



Socrates and Confucius: The cultural foundations and ethics of learning

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EDITORIAL

Socrates and Confucius: The cultural foundations and ethics of learning

To study without thinking is worthless, to think without study is dangerous.
(Confucius, *Analects*, 2:15)

The unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates, *Apology*, 38a)

In a recent new book, *The Cultural Foundations of Learning*, Jin Li (2012) maintains that Western and Chinese people hold fundamentally different beliefs about learning. Essentially, she argues that the Western cognitive rational model is to be distinguished from the East Asian virtue model and that these approaches influence how the West and East Asia engage in child-rearing practices and education. Whereas the Western cognitive model aims to cultivate the mind in order to understand the world, the Chinese model emphasizes the morally perfected self. In a world of greater interconnectedness and globalizing convergences the differences between the two models have not diminished.

Jin Li (2012) recounts how at the University of Pittsburg she took courses in educational psychology and child development on how to develop children's creativity. Driven by her desire to 'help rectify Chinese education problems' caused by more than a century-old Confucian tradition and Marxist dogma, she came to understand the notion of 'culture' as a developmental concept, putting her new hope in 'the teachability of creativity'. She writes, apparently unaware of the premises of cultural studies or the ambit of the field itself:

Culture, as the largest human-created system (as opposed to our biology), penetrates so profoundly into all spheres of human life that it alters human cognition, emotion, and behavior, setting us apart from the next smartest creatures in the animal kingdom. Culture is like the air we breathe; we are completely dependent on it. Together with our biology, culture produces us, but we also alter culture continuously. This interactive process is the inescapable force underlying child development. (Li, 2012)¹

As a result she read late in life Confucius's *Analects* and other original works that she says felt like 'I was gazing into my own soul'.

Why did the Chinese admire Confucius for 2500 years? Why was he called a sage and an 'exemplary teacher for all ages' (萬世師) even by the powerful

(for example, emperors) and smart people (i.e. scholars), and why was his *Analects* required reading of all schoolchildren for millennia? Were all the Chinese who lived before me wrong—stupid even? These questions greatly disturbed me. (Li, 2012)¹

Further reading revealed that many scholars thought that the root cause of Chinese steady decline was the Confucian ideology that all ruling dynasties had adopted: ‘What defeated the Chinese system at the turn of the twentieth century, as intellectuals and politicians agreed, was really not Western troops but their science, which the Confucian ideology clearly lacked.’ But ‘Blaming Confucius is like blaming Jesus for the medieval Inquisition and other immoral acts committed in the name of Christianity’ (Li, 2012).¹

I leave other scholars to review and assess Li’s claims and review of research, except to say provisionally that an orientation that while tracing the cultural origins of these two traditions focuses entirely on the psychology of learning to explain differences seems to me cannot proceed from premises of psychology only (especially a Western empiricist model that itself is largely oblivious of culture) but requires a detailed understanding of cultural history and philosophy. Also, the claim that differences have endured in the face of globalization stands in need of evidence.

What I find interesting is the *very notion* of cultural foundations of ethics and learning, and also how it might be approached through the lens of philosophy rather than (exclusively) psychology. In this respect we might ask: What are the differences between Socrates and Confucius and how can they be ascribed as the basis of differences in dominant and enduring cultural traditions? Can these classical traditions be compared or are we to treat them as incommensurable? Are they really still culturally effective in determining attitudes and approaches to ethics and learning? Are the two traditions easy to characterize and differentiate?

Li (2012) suggests that in the Socratic tradition the West values the rational individual mind that is trained to interrogate the world and become its master while the Confucian tradition is based on moral self-perfection, learning as a moral virtue and the primacy of action over thought, with the highest virtue consisting in *ren* (or human goodness).

At one level both Confucius (551–479) and Socrates (469–399) saw themselves on a divine mission to teach values, although while Confucius was a sage and an ‘exemplary teacher for all ages’ (萬世師表) Socrates rejected the label of teacher. In part, the difference revolves around their opposing attitudes to tradition: where Socrates is critical of traditional values and acts a ‘gadfly’ to get people to examine their lives and moral beliefs Confucius is respectful of tradition and the *Dao*. This leads to very different accounts of virtue: for Socrates virtue is the outcome of an intellectual process that equates virtue with knowledge and wisdom as the love of truth whereas for Confucius virtue depends upon the cultivation of traditional practices involving love and filial piety. In view of this difference it is perhaps understandable that there are also strong differences in related conceptions of politics (Yu, 2005).

As Jiyuan Yu (2005, p. 186) in ‘The beginning of ethics: Confucius and Socrates’ indicates, they have very different accounts of the end of ethics: ‘For Socrates, the

most important thing is to examine, for “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Apology, 38a).’ Yu comments:

While examination can certainly discover the inconsistencies in one’s beliefs, and help illuminate the puzzles in one’s life, it is unclear whether it can establish and defend positive moral truth and hence provide us with a constructive understanding of how to live. Socrates seems to believe that his elenchus can lead to positive truth. ‘I prefer nothing, unless it is true’ (*Euthyphro*, 14e). But he never explains how his elenchus can reach this goal. Given his repeated disavowal of knowledge, and given that many earlier dialogues in which Socrates performs elenchus thoroughly are aporetic, it should be safe to say that, for Socrates, ethics is more a matter of critical examination. (Yu, 2005, p. 186)

By contrast, Confucius offers a unified theory and vision of how to live properly, maintaining that ‘to have a positive knowledge of the *Dao* is the most important thing in human life’.

Reflecting on the article ‘On comparative origins of classical Chinese ethics and Greek ethics’, Chung-Ying Cheng, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, emphasizes that ancient China ‘achieved its outlook of the world and human beings in the divinatory texts of the *Yijing*’, which sees the world:

as a process-structure of changes and transformations to be accounted in the creative balance and harmonization of the yin–yang forces, whereby yin and yang stand for a contrast of dark and bright, soft and firm, rest and motion. This onto-cosmological philosophy not only allows individual human participation and decision on actions for the well-being of the individual human person but leads to a creative use of the yin–yang concept for the cultivation of the human person and human society toward a better state. (Cheng, 2002, p. 308)

By contrast, Chung-Ying Cheng maintains that the Greek tradition begins:

with the Homeric conception of heroic virtues, which consists in seeking excellence in power and skill as exhibited in Homeric gods and heroes. On the other hand, common people’s desire to avoid excess, arrogance, and violence perhaps led Hesiod to reconstruct a theodicy of justice (*dike*) according to which wrongdoing and crime (*hybris*) would be punished with severity and necessity. In this paradigm, the most important virtues for the human person are justice and control of one’s desires, meaning temperance. (Cheng, 2002, p. 311)

Chung-Ying Cheng (2002) asserts that ‘there is more affinity between the Aristotelian view of morality and ethics and the Confucian ethics of virtues than any other Greek and Chinese comparison. Both stress human practice and human sociality.’

In relation to the question of comparison, Tim Murphy and Ralph Weber’s work is interesting. They suggest that ‘every comparison must proceed from asserting one or more commonalities: assumptions and presuppositions are made, either explicitly or

implicitly, to justify the comparative exercise in the first instance' and 'every comparison is interested in finding differences and similarities in two or more objects under scrutiny. These two stages are essential elements in any comparative analysis' (Murphy & Weber, 2010, p. 201).

As they suggest, one of the best sites for comparative analysis is when thinkers from both traditions address the same question and they focus on how both Confucius and Socrates responded to the question: how should a son respond if his father commits a crime? The responses by Confucius and Socrates are found, respectively, in *Analects*, 13:18, and Plato's *Euthyphro*.

The issue of comparative philosophy is a recent one largely taken up by questions of (in)commensurability of content, methodology, epistemology and ethics, although the actual separation of these issues is somewhat artificial: 'The most obvious sin of doing comparative philosophy is assimilating another tradition to one's own by unreflectively importing assumptions, frameworks, and agendas into one's reading of that other tradition' (Wong, 2009; see also Chen, 2011)

I like the definition provided by Ronnie Littlejohn, who writes:

First, comparative philosophy is distinct from both area studies philosophy (in which philosophers investigate topics in particular cultural traditions, for example, Confucianism) and world philosophy (in which philosophers construct a philosophical system based on the fullness of global traditions of thought). Second, comparative philosophy differs from more traditional philosophy in which ideas are compared among thinkers within a particular tradition; comparative philosophy intentionally compares the ideas of thinkers of very different traditions, especially culturally distinct traditions. (Littlejohn, 2005)

Littlejohn also usefully details the problems of comparative philosophy, including:

descriptive chauvinism (recreating another tradition in the image of one's own), normative skepticism (merely narrating or describing the views of different philosophers and traditions, suspending all judgment about their adequacy), incommensurability (the inability to find the common ground among traditions needed as a basis for comparison), and perennialism (failure to realize that philosophical traditions evolve, that they are not perennial in the sense of being monolithic or static). (Littlejohn, 2005)

And he concludes by asserting:

Properly speaking, comparative philosophy does not lead toward the creation of a synthesis of philosophical traditions (as in world philosophy). What is being created is not a new theory but a different sort of philosopher. The goal of comparative philosophy is learning a new language, a new way of talking. The comparative philosopher does not so much inhabit both of the standpoints represented by the traditions from which he draws as he comes to inhabit an emerging standpoint different from them all and which is thereby creatively a new way of seeing the human condition. (Littlejohn, 2005)

The question is enthralling. From a cultural perspective it is difficult to occupy a point outside culture as a measure of comparison. All we have is constructive engagement between traditions that can be developed through reflective criticism.²

In terms of the question of the cultural foundations of ethics and learning, it is a useful step to identify first that learning and ethics have an essential relation to each other in both traditions; that the question of cultural foundations is not an absurd pursuit; that it can be usefully approached through a philosophical perspective rather than one that issues from contemporary (Western) psychology; and that the philosophical approach might begin with a robust comparison of the question of self-knowledge construed as questions of ‘knowing oneself’ (Socrates) and its relation to the Other (Confucius). Knowing oneself and knowing others might also be considered a complementary ethics of learning that can serve as a humanistic foundation going forward.

Notes

1. All quotations are from the excerpt that appears at http://assets.cambridge.org/97805217/68290/excerpt/9780521768290_excerpt.pdf
2. On the question of comparative philosophy see the following journals and centres: *Comparative Philosophy* <http://www.comparativephilosophy.org/index.php/ComparativePhilosophy/>; The Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy <http://www.sacpweb.org/>; The Columbia Society for Comparative Philosophy (CSCP) <http://www.cbs.columbia.edu/cscp/>; *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* http://www.kutztown.edu/academics/liberal_arts/philosophy/dao.htm; and Center for Comparative Philosophy <http://www.sjsu.edu/centercomphil/>.

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