

College and Character: What did Confucius Teach Us About the Importance of Integrating Ethics, Character, Learning, and Education?

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Abstract

Recent news reports of personal greed, corporate failures, and government bailouts are evidence of a nation's moral character in peril. Wall Street has been blamed for much of the financial crisis as a consequence of the impudent business decisions that were made and moral considerations that were ignored. Business executives seemed to be looking out only for themselves, and, in doing so, they put aside moral accountability and social responsibility. What happened to the conscience of these decision-makers? It appears that the present economic meltdown is not only financial in nature, but represents also moral and ethical failures. For America to have a sustainable future, those of us working in higher education must do more to promote and support the development of ethical values in our students.

Institutions of higher education cannot ignore the moral consequences of their missions. Yet, in recent years, there have been unprecedented changes in American higher education. The role that ethics historically played in the ideals governing the objectives of higher education has been shifted to the emphasis on a vocational approach to education. Today's students are found to focus more on their own success and are less inclined to see beyond their own lives.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that Confucianism, as an inspiring tradition emphasizing the welfare of all humanity, has much to recommend as an important school of thought within learning and education. The main concern of the Confucian tradition is education. The primary purpose of Confucian education is character-building. Education as character-building is to learn to be human. While Confucians emphasize personal cultivation of character, they give priority not to the *individual* but to *the family, community, and the world*. The Confucian approach to learning and education, which emphasizes humanity and service to others, is of significant value to the modern world.

Introduction

Born in 551 B.C., Confucius founded the Confucian school of thinking, or Confucianism. Not only is Confucianism a major system of thought in China, but also it is one of the most influential traditions in the world, with profound insights into human nature and human conduct. Confucius valued learning and devoted his whole life to education. Speaking of himself, Confucius said, "I have never grown tired of learning, nor wearied in teaching others what I have

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learned” (The Analects, 14:24).² The aim of learning, for Confucius, is to improve one’s self and character. Confucius attached great importance to self-cultivation. However, while learning begins with oneself, Confucius did not think that it should end with one’s own satisfaction. Students are expected to extend and apply their knowledge and virtue to others and to the world. The emphasis of Confucian learning is on the search for personal strength and the commitment to social responsibility. In this paper, I will first examine Confucius’s views on education, learning, and character before discussing its relevancy to American higher education.

Confucian Education

Confucius considered man’s nature to be inherently good, and believed that every person has feelings of pity, shame, and moral goodness. Humanity, justice, and wisdom are within a person’s nature. However, he or she can be made to do evil as a result of external influence. Thus, Confucius established education and self-cultivation as the way for individuals to overcome individual contention and gain self-discipline. Prior to Confucius, education was confined to nobles and controlled by officials. Confucius revolutionized education by providing education to all. According to him, education has no class distinction. All human beings are teachable and improvable. A person desiring an education should be educated. Citing the Doctrine of the Mean, Pohl (1999) notes, “The cultivation of the person is to be accomplished through the Way, and the cultivation of the Way is to be done through *jen* (humanity)” (p. 85). Since every person has the beginnings of goodness within him or her, all people are born equal, and thus it becomes imperative for every person to cultivate and develop what is innately good in him or her into an ever larger realm and onto an ever higher level. Confucius believed in the equality and educability of all people. He viewed education as a means of transformation, the discovery of human nature, and the cultivation of character. Through education, virtues are developed and integrated. In the Analects, Confucius defined *junzi* as a true gentleman or a superior man who has moral virtues such as *jen* (humanity or humanness) and *yi* (righteousness).

Confucian Virtues of Jen and Yi

Jen was a core aspect of Confucian teachings. Of all the Confucian virtues, Confucius and his followers regarded *jen* as the most important quality of a moral person. *Jen* can be referred to as a synthesis of concepts such as love for others, compassion, and benevolence. The primary meaning of *jen* is “humanity” in the larger sense, i.e., natural goodness of heart as shown in association with one’s fellow man. One who possesses *jen* is capable of loving others and treating them with kindness. The essence of *jen* is being fully human. According to Confucius, what truly distinguishes human beings from animals is not the body, but the heart and mind. The prominent feature of the heart-and-mind is empathy, the ability to feel the suffering of others. For Confucius, human kindness is inherent in our nature. His main concern was for one to realize the full measure of his or her heart-and-mind.

Yi can be described as righteousness and justice. It signifies what is right. Confucius considered righteousness as part of the essence of a true gentleman. In the Analects, Confucius said, “The superior man does not set his mind either for anything, or against anything: What is right he will follow” (4:10). “The superior man understands righteousness; the petty man understands profits” (The Analects, 4:16). “The superior man is easy to serve and difficult to please. If you try to please him in any way which is not accordant with right, he will not be pleased” (The Analects, 13:25). As an essential human virtue, *yi* is something a good man values

² All quotations of Confucius shown here are from *Confucius, Confucian Analects, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean*, J. Legge. (trans.), New York: Dover, 1971.

and holds important. But the desire to be righteous often conflicts with other values such as power, influence, or wealth. Ethical behavior will only result when moral considerations take precedence over competing values, and inner desires are managed through the development of virtues that make up a moral character. Confucius said, “When observing gain, the superior man strives for righteousness” (The Analects, 16:10).

Wealth and honor are what every man desires. But if they have been obtained in violation of moral principles, they must not be kept. Poverty and humble station are what every man dislikes. But if they can be avoided only in violation of moral principles, they must not be avoided” (The Analects, 4:5).

Indeed, as Kim (1999) notes, knowing *yi* lets one understand how acting according to what is right should be the best option. Just living is not the overriding concern—how one lives should be.

Cultivation of Character, Confucian Learning, and Service to Others

The primary concern of Confucius is character formation defined in ethical terms. As Berling (1996) put it, if the “outer” side of Confucianism is characterized by conformity and acceptance of authority, the “inner” side can be referred to as cultivation of conscience and character. Confucius valued learning and believed that it is through learning and practice that people become differentiated. In the Analects, Confucius said, “By nature, men are alike. By practice, men become far apart (17:2).” For him, whether or not the roots can grow into the great tree of humanity depends essentially upon whether or not, and how, humans preserve their heart-and-mind and cultivate their character.

While Confucius emphasized the importance of cultivating moral virtues within one’s heart-and-mind, he insisted that one’s cultivation of character must involve extending virtues to others. Confucius said, “Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be establishing himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarging himself, he seeks also to enlarge others” (The Analects, 6:28). The difference between a morally-superior and a morally-deficient person is that the former has understood what is righteous in one’s own self and extended it to others, while the latter is devoted only to satisfying his or her own interest. Self-cultivation, in the Confucian sense, is far from merely being an internal search for one’s moral sensitivity. Instead, it involves broadening concern with other people. For the Confucians, the self transforms itself as it encounters other selves. The whole process of Confucian learning involves enriching the self and refining one’s wisdom to be considerate of others. Unlike many Western cultural traditions, Confucianism does not regard self in isolation, but considers an individual as embedded in a network of relationships. As one begins life in a family and then moves outward toward increasingly more complex social relationships, these relationships help define the person and influence ethical character in them. Human growth is then, a broadening of vision, of relationship, and of the ethical bonds that hold people together (Berthrong, 2000).

The Confucian perspective of cultivation of character has its emphasis on the search for personal strength and social responsibility. Learning, for the Confucians, has two purposes. The first is to learn to be an upright, moral person. This purpose is the ideal of a gentleman or a superior person. After the gentleman has cultivated virtues and elevated his character, it is then possible for him to apply what he has learned. To serve the people and the state is considered the ultimate purpose of learning and a moral obligation of a true gentleman (Wong, 1998). Specifically, the purposes of Confucian learning first start within the self and then extend to family and the state. This emphasis on personal cultivation is well stated in the Great Learning:

Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their will sincere. (1:4)

For the Confucians, personal cultivation of character and virtue is the basis for family harmony and social order. The Confucian self is where common good is transmitted.

Changes and Challenges in American Higher Education

When asserting the modern relevance of traditional Confucianism, Tu (1998) pointed out that while the modern West provided the initial impetus for worldwide social transformation with values such as rationality, liberty, and due process of law, Confucian values such as humanity, righteousness, and duty-consciousness may turn out to be a critical and timely reference for the American way of life. Indeed, our nation is presently suffering from an economic crisis that was caused in part by the greed and selfishness of some business executives. As Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) note, there has been excessive individualism of contemporary American culture. This cultural climate has resulted in a growing sense that Americans are not responsible for or accountable to one another. Goals of personal advancement and gratification too often take precedence over ethical and moral values.

Consistent with this view, Piper, Gentile, and Parks (1993) found that today's students aspire to their own personal success, but they do not seem to be prepared to exert leadership capable of addressing complex issues with a vision of the common good. Citing the views of Suzi Gablik, Piper et al. suggest the following:

Individuality and freedom are undoubtedly the greatest achievements of modern culture. . . . But we have fallen into the trap of individualism . . . and have lost sight of the relationships between the individual and the social system, between freedom and responsibility. . . . Our young adults—even some of those most talented and gifted—are coping with half of what they need. They have a vision of freedom to pursue individual contentment. Typically, however, they do not have a robust vision of social engagement and responsibility. (p. 38)

Education is a value, and to be educated means more than a path to achieve personal success. As institutions of higher education have the responsibility for the education of a society's youth, they must take on the challenge of providing students with an ethical vision of right and wrong and increase their concern for the public good. However, in recent years, institutions of American higher education have changed and will continue to change. Marketization and commercialization of higher education characterize many campuses. Higher education is becoming a competitive "industry," where many universities and colleges adopt the strategies and techniques of businesses. Marchese (2000) was concerned that traditional values that have sustained higher education are diminishing. When insisting that all higher education institutions serve a public purpose, Shapiro (2005) states that education's role in the moral development of students is one vehicle through which institutions of higher education can contribute to society. If today's college students are to be positive forces in this world, there is a need for institutions of higher education to refocus their vision and to take moral development seriously. As we search for the moral obligation of higher education, we must keep in mind that the vision and insights put forward by Confucius are still of value today.

Discussion

Confucius had a holistic view of learning and education, which centered on cultivation of virtue and character. Not only did Confucius insist that cultivation of virtue is integral to the development of self, but he also believed that it is of great importance for a good society. For him, virtuous people are necessary for the well-functioning of a society. While law is essential for social stability, the civilized mode of conduct can never be communicated through coercion or punishment. Confucius believed in the transformation of education for one to become virtuous. Confucian learning was seen as the process where individuals grow in virtue and cultivate human goodness while becoming in tune with other people.

The focus on moral and character education was central to American education from its inception, but it has been set aside in many colleges and universities today. America's founding fathers understood that the republic at its core depended upon a mass of citizens educated in virtue. James Madison asked, "Is there no virtue among us?" in his speech at the Virginia Ratifying Convention in June 1788. Tschange and Wittlinger (2000) suggest that without virtuous alternative, Madison prophesied, "it was an unstable society." John Adams also knew that if a democratic society were to function as intended, its citizens must be blessed with virtue as well as wisdom and knowledge (Colby, et al., 2003). A society that ignores the development of virtues and moral character faces catastrophic consequences. The present economic and financial challenges pose a real threat to our nation and draw the attention to the importance of fostering ethical and moral values. Without the cultivation of virtue and ethics, individuals become irresponsible and fail to balance self-interest and social responsibility.

At the heart of ethics is the development of good character. Confucius taught that learning is not simply making oneself knowledgeable, but also involves acquiring moral values such as *jen* (humanity) and *yi* (righteousness). Only a person of true humanness could show empathy and have the courage to become a righteous person. In addition to disseminating knowledge and enhancing intellectual development, universities and colleges must make higher education relevant and purposeful, and impart to their students ethical values and virtues such as compassion, justice, and concern for others.

Learning, for the Confucians, is to learn to be human. To be human is not merely to look after one's own interest and satisfy one's own desires. The heart-and-mind defines the uniqueness of being human. Confucius taught to cultivate compassion and practice concern for others. He insisted on empathizing and extending virtues to others as the way to cultivate humanity. The basic idea of *jen* illustrates how human beings should relate to one another in society. There is a sense of belonging and interconnection that encourages one to extend him- or herself to others. With the focus of today's college students dominated primarily by narrow concerns of individual success and self-fulfillment, institutions of higher education have an important role to play in providing these students with a larger sense of purpose and in fostering within them consciousness of the welfare of all humanity.

The ultimate task of character formation, in the Confucian sense, is to become a full person through the cultivation of *jen* (humanity). Tu (1999) described Confucian self-cultivation as follows: "Man is a moral being who through self-effort extends his human sensitivity to all the beings of the universe so as to realize himself in the midst of the world and as an integral part of it" (p. 79). A Confucian's self-realization, in Tu's analysis, is the process which enables one to embody the family, community, nation, the world, and cosmos in his or her sensitivity. Not only do the Confucians address humanity in both personal and social dimensions, but they also insist that each person must work through families, communities, nations, and all beings of the universe to realize him- or herself. Confucius emphasized the cultivation of the full person for service to

others and to the state. A man of virtue must practice and extend what he learns. Confucianism does not view a member of society as an individual who asserts rights but performs no duties. Instead, Confucian teachings emphasize that one should pay more attention to fulfilling obligations and responsibilities to others than to his or her individual rights.

In the contemporary society, most people tend to think that they will achieve well-being if they prosper materially and economically. While achieving worldly success may be important, one must not lose sight of the intrinsic value and purpose of learning. Confucius, as an individual, did not achieve worldly success or political triumph. However, he came to terms with himself and his desires, and achieved a sense of personal content and fulfillment. The following message can best describe Confucius' experience with learning:

At the age of fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At the age of thirty, I had my feet firmly on the ground. At the age of forty, I was no longer confused. At the age of fifty, I knew the ways of Heaven. At the age of sixty, my ears were attuned. At the age of seventy, I could follow what my heart desired without fear of transgression. (The Analects, 2:4)

Conclusion

Confucianism has been argued as incompatible with modernity (Tamney and Chiang, 2002). With regard to education, Confucianism is described as having emphasis on filial piety and obedience, which leads students to avoid original thinking and inhibits creativity (Kim, 2005). But, as Bell and Chaibong (2003) point out, creativity may be important, but learning to live as a member of society, as a civilized citizen, is the most important thing. As an all encompassing system of humanism, Confucianism is able to survive as a coherent system of thought throughout its long history. It expresses values of universal significance for those concerned with cultivation of character and virtue. The teachings of Confucius have the concern for the well-being of the entire human family.

University education has a role to play beyond increasing one's power to make money. It must shape character and social responsibility in its constituents. Citing Howard Bowen's questions in the discussion of the public good, Kezar, Chambers, and Burkhardt (2005) asked:

What kind of people do we want our children and grandchildren to be? What kind of society do we want them to live in? How can we best shape our institutions to nurture those kinds of people and that kind of society? (p. 324)

There is no doubt that we live in trying times. College students need to see beyond their own success. Their education must include an appreciation for ethical values and virtues to others.

Cultural tradition influences the relationship between individual and society. While Western cultures stress individual rights and freedom, Eastern cultural tradition, under the influence of Confucianism, emphasizes communal values. For Confucius, social and ethical responsibilities define the self. Learning is to learn to be human. As universities and colleges have the important responsibility of preparing future leaders, there should be increasing awareness among administrators and faculty to focus attention on the greater good and to restore the value of educating for humanity.

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