only an idea but was also being implemented. The practice of formal discipline valued the teaching of ancient Greek mythology. Margaret Fuller and her students believed that classics learning led women’s insights into the ideal of being an accomplished human being and transcending personal feelings and prejudices. In their view, Prometheus was a metaphor for “pure reason”, Jupiter a metaphor for creativity or will, and Minerva a metaphor for “practical reason” or intellectual power. Through Greek mythology education, students could perceive the spirit implied in the form of truth, goodness, and beauty [12].

Margaret Fuller regarded faculty as the basic unit of the mind at the spiritual level. Later, when Henry Conrad Brokmeyer came to St. Louis, with whom William Torrey Harris read and discussed topics on German transcendental philosophy. He believed that the human spirit was a whole being and could not be divided into fragmented parts as faculty psychology did. Harris developed the theory of the basic form of the human mind. After the civil war, Harris and scholars from all over the country set off a wave of philosophical discussion in St. Louis. Scholars founded the “Hegel Club”, “Kant Club”, “Aristotle Club”, “Shakespeare Society”, and so on, and from the Hegel Club was derived the “Philosophy Society” [32] (p. 66). Harris further applied Hegel’s philosophy to the analysis of educational practice problems by serving as the superintendent of St. Louis public schools, and as the education commissioner, promoting the scientific education movement, creating the Journal of Speculative Philosophy, and actively participating in the education and philosophy salon.

This emphasis on spirit and classics was reflected in many public educational reports. For example, the American Youth Commission appointed by the American Council on Education discussed and formulated “what high school ought to teach”. It said that the purpose of history teaching in general education is to “discipline the mental power”. Education is ultimately aimed at shaping people’s sense of participation in the community, forming citizenship and civic obligations consciousness [33]. Here, the concept of mental discipline included rational cultivation as well as awareness and acceptance of the ethical obligations of the community. During the early 20th century, Hutchins proposed that education was the cultivation of intelligence. Material prosperity, peace, civil order, justice, and moral virtue are the tools to cultivate wisdom [34]. Hutchins promoted the Great

Works movement at the University of Chicago. Hutchins chose a set of classics containing short stories, plays, essays, scientific papers, speeches, and letters. According to his opinion, the great books could afford readers intellectual excitement and present different kinds of thinking [35].

2.3. *The Development of the Concept of Mental Discipline Rooted in Faculty Psychology*

In the antebellum era, under the influence of the concept of “faculty” from British empirical psychology as well as German and Scottish phrenology, there appeared a concept of mental discipline rooted in the theory of “faculty psychology” in North America. Faculty psychology absorbed ideals of the human mind from the Unitarianism, phrenology, and empiricism of children’s development at that time. One of its main sources was phrenology, which spread from Europe to North America in the first half of the 19th century. George Combe, was one of the proponents of phrenology, whose book *The Constitution of Man* was a bestseller in North America during that time [36]. Faculty psychology had a complex classification in terms of mental faculty. Combe came to North America from Europe for a visit and had close contacts with Horace Mann, Secretary General of the Massachusetts Education Commission. Some university teachers and scholars were also deeply interested in his theory of phrenology [37]. In this case, the concept of mental discipline was reinterpreted as a formal training theory based on faculty psychology. Faculty psychology and the theory of transfer of training had become the main theoretical basis of the mental discipline education concept. The importance of learning the content of classics gradually decreased.

In 1869, Charles W. Eliot was appointed President of Harvard University. Eliot solemnly redefined the aim of undergraduate education at Harvard University as training and strengthening “mental power” at the inauguration ceremony. Eliot implemented the elective system. He believed that the classical humanities and natural scientific disciplines had the same value in terms of developing and disciplining mental powers [38]. Eliot once again pushed the concept of mental discipline to the center of national attention in the process of promoting cohesion between high schools and universities. In the Report of the Committee of Ten at the end of the 19th century, Charles W. Eliot and other educators talked about “mental discipline” as an aim of the whole curriculum, and James H. Baker talked about the “training of powers”, which referred to the training of “observation, memory, expression and inductive reasoning”. The educational aim was different from the education of imagination, deductive reasoning, feelings, and will [39]. Charles Hughes Johnston from the Department of Education of the University of Kansas, G. L. Jackson from the Department of Educational History of the University of Michigan, Edward C. Elliott, a professor of education at the University of Wisconsin, several scholars at the University of North Carolina and the University of Chicago, and other university teachers all participated in the discussion of “whether mental discipline has the value of ‘transfer of training’” [40].

At the beginning of the 19th century, Edward Lee Thorndike and R. S. Woodworth criticized faculty psychology through large-scale psychological experiments. Thorndike and Woodworth successively presided over a series of experiments in 1901 and published their conclusions in *Psychological Review*. They put forward two influential conclusions. First, general training could not bring about the general discipline of mental power [41]. Mental training could only bring about progress in more specific mental abilities, and the transfer of training theory was groundless. Second, the ideals of sense discrimination, attention, memory, and observation were confusing. Such mental faculties did not exist in real life. For example, as far as “attention” was concerned, attention to words or the meaning or spelling of words were totally different mental abilities [42].

The criticism and experiments of Thorndike and others had aroused the attention of the supporters of the classical oriented concept of mental discipline. In 1920, Alexander Meiklejohn, president of Amherst College, delivered the speech “Is Mental Training a Myth” at Boston University. He also put forward that mental discipline was an educational concept not derived from psychology but from logic philosophy, which was essentially formal training. Meiklejohn proposed that “form” was the “basic form” of human mental

activities, and that each form could be further classified into sub-forms. He defined the most basic “form” as the “Law of Contradiction”. The “Law of Contradiction” was equivalent to consistency and organization, and could be further decomposed into two sub-forms. The first was the form of space, including position, direction, and distance. The second was “causality” [43]. The purpose of formal discipline was to cultivate students’ systematic thinking and consistent thinking.

In the 1920s, Irving Babbitt reinterpreted the aim of colleges as mental discipline. Babbitt criticized Charles W. Eliot’s concept of mental power training and the elective system. Babbitt raised several questions. In particular, he doubted whether the natural science curriculum really had the same value for mental discipline as the humanities curriculum. What should we learn from classical learning? Babbitt, together with Paul Elmer More, a teacher at Princeton University; Stuart Pratt Sherman, a teacher at the University of Illinois, and Van Doren of Columbia University, centered on Nation, and launched a literary movement to reinterpret classics and a critical trend to reflect on elite university education. As university curriculums, how did classics make up for the defects of reason training education?

In the spring of 1943, James Bryant Conant, President of Harvard University, appointed an investigation committee to re-explore the goals, values, methods, and other issues of general education, including the relationship between humanities and natural science disciplines. Within two years, the committee had cooperated with comprehensive universities or small liberal arts colleges from Cornell University, Yale University, Smith College, Columbia University, Amherst College, Hamilton College, Cambridge High and Latin School, East Boston High School, other high schools, the American Federation of Labor, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the General Secretary of the Workers’ Educational Association of Great Britain, and the Board of Examiners, N.Y.C. The education commissioners of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maine consulted, investigated, and studied alongside educational institutions, educational administrative departments, trade unions, and large economies. They completed the report on “General Society in a free society” in 1945. This report used a statement similar to the concept of mental discipline to describe the goal of general education, “foster traits and characteristics of mind”. The specific aim was to cultivate “effective thinking, communication ability, making of relevant judgments and discrimination among values” [44]. On the whole, this educational concept mainly retains the philosophical connotation from the formal education of the concept of mental discipline. Effective thinking, communication, judgment, and value discrimination have strong “rational” elements and transform spiritual elements and value elements into the connotation of reason.

2.4. Method

As a puritanical phenomenon, the concept of mental discipline attaches importance to spiritual education and the shaping of piety. When the concept of mental discipline is rooted in phrenology and enriches the theoretical basis of faculty psychology, it seems to have changed from humble and pious cultivation to rational training. So, is the development of mental discipline based on the trichotomy of reason, appetite, and will as ancient mental philosophy, hovering between will and reason? During its development, it has always been a homogeneous concept. Is there no essential change? Hence, the aim of this research is to explore whether there has been a fracture in the evolution of the concept of mental discipline and explain how and why it evolved in three stages.

Intellectual history research methodology may help to clearly describe the possible splits. Peter E. Gordon proposes that the traditional research method of the history of ideas is just like “a musicologist tracing a theme and all of its variations throughout the length of a symphony” [45]. The research of the history of ideas under the methodology of intellectual history needs to reconstruct the philosophical arguments as the ideals are recorded in different contexts and times. Stella Vosniadou proposes that context includes situational context and linguistic context [46]. Starting from the methodology of intellectual history, it is

necessary to extract the contextual elements continuously constructing the mean of concepts. In order to explore whether there has been a fracture in the evolution of the concept of mental discipline, and to further analyze how mental discipline concepts produce the connotation of cultivating the modern self, the following answers these questions through typical cases in three representative periods.

3. Results

3.1. Representative Periods of the Concept of Mental Discipline

3.1.1. From Timothy Dwight to Henry Ware: Being Awakened to the Civic Self

According to the concept of Dwight, the president of Yale University, discipline was often combined into various phrase structures, such as “Christian discipline”, “discipline of church”, “ecclesiastical discipline”, “discipline of person”, and “discipline of child” [47] (pp. 372–373). In terms of meaning, Dwight’s concept of discipline did not refer to objective and static norms or regulations. The phrases “ecclesiastical discipline” and “Christian discipline” mainly referred to the complete spiritual education process of the educator to the educated, including private remonstrance and admonition in the presence of others, as well as excommunication [47]. In the process of “discipline of church”, the whole body of the church group cannot be present and cannot be judged based on the whole [47] (p. 374). It can be seen that discipline referred to a process of spiritual education. From the phrases “discipline of church”, “ecclesiastical discipline”, “Christian discipline”, and so on, the legal source of this kind of educational right was church laws or Protestant ethics. This phrase reflected that the reference for this kind of education was church laws or Protestant ethics.

From “ecclesiastical discipline” to “discipline of people” and “discipline of child”, the discretion of educational power referred to in the concept of discipline has gradually transitioned to secular power. For example, Dwight proposed that children are the onus of “discipline of church”, but the subject to “discipline” children was transferred to parents, teachers, and the government. Parents ought to educate and govern children. Dwight called “Christian discipline” a “system” [47] (pp. 374–375, 379–380).

On the whole, Dwight’s concept of discipline expressed that the source of the principles of education was Protestant ethics. The specific implementation and discretion of educational jurisprudence were entrusted to secular governments, parents, and teachers. It can be predicted that this source of educational law would not, nor could it, provide for a more specific form of educational implementation, thus, accommodating the possibility of discipline’s educational jurisprudence changing into a mixture of Protestant ethics and secular ethics. On a more microscopic level, in addition to the state constitution, the local (school district or town) people’s customs and moral traditions are the actual source of educational jurisprudence. For example, Massachusetts legislated in the 18th century that local towns or town districts could have certain educational discretion within the scope of the state constitution [48]. In this sense, the educational goal set by discipline is to cultivate students with a spirit of piety, on the one hand, and to cultivate citizens who conform to the rules of the customs of the people on the other.

Generally, at the beginning of the 19th century, whether there was internal consistency between the cultivation of piety and local civic virtue was controversial. In the controversy surrounding the choice of the Hollis professor of Harvard University from 1803 to 1805, Dwight firmly stood in the Jedidiah Morse camp of the so-called “orthodox Calvinism” school and opposed the liberal theology of Unitarianism represented by Henry Ware, who took the position of Hollis Professor of Harvard College [18,49]. In the 1820s, Ware had a fierce argument with Leonard Woods, another orthodox Calvin teacher. This confrontation highlighted that the traditional educators who regarded themselves as orthodox Calvinists had a completely different understanding of the relationship between the education of piety and the education of secular moral norms from the liberal theology and the theory of faculty training represented by Mann after the 1840s.

In Woods's discussion, all things in the world existed in different time dimensions. People were generally in a limited and terminal time dimension. Education may help people to open a gate and surpass this limited time. In this sense, educational time was a channel. At the same time, the time of education varies depending on whether people "know their sins", which represents a sudden awakening of the spirit. No amount of moral education is futile before "recognizing sin", before the starting point of education can be determined, or before entering into a state of humility and piety, and will not open up the essential time for education [50]. Therefore, there is a time difference between the education of piety and the education of secular ethics.

In contrast, according to Ware, time was regarded as passing and moving. People lived in the flood of time, with birth, growth, education, good or evil, death, and other similar processes. With the development of "autonomous faculty", humans had self-consciousness, probably produced spiritual and moral changes, and educational time also went by and spread [51]. In this sense, everyone would necessarily experience educational time. Educational time moves with the development of "self-improvement" of the individuals. Human agency, self-consciousness, and self-initiative ensure that education and its effects are effectively extended in the time dimension. Therefore, the influence of secular ethics and the edification of Calvinism had certain internal consistency.

Dwight was similar to Woods. Dwight's concept of education was based on the concept of "sin". "Sin" preceded the "birth" of a child and preceded the moral category in time. "Sin" prescribed the limitation and limit of the meaning of a man or woman's secular time. Discipline means to promote the awareness of "knowing sin", and to promote enlightenment and insight into the obligations of a human. Only in this way could education time be generated and one with "sin" could probably become a "holy" individual.

In the past, as a puritanical phenomenon, mental discipline was consistent with the extensive concept of puritanical education. This consistency was mainly reflected in the understanding of human nature. In other words, this view of education holds the concept of sin. Sin was, first of all, the degeneration of spirit, belief, and the essence of human nature. It was a sin shared by the whole of mankind, rather than a responsibility of a certain modern individual or individuals with free will who had violated some moral norms or civil contract laws in morality. Therefore, from Timothy to Ware, we see not only the change in theological concepts and Christian theological concepts but also the appearance of the concept of cultivating individual will. Cultivating individual will is the premise of cultivating general will. General will means the consensus of citizenship based on contracts and law. Therefore, it can be said that the significance of the change in the concept of mental discipline from Timothy to Ware is that the civic consciousness had woken up.

3.1.2. William Torrey Harris's Concept of Self-Activity

New England's Unitarianism appeared in an era in which the world's outlook had changed. In the 19th century, Kant's two criticisms and Goethe's *Faust* had great influence. Thinkers in this century wanted to find a substitute for pure reason, which is the basis of truth [52]. William Ellery Channing was regarded as a great Unitarian. On September 9, 1836, Ralph Aldo Emerson, F.H. Hedge, Convers Francis, James Freeman Clark, and Amos Bronson Alcott met at George Ripley's home [52] (p. 35). Later, Emerson, F.H. Hedge, George Ripley, Putnam, Orestes A. Brownson, Theodore Parker, C.A. Bartol, C.C. Stetson, Margaret Fuller, and Ms. Peabody held a meeting at Emerson's home in Concord, forming the inauguration ceremony of The Transcendental Club. A.B. Alcott is sometimes called "The Symposium Club" and other times "The Hedge Club" [53]. George Bancroft and Channing also participated. In The Transcendental Club, Emerson exerted great influence through "Dial". Emerson said in "Dial" that the transcendentalism we often refer to was idealism. Idealism appeared in 1842 since Immanuel Kant began to use this term to respond to John Locke's speculative philosophy. Idealism holds that nothing in intelligence exists prior to sensory experience, and there are very important classes of ideas or imperative

forms before intelligence, which are not derived from experience, but experience can be acquired through these classes and forms [54].

In 1844, Henry Conrad Brokmeyer, a refugee fleeing from Prussian militarism, landed in New York State with 25 cents and the only three English words he knew. He experienced a life of working, wandering, and doing business. Later, he went to Brown University to continue his studies and learned about Emerson's transcendentalism. In 1854, Brokmeyer came to Warren County, Missouri [32]. In the 1950s and 1960s, Harris met Brokmeyer, Denton Jacques Snider, Amos Bronson Alcott, etc., who founded the "Hegel Club", "Kant Club", "Aristotle Club", "Shakespeare Society", and so on in St. Louis, and from the Hegel Club was derived the "Philosophical Society" [32] (pp. 38, 66). Harris further applied Hegel's philosophy to the analysis of educational practice problems by serving as the superintendent of St. Louis public schools, and as the education commissioner, promoting the science education movement, developing the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, and actively participating in the education and philosophy salon.

According to Herbert M. Kliebard's research in 1895, Harris, the leader of Hegelism in the United States, as a former member of the Ten Committee, "painfully separated himself from the position of mental discipline" [4] (p. 14). In fact, Kliebard's concept of "mental discipline" was a concept of faculty training based on faculty psychology with a hierarchical system of faculty concepts. Rather than saying that Harris was "separated" from the mental discipline camp, Harris constructed a theory of spiritual growth based on logic along a path opposing faculty psychology. In George Combe's faculty psychology, the human mind included two types of mental faculties, namely, "feeling faculties" and "intellectual faculties". Among them, feeling faculties could be divided into the common propensities of human beings and animals and sentiments only belonging to humans. Intellectual faculties could be divided into three kinds. The first was the use of the knowing faculties to perceive the external world and quality. The second was the use of the knowing faculties to perceive the relationships between external things, such as a sense of time, sense of space, and sense of order. The third one was "reflected faculties", such as the ability to compare and distinguish, and the ability to think about causality [36] (pp. 52–56).

In Harris's visual threshold, there were two kinds of formal discipline or mental discipline concepts. One was the mental discipline concept based on the theory of phrenology and faculty psychology introduced from Europe. The concept of mental discipline guided an educational and teaching practice model based on the training of mental faculties. In theory, the concept regarded people's memory, imagination, and other mental faculties as the most basic "form" of mind [55] (p. 52). The second was the formal discipline concept based on Kant's mental philosophy theory. According to Kant's theory of the form of mind, the form of mind is an a priori concept of time and space [55].

With regard to the above two kinds of mental discipline concepts, Harris opposed the first one and theoretically improved the second one. Harris believed that the first educational concept separated man's mind in theory, ignoring man's emotion, spirit, and will as a whole. Harris made two attempts to improve the second concept. First, he learned from Hegel's historical philosophy to bind the relationship between the causal law of mind with time and space consciousness. Time was interpreted as the nesting and continuity of cause and effect. Second, from Hegel's concept of freedom, the nature of human beings as free spirits and free will could be understood, and the tension between virtue and freedom generated by traditional mental discipline was solved. In modern society, people examined themselves as an objective whole, so a concept of the self was introduced here. Harris no longer followed the traditional concept of mental discipline, so the self no longer only meant the aggregation of various mental faculties but the existence of soul and spirit in the overall sense.

Harris understood the mind as a synonym of the soul, spirit, reason, and intelligence [55]. Education was no longer the training of various mental faculties, but an education targeting the self in the sense of spirit as a whole. According to Hegel's philosophical logic, this kind of self-oriented education would not be a shackle or cage for the self, but

a manifestation of the spirit of freedom. Harris solved this problem with the concept of self-activity. Self-activity referred to the law of individual spiritual activities and was the manifestation of the ultimate law of the universe, the law of cause and effect, in individuals. Self-activity included three stages. One was to recognize the world through senses, the second was to use reason to observe and understand the world through relational thinking, and the third was to introspect through “self-relation” to see the ultimate truth [55] (pp. 20, 31–36).

In Harris’ interpretation, self-activity integrated the laws of time and space and was the basic form of human mental activities. Individuals or groups carried out self-examination and introspection activities on the self or selves, constantly identified and broke through the threshold of the original self or selves, and generated a new self or selves and will. From the original self, the movement of generating a more complete self was essentially a self-knowing movement. In the physical time of a limited life, an individual expands from the self in the individual to the self in the family, and then to the self in the social community, and becomes a more self-determined human identifying with the universal self [56], the “harmony of wills” [57]. Harris believed that theoretical ambiguity was reflected in two issues of social practice. First, American society had not yet provided enough educational basis for the people and had not yet achieved real freedom. A truly free society did not provide formal freedom for all. He regarded American society at the end of the 19th century as a society that only realized formal freedom, and those who had not yet learned to distinguish between public interests and private interests held the legislative power [56]. Second, American society had the problem of the decay of morality. Harris proposed that immigrants from various European countries and some Asian countries brought about the national customs of the old world, which had an impact on the new ethical system. The problem caused by this phenomenon is how to distinguish between essential and conventional morality. For this problem, Harris believed that it was necessary to find an organic form to help people learn to self-govern [56]. Harris’s pedagogy dealt with the transition from the natural ethnic social ethics system to the civil social ethics system. Harris’s pedagogical theory, especially the educational proposition based on the concept of self-activity, aimed to solve the freedom dilemma of American democratic society in reality.

Harris realized that to maintain a modern civil society, a good general will would be needed to represent the public interest. Therefore, the premise of general will would be a modern individual with free will. However, each individual has certain interests within their social life. Thus, the problem is that individuals can become self-governed individuals. Therefore, Harris paid attention to the cultivation of self-activity and opposed the cultivation of human instrumental rationality, which is why he criticized faculty psychology. Harris’ mental discipline aimed to shape a self-governed individual. He focused on making individuals associate with larger communities, such as society and the nation-state. Therefore, people could overcome their selfishness in the process of developing multi-level self-identity. It can be seen that Harris’s idea is democratic, and a kind of unionism. It has some differences from the introspective individual in Babbitt’s concept of mental discipline.

3.1.3. From Eliot, C.W. to Babbitt I.: Self-Disciplined Individuals and Community Consensus

Eliot said in his speech to the University of Virginia in 1909 that 1870 was a watershed in the balance of individualism and collectivism among civilized nations and countries. After 1870, collectivism took the lead. Individualism is manifested in two aspects. One is to attach importance to individual rights, and the other is to attach importance to the freedom and legal rights given to individuals by society. Collectivism attaches importance to social rights, opposes individual freedom, and believes that the interests of the majority should prevail over individual interests. For the conflict between the two, the aim of collectivism is not to eliminate individuals but to restrict individuals to maintain the common good, including the individual good. Every man has his own talent, and education is an individualistic choice. Education should be the training of perception, technology

acquisition, memory, and rational sense from beginning to end. In Eliot's view, the problem faced by the concept of mental discipline with the connotation of the training of faculties is the contradiction between individual interests and the common good of society, and between individualism and collectivism [58].

When Eliot became president of the university, he believed that the responsibility of education was to promote democracy, and democracy was the flow of society. Everyone has the opportunity to flow into the upper class. The purpose of civic education is to give people the ability to participate in social mobility. At the beginning of the 20th century, Eliot's thoughts had changed. He valued government responsibility more. He began to understand democracy to mean that everyone should do their best, not that everyone should be able to become president. He probably believed that human talent must be based on social consensus in order to maximize democratic value. Babbitt's criticism was aimed at the early beliefs of Eliot and the elective system in Harvard University.

Babbitt's concept of disciplined imagination expressed his understanding of the goal of elite universities. Elite universities, especially Harvard University, cultivated an educated group with rationality, proficient in rhetoric and eloquence. Babbitt foresaw that in the rapid development of information media technology, the group of people who were proficient in rhetoric cultivated by elite universities would lead American society and even Western civilization into an unpredictable future or even a disaster. As the rich class became the spiritual and cultural leaders of universities, law for man would probably wane [59].

Disciplined imagination, as a goal, was used to solve the problem of college students' spiritual indolence. Babbitt understood President Eliot's concept of mental discipline as a kind of mental power training. This kind of education only provided a powerful force and tool for college students to expand their desire. Babbitt divided human desire (libido) into knowledge libido, appetite libido, and power libido. Groups with elite college or university education also expanded their knowledge libido with mental power. This kind of university education could not solve the problem of people's spiritual emptiness. Undergraduates increasingly suffered from a lack of reverence for their ignorance and the infinity of the universe.

In view of the defects of Eliot's educational theory and practice, Babbitt proposed that a kind of restraint education could be used to make up for them [60]. For undergraduates, the direct goal of restraint education was to cultivate disciplined imagination. Furthermore, it was necessary to consider the undergraduate orientation and educational aims, knowledge structure, curriculum system, and teaching methods of university education.

First of all, in terms of the undergraduate orientation of university education, Babbitt proposed that American universities should consider achieving a balance between German gymnasiums and graduate education. Gymnasiums provided a receptive education, focusing on the digestion and internalization of cultural heritage, while graduate education was a productive education. Babbitt regained the core of humanistic education and defined the goal of university teaching as "forming the minds and characters" of future citizens of the Republic [59] (p. 178).

Secondly, in terms of the knowledge structure of university education, Babbitt opined that the proportion of classical knowledge and modern knowledge, humanities, and natural sciences should be considered. Babbitt interpreted that the spiritual core of the classical spirit was impersonal reason. Impersonal reason enabled people to transcend the transitional pursuit of personal interests of the ordinary self when reflecting on the self. Impersonal reason leads individuals to the "real and deep self", in which individuals become one with the whole world [59] (p. 175). When people's thoughts were integrated with the spirit in the classical world, the consciousness formed was the true self. The true self becomes an internal law that can make people self-govern. The ideological state of the ordinary self was to put the expansion of individual reason and desire above others, morality, and ethics [60]. The true self was considered to be a constraint on the ordinary self. The classical spirit was mainly embodied in the Hellenic spirit as well as in the oriental civilization.

The third aspect was the curriculum system. Babbitt criticized President Eliot's elective system at Harvard University. The elective system gave complete democracy and freedom to undergraduates. However, it also dispelled the qualitative differences between different kinds of disciplines. All the different subjects selected by undergraduates could be converted into equal credits in terms of quantity in order to obtain the same degree. Babbitt's confusion lay in what kind of groups universities were equipping with the power and possibility to control voters and implement the tyranny of words.

The last aspect concerned teaching methods. Babbitt regarded virtue as highly important, and he also foresaw the possibility of carrying out educational practice in the name of moral education actually destroying the spirit of freedom. Therefore, he believed that Socratic dialectics could prevent this problem. Socratic dialectics use concrete and historical words to eliminate the excessive domination of abstract, synchronic, and structural words on imagination and cultivate "disciplined imagination" [60] (p. 191). Babbitt agreed with the introduction of moderate historical spirit into literature education.

Babbitt's goal for elite universities, forming the minds and characters, was decomposed into the discipline of the high-level self to the ordinary self. Babbitt's concepts of the higher self and the ordinary self were derived from Matthew Arnold's concepts of the ordinary self and the best self. The best self referred to a higher sense and judgment that transcended class, sect, and personal interests. It was a will that transcended personal will and proceeded from public welfare. Arnold understood that the Greek spirit was the pursuit of the perfection of human nature and the unity of reason and beauty and had a tempered nature [61]. He agreed with Wilhelm von Humboldt that, in addition to the fact that personal safety and property are actively dominated by the state, people should perfect themselves on their own foundation. Arnold's understanding of self-government can be extended to the recognition of the British Reform Bill's liberalism in 1832, namely, local self-government, free trade, unrestricted competition, and Protestantism [61]. In this respect, Babbitt's ideas were inherited. The discipline or restraint of the higher self to the ordinal self he proposed was mainly a kind of self-government or self-education. This concept of self-government could be extended to Babbitt's understanding of federal and state governments. He mentioned the issue of "tax without representation" in the United States [60] (pp. 60, 207). Babbitt had reservations about the income distribution reform promoted by the federal government at the beginning of the 20th century. He tended to take a neutral position between centralized federal government and localism.

From the 1900s to 1940s, Babbitt and other neo humanists, such as Paul Elmer More, Stuart P. Sherman, and Mark Van Doren, took *Nation* magazine as their main publication, reinterpreted humanism and the spirit of ancient Greece, and called on university education to become the center of shaping "cultural consensus" [62] (pp. 36–43). Like More, Sherman, and even Van Doren, Babbitt lamented the decline of Western civilization, and he also regarded the mainstream education trend at the beginning of the 20th century as a factor that accelerated this decline [63–65]. Babbitt borrowed Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler's thinking on the causes of the decline of Western civilization. As a solution to the problem, he also borrowed the concept of *Bildung* from Spengler in German pedagogy. *Bildung* was the transcendence and renewal of the concept of enlightenment after the Enlightenment, representing self-enlightenment [66]. The concept of *Bildung* in Germany, Arnold's British self-government concept, and the concept of self-cultivation of Oriental Buddha and Confucianism were combined to form Babbitt's concept of mental discipline.

Babbitt mainly absorbed the timeless connotation of these educational concepts to resist the trend of emphasizing the continuity of family names, the expansion of self and family consciousness, and the continuous time consciousness that prevailed after the Industrial Revolution. Whether it was self-enlightenment or introspection, they all emphasized the state beyond time, or entering a time-space dimension that would not be quantified and compared but would be stable (Sanskrit: *aranya*).

3.2. Discussion

The metaphor for the decline in universities and Western civilization in Babbitt's literary theory, both overtly and covertly, shows that they were jointly aware of the crisis represented by the separation of university and the spiritual form of historical civilization, as well as the crisis represented by the separation of contemporary American culture and the spiritual form of Western civilization [66].

First of all, the mental discipline of the early 20th century opposed the values of the social economic system leading the values of the cultural system. Expansionism, consumerism, the pursuit of standardization, and the careful calculation and pursuit of quantity belonged to the system of industrialism. They were not suitable for universities and would only damage universities and accelerate the decline of Western civilization. In particular, as mentioned earlier, one of the reasons why Babbitt criticized the elective system was that it converted humanities and natural sciences into credits based on quantitative means. In Babbitt's view, the equality of credits does not necessarily represent the equality of values of different disciplines in cultivating complete human nature.

Secondly, the concept of mental discipline of the early 20th century opposed the supremacy of instrumental rationality education in higher education. People have instrumental rationality and will act according to their goals and interests. Babbitt regarded Bacon as the representative of the rational education theory, and Rousseau's education theory as the opposite of Bacon's theory because Rousseau attached great importance to human emotional education [59]. Thus, for Babbitt, the task of modern universities at the beginning of the 20th century was not to choose between rational training and emotional cultivation, but to balance instrumental rationality education and emotional cultivation. In his words, universities should teach students to reflect on whether they had sacrificed "seeking the truth" to pursue "rhetorical effect" [59] (p. 39). If the concept of mental discipline at the beginning of the 20th century is not placed in the historical context, it is easy to see only the concept of mental discipline rooted in faculty psychology, such as the concept of mental discipline mentioned by Edward Lee Thorndike. In this way, the multiple connotation of the concept of mental discipline at the beginning of the 20th century was understood as a phrase equivalent to rational training.

Babbitt taught at Harvard University. He was well aware of the influence of elite college graduates in political activities. Therefore, he advocated the balance of rational and emotional education, and believed that only the will could achieve this balance. To a certain extent, he believed that the discussion of the goal of university education was not only a question of education, but also a question related to this democratic society. In the 1920s, he proposed that highly educated literati were often regarded as representatives of the rational class, representatives of mental labor, and it seemed that there was a huge gap between them and groups engaged in physical labor, groups with rich emotions. He hoped to clear up this misunderstanding with his own research and works. In his view, highly educated literati are not extreme rationalists, but individuals with free will, who can reflect on themselves with will and guide human rational power and social science and technology to an appropriate direction [60].

Lastly, the cultural significance of the mental discipline of the 20th century was an attempt to integrate Hebrew spirit, Greek spirit, and even oriental culture into the field of education, balancing the excessive pursuit of outward love and charity with personal self-cultivation, sincerity, and self-government—to strive to improve the personal character and balance the excessive dependence on social reform. This was the meaning of the ancient Greek proverb "know thyself" recognized by the reinterpretations.

In general, Babbitt considered the problem of how a university can construct a good community (form consensus) based on common culture (classical culture). Members could constantly introspect in terms of their social and political life, regulated their selfish desires and instrumental rationalism with the spirit of community or will, and appropriately used their personal freedom in their economic life. This seemed to solve the problem of sophisticated egoists in college education. However, the scientific truth explored, spoken

of, and written by the university community, regarding how to effectively promote social progress, and following what kind of discourse norms and dialogue in the political field and the public sphere, is still unresolved.

4. Conclusions

From the three representative periods of the concept of mental discipline, the phrases of mental discipline differed in different contexts. From the first period to the second period, the concept of mental discipline was fundamentally broken. In the first period, represented by Dwight, the concept of mental discipline was embedded in a non-modern context, which was a Puritan education concept [47]. In this context, the object of education was not an independent individual with an independent body and free will in the modern sense. The concept of mind was based on the concept of the body. The concept of the body was based on the concept of “flesh” and “original sin” embedded in the Puritan context. Under the influence of the concept of the body, all human bodies share an essential sin. In other words, the body was available to everyone and at the same time could not be independently owned by everyone. All human bodies have a cross-section. This cross-section was the shared sin. Mental discipline represents a negative education. This concept means the discipline of the corporate mind by divine law. The term “mind” in the concept of mental discipline is not the concept of mind in the sense of modern individuals.

Dwight experienced a changing context, which was characterized by a great tension between Calvinism and Unitarianism. This tension permeated educational reforms of colleges and universities. From Timothy to Ware, because of the abandonment of the idea of sin, some colleges and universities could redefine virtue and how to cultivate it [51]. The concept of mental discipline not only in a linguistic sense but also in the definition of virtue education changed. It gave a space to contain the civic consciousness when talking about mental faculty.

During the antebellum era and after the civil war period, represented by Harris, mental discipline had acquired a pre-modern meaning. Phrenology drew on the knowledge of physiology and related human brain and mental faculties. The various faculties of the mind were considered to be closely related to the structure of the body, especially the brain. The individual body structures that came from different groups were believed to affect the minds of different individuals. Influenced by the philosophy of Hegel and Kant, Harris criticized the concept of mental discipline based on faculty psychology [57]. He did not agree that the human mind should be understood as a collection of isolated faculties but advocated that the human mind should be regarded as a whole from the spiritual level. In the spiritual sense, the development of the human mind finally relied on introspection, on constant self-activity [55]. It can be seen that in the period represented by Harris, the phrase “mental discipline” changed to “self-activity”. People’s independent spirit and reason are recognized.

Again, the educational expectation given to the concept of mental discipline in this period represented by Harris also changed. If Dwight’s concept of mental discipline was endowed with the educational expectation to solve the problem of sin shared by the human body, the concept of mental discipline represented by Harris dealt with the problem of individual selfishness. When people are regarded as independent individuals, they have practical reason and can freely choose values and behaviors. People may make rational choices and practice goodwill based on their recognition of the common good of communities; however, they may also choose to act selfishly on the premise of knowing what is common good. As Kant stated, human beings had the freedom of practical reason and choice, but sometimes they did not take freedom as the basis of moral obligations but took their selfish inclination as the basis of obligations [67]. Harris put forward the concept of self-activity to replace faculty training in order to solve the problem of individual selfishness.

Harris’s thoughts in the second period were rooted in a wide range of backgrounds. From the antebellum era to the end of the civil war, in German and American literature,

philosophy and pedagogy had a great degree of exchange. Therefore, Harris's thought to a large extent reflects his absorption of Hegelianism and Kant's transcendental philosophy, including the unionism which has tension with the Puritan sin concept in the first period.

In Herodotus's History, Croesus raised a question to Solon of Athens, the Athenian legalist who came to visit: what kind of person has the most happiness? The argument between Croesus and Solon is mainly about whether people should strive for present benefit or give priority to eternal goals or ethical laws [68]. Hegel responded to Herodotus's question of "happiness" in his Outlines of the Philosophy of Right. Hegel believed that the difference between ancient and modern society is that modern people have subjective freedom [69]. Harris saw individuals as part of a larger cosmic order. Harris believed that autonomous individuals, nation-states and civil society all reflect free will in the process of continuous self-activities. This is very similar to Hegel's concept of the relationship between spirit and history.

The third period of the concept of mental discipline represented by Babbitt was the overall reflection on the concept of puritan discipline in the first period and the aim of cultivating the practice of reason in the second period. The concept of mental discipline in this period focused on the individual mind and does not deny that there was a shared consensus among all people's minds. However, the concept of mental discipline in this period was more introspective than Harris's concept of self-activity. Harris hoped to cultivate individuals of self-government. Through constant self-reflection and self-activity, such individuals would become aware of the needs and interests of family, society, and others, overcome selfishness, and finally actively participate in social political activities. Babbitt discussed that the mental discipline of modern universities helps cultivate one who had a moderate balance between love and law (individual reason law). Babbitt hoped that mental discipline could cultivate citizens who can overcome selfishness, and also hoped to cultivate a quiet, autonomous person who would not overuse their own reason. Babbitt believed that self-examination and self-discipline could bring more happiness than large-scale social reform. Babbitt's concept of spiritual discipline is rooted in the context of Charles W. Eliot's theory of educational democracy, as well as in the election system of Harvard University and the tension between the federal government and the state government.

Charles Taylor talked about the concept of the modern self in his Sources of the Self. In the book, Taylor discussed the topic of self-consciousness in ancient, pre-modern, and modern times. In his analysis, he posited that it is beyond the ancient times to internalize honor in the public sphere [70]. However, as Habermas put forward, people live in discourse communication. In the process of communication with others, people define a self that includes others. People also need to explore the real objective world. People also need to participate in the world with sincere expression [70]. Combined with Taylor's modern self theory, the modern self first realizes the independence of the individual body and self-consciousness. On this basis, the modern self does not stay on the level of the quiet and autonomous individual consciousness that Babbitt outlined. The modern self should go beyond a human-centered or self-centered perspective embodied in the concept of mental discipline of the three periods. Moreover, when the modern self defines what one is, it defines one in a world that includes others, nature, and that which beyond the phenomenal world human may know. In other words, the significance of the external world is not limited to the scope of human consciousness. The meaning of the world that people realize is only meaningful to humankind, and this meaning does not necessarily belong to the world itself. If we take humans as the center to know the world, we will not know the real world. The modern self, as a person of consciousness, can effectively participate in social life. The premise of effective participation is to believe that every self, including the other, is truly expressing itself. People with the modern self as their conscious characteristics live in a network composed of universal discourse forms and discourse meanings. Modern people can strip away the identity attached to the self, such as family, community, and institutions. At the same time, modern people can understand others' feelings and can also

be understood by others who live in a world with themselves. According to the research of Taylor and Habermas, the mental discipline concepts represented by Harris and Babbitt touch on the question of the cultivation of the pre-modern self and the cultivation of the modern self. However, Babbitt and Harris did not systematically construct the educational significance of the mental discipline of universities on the premise of overcoming the anthropocentric perspective.

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