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Confucius and Human Nature



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Confucius was an extremely influential figure in Chinese culture. He was born around 551 B.C.E. and lived a long and full life before his death around 479. He is thought to have been the first man in China to devote his life to teaching and the first to encourage education for all people. As with many great figures from antiquity, little about his life is known for certain and the few facts that we do have available have become intermingled with myth. One fact is certain—his work and example became a cornerstone of Chinese thought. His texts were taught in the Chinese schools and were the basis of their civil service examinations from 1313 until 1905.

Confucius has sometimes been dubbed the Socrates of the east and there are many similarities in their teachings. Both emphasized the importance of education and the role which it plays in the building of one's character. This building of character can be viewed as the growth of virtue upon the matrix of human nature. *This paper will discuss the concept of human nature in Confucian thought.*

Confucius only once directly addressed human nature, much to the chagrin of his followers who were eager to hear more of his thoughts upon the subject.

Tzu-kung said, Our Master's views concerning culture and the outwards insignia of goodness, we are permitted to hear; but about Man's nature and the ways of Heaven he will not tell us anything at all.¹

He only once spoke directly about the nature of humanity, in *Analects* book XVII, verse 2. "The Master said, By nature, near together; by practice far apart."² Humans are born with more-or-

¹ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Whaley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 110. All citations are taken from this work. Hereafter they will appear in a book, verse, page format.

less the same needs and faculties. Obviously there are exceptions at either extreme end of the spectrum, but in general we are all very similar at birth. Based upon our actions, the feedback that we receive in response, and revisions in our behavior in reaction to the feedback, we each begin to embark upon a divergent pathway. This action-feedback-revision process shapes our experiences, creating our unique individual lives. In the passage above, Confucius points out that what we have in common by nature is our potential for growth and our individual degrees of growth are what differentiate us.

He denied (though one disciple at least seems to have had the opposite impression) that he possessed any unusual stock of knowledge; still less would he admit that such knowledge as he possessed was innate or inspired. What he regarded as exceptional in himself was his love of 'learning,' that is to say, of self-improvement, and his unflagging patience in insisting upon the moral principles that had (in his view) guided the godlike rulers of the remote past. His task, then, like that of the English trainer of *chün-tzu* (gentleman's sons) in the great Public Schools, was not so much to impart knowledge as to inculcate moral principles, form character, hand down unaltered and intact a great tradition of the past.³

In this passage it is pointed out that by nature Confucius was the same as any other man; that the only thing that set him apart was his great love for education. Although he only addressed nature in the one instance, by examining more of the *Analects* we can delve deeper into the potentialities that nature offers us.

The Master said, (the good man) does not grieve that other people do not recognize his merits. His only anxiety is lest he should fail to recognize theirs.⁴

A good man does not act for the sake of praise, but because his experience—his education—has shown him the proper path to take. A good man does, however, look to praise others for their good works in order to be an active part of the feedback process mentioned

² XVII, 2, 209.

³ Introduction, 16-17.

⁴ I, 16, 87.

above. This recognition and reinforcement of virtue is a method by which one can help to perpetuate these qualities.

The Master said, He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is fit to be a teacher.⁵

This passage can be seen as a description of Confucius' relationship with education. By careful examination of the Old ways through the recorded thoughts and experiences of our predecessors, insight can be gained that can be implemented into our present circumstances. In his pursuit of knowledge Confucius learned much about the past and was adept at using this information to illustrate his points when teaching.

The Master said, Yu, shall I teach you what knowledge is? When you know a thing, to recognize that you know it, and when you do not know a thing, to recognize that you do not know it. That is knowledge.⁶

This passage illustrates Confucius' empiricism and skepticism. His teachings were in no way based on faith, but entirely upon evidence. In cases where he saw no evidence he refrained from speaking on the topic or drawing any conclusions. He also pointed out here that knowledge that is possessed but not used is useless. Lessons learned must be implemented in order to actualize their true value.

Tzu-chang was studying the *Song* Han-lu. The Master said, Hear much, but maintain silence as regards doubtful points and be cautious in speaking of the rest; then you will seldom get into trouble. See much, but ignore what it is dangerous to have seen, and be cautious in acting upon the rest; then you will seldom want to undo your acts. He who seldom gets into trouble about what he has said and seldom does anything that he afterwards wishes he had not done, will be sure incidentally to get his reward.⁷

Here Confucius explains the way that all experience can be education. By hearing and seeing much, much will be learned. The caution invoked here is the contemplation upon these

⁵ II, 11, 90.

⁶ II, 17, 91

⁷ II, 18, 91-92.

experiences and their correct application. The reward here is the experience of a good life rather than a material reward.

The Master said, I for my part have never yet seen one who really cared for Goodness, nor one who really abhorred wickedness. One who really cared for Goodness would never let any other consideration come first. One who abhorred wickedness would be so constantly doing Good that wickedness would never have a chance to get at him. Has anyone ever managed to do Good with his whole might even as long as the space of a single day? I think not. Yet I for my part have never seen anyone give up such an attempt because he had not the *strength* to go on. It may well have happened, but I for my part have never seen it.⁸

In this passage Confucius comes very close to addressing human nature. Man has the capacity for both Goodness and wickedness, but perhaps not the capacity for perfection of the form of Goodness. He points out that this is not due to an inherent lack of strength and seems to point instead to more of a lack of dedication. Were one truly dedicated to the pursuit of Good there would be no chance to indulge in wickedness.

The Master said, Shên! My Way has one (thread) that runs right through it. Master Tsêng said, Yes. When the Master had gone out, the disciples asked, saying What did he mean? Master Tsêng said, Our Master's Way is simply this: Loyalty, consideration.⁹

Like Socrates, Confucius felt that education promotes ethical behavior. By learning of others' experiences we learn how similar we are to each other. Proper application of this knowledge leads us to treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated.

The Master said, A gentleman takes as much trouble to discover what is right as lesser men take to discover what will pay.¹⁰

A gentleman pursues education as an end and a means whereas the common man sees education merely as a means towards wealth and security.

The Master said, In the presence of a good man, think all the time how you may learn to equal him. In the presence of a bad man, turn your gaze within.¹¹

⁸ IV, 6, 103. Italics in original.

⁹ IV, 15, 105.

¹⁰ IV, 16, 105

The opportunity for education is omnipresent. In the company of good people we learn their characteristics and are able to implement them in our own lives. In the company of bad people we learn their characteristics and are able to recognize and eradicate these characteristics in ourselves.

The Master said, In the old days a man kept a hold on his words, fearing the disgrace that would ensue should he himself fail to keep pace with them.¹²

A gentleman does not brag nor make promises that he cannot keep. The gentleman strives to keep his actions in congruence with his words, and will not expend words that he would be unable to follow up with action.

The Master said, Those who err on the side of strictness are few indeed!¹³

Again, here, Confucius seems to be addressing human nature though it would be more nearly correct to see it as addressing a human tendency rather than a nature. Like water, humans have a tendency to seek the path of least resistance rather than remaining dedicated to the path of the higher ground.

The Master said, A gentleman covets the reputation of being slow in word but prompt in deed.¹⁴

A gentleman takes the time to consider his words before speaking, but when action is required he acts quickly, secure in his knowledge of the appropriate path.

The Master said, Moral force never dwells in solitude; it will always bring neighbours.¹⁵

¹¹ IV, 17, 105

¹² IV, 22, 106.

¹³ IV, 23, 106.

¹⁴ IV, 24, 106.

¹⁵ IV, 25, 106.

Moral integrity attracts through resonance. Other people of high moral integrity will be attracted in an effort to be in good company, and others will be attracted by this inner strength and will seek a gentleman's company so that they may emulate him.

Tzu-yu said, In the service of one's prince repeated scolding can only lead to a loss of favour; in friendship, it can only lead to estrangement.¹⁶

A gentleman avoids recrimination, as the recipient often becomes resentful and therefore less responsive. Instead of resorting to the physical force of his words, he leads instead by moral example.

Tzu-kung asked saying, What do you think of me? The Master said, You are a vessel. Tzu-kung said, What sort of vessel? The Master said, A sacrificial vase of jade!¹⁷

Humans are very much vessels, carrying their experiences and knowledge through space and time. Confucius characterizes Tzu-kung as a sacrificial vase of jade because of Tzu-kung's dedication to the sacred pursuit of education.

When the Master was in Ch'ên he said, Let us go back, let us go back! The little ones at home are headstrong and careless. They are perfecting themselves in all the showy insignia of culture without any idea how to use them.¹⁸

Education provides us more with a proper reasoning of why to do things rather than teaching us what exactly must be done. Mere mimicry of an educated person does not prepare one to make their own decisions.

The Master said, How can we call even Wei-shêng Kao upright? When someone asked him for vinegar he went and begged it from the people next door, and then gave it as though it were his own gift.¹⁹

¹⁶ IV, 26, 106.

¹⁷ V, 23, 107.

¹⁸ V, 21, 113.

¹⁹ V, 23, 113.

Wei-shêng Kao was a legendary exemplar of truthfulness in Chinese culture. In this passage Confucius illustrates how difficult it is to maintain the path of the Good. Even a man who had been known for his truthfulness succumbed at least this once to misrepresentation. This passage also speaks of the importance of proper attribution; a gentleman always gives credit where credit is due.

The Master said, Clever talk, a pretentious manner and a reverence that is only of the feet—Tso Ch'iu Ming was incapable of stooping to them, and I too could never stoop to them. Having to conceal one's indignation and keep on friendly terms with the people against whom one feels it—Tso Ch'iu Ming was incapable of stooping to such conduct, and I too am incapable of stooping to such conduct.²⁰

One of the great byproducts and benefits of education is humility. The more one learns, the more aware they become of the vast quantity of knowledge available and the absurdity of one ever learning all that there is to know. Common man often thinks that he knows all there is to know on a given subject and adopts a pretentious manner. A gentleman does not resort to behavior of this sort and outrage in the face of such behavior is a righteous indignation.

The Master said, In vain I have looked for a single man capable of seeing his own faults and bringing the charge home against himself.²¹

The pursuit of knowledge of self is the highest form of education but also the most difficult. What is learned in one branch of knowledge can be applied to all other branches of knowledge but the hardest task is the application of this knowledge upon our own characters. It is far more difficult to examine one's own character from the inside than it is to examine another's from the outside.

Jan Ch'iu said, It is not that your Way does not commend itself to me, but that it demands powers that I do not possess. The Master said, He whose strength gives out collapses during the course of the journey (the Way); but you deliberately draw the line.²²

²⁰ V, 24, 113-114.

²¹ V, 26, 114.

A man's strength and powers can only be quantified through their exercise. One cannot know of their capabilities without experimentation and verification.

The Master said, Who expects to be able to go out of a house except by the door? How is it then that no one follows this Way of ours?²³

Though everyone would like to live a Good life, very few persevere through the work involved. The path of the Good life takes lifelong dedication.

The Master said, When natural substance prevails over ornamentation, you get the boorishness of the rustic. When ornamentation prevails over natural substance, you get the pedantry of the scribe. Only when ornament and substance are duly blended do you get the true gentleman.²⁴

A gentleman's character is composed of equal and corresponding parts practicality and transcendence. He always strives to go above and beyond but remains realistic.

Fan Ch'ih asked about wisdom. The Master said, He who devotes himself to securing for his subjects what it is right that they should have, who by respect for the Spirits keeps them at a distance may be termed wise. He asked about Goodness. The Master said, Goodness cannot be obtained till what is difficult has been duly done. He who has done this may be called Good.²⁵

As noted above, the path of the Good life is a life-long process, and as such can only be judged in retrospect.

The Master said, A gentleman who is widely versed in letters and at the same time knows how to submit his learning to the restraints of ritual is not likely, I think, to go far wrong.²⁶

It may seem hard for a modern reader to relate to the idea of ritual, but it is still a part of modern life. Ritual can be seen in such everyday things as politeness and manners. It can also be seen when we develop a standardized method to help us through complicated procedures, such as when we always set up a truth table in the same manner. Rituals are the grease in the

²² VI, 10, 118.

²³ VI, 15, 119.

²⁴ VI, 16, 119.

²⁵ VI, 20, 120.

²⁶ VI, 25 121.

gears of life, they keep things running smoothly. One who is knowledgeable and adept at these rituals is twice blessed and well prepared for anything that they might encounter on the road of life.

The Master said, How transcendent is the moral power of the Middle Use! That it is but rarely found among the common people is a fact long admitted.²⁷

Confucius advocates a life of moderation, but too often people live instead at the extreme ends of the spectrum, with lives of excess or aestheticism.

Tzu-kung said, If a ruler not only conferred wide benefits upon the common people, but also compassed the salvation of the whole State, what would you say of him? Surely, you would call him Good? The Master said, It would no longer be a matter of 'Good.' He would without doubt be a Divine Sage. Even Yao and Shun could hardly criticize him. As for Goodness—you yourself desire rank and standing; then help others to get rank and standing. You want to turn your own merits to account; then help others to turn theirs to account—in fact, the ability to take one's own feelings as a guide—that is the sort of thing that lies in the direction of Goodness.²⁸

And this, in a way, brings us right back to the beginning. Deep down we are all very much similar. We all are born with the same set of needs and no matter how much we might diverge as we go about living our lives we continue to operate based upon these needs. In the process of fulfilling these needs, we develop 'wants' which to a great extent are more-or-less similar as well. Through examination of our own feelings and desires we can learn much about the feelings and desires of others as well. By taking an empathetic position and helping others we are given an opportunity to learn and to better prepare us for the realization of our own satisfactions.

“By nature, near together; by practice far apart.” Our 'practice' is our divergent experience. The process of education teaches us just how similar we really are, even across vast

²⁷ VI, 27, 121-122.

²⁸ VI, 28, 122.

expanses in time. Philosophy, history, literature, all show us that ancient man had the same needs, wishes, and questions as modern man. It must be stressed that for gentlemen such as Confucius and Socrates education was not the mere process of schooling, but rather using every single moment as an opportunity to learn. If it were only a matter of attending school the Way would not be described as so difficult. It is no easy task to remain open to the moment at all times. The day-to-day drag of the weight of responsibilities, trials and tribulations, indeed anything in life can be a distraction from this goal, just as it was in Confucius' day.

The Master said, Hui is capable of occupying his whole mind for three months on end with no thought but that of Goodness. The others can do so, some for a day, some even for a month; but that is all.²⁹

²⁹ VI, 5, 116.