

2.3 Confucius and the Life of Virtue

Twelve years after the Buddha was born in India, Confucius (551–479 BCE) was born in the state of Lu (now the province of Shandong) in China. (“Confucius” is the latinization of K’ung Fu Tzu, which means “Master K’ung.”) He lived at a time when Chinese society had disintegrated into social and political chaos. Because of these circumstances, he became interested in the question of how the well-being of society can best be achieved and how this was related to the good life.

Biographical information is uncertain, but tradition tells us that Confucius was from the nobility. When he was three years old, his father died. At age nineteen he married and sought a government career. Ultimately, however, he was to make his name as an educator, not as a politician. He provided what we today would call a “humanistic” education to commoner and noble alike, and he taught what might be termed a “humanistic social philosophy”—“social” because of his concern for achieving a good social order and “humanistic” because of his concern to cultivate humane qualities in the human spirit. His reputation in China became so immense that on the popular level he was deified, while among scholars he was venerated as a great sage.

Jen is one of the central ideas of his thought. It has been translated in a variety of ways: “human excellence,” “humanity,” “love,” “benevolence,” “humaneness,” and “kind heartedness,” to name only a few. At times, the term is used to refer to what we might call “ideal human nature.” It is humanity at its best, having realized its full positive potential. *Jen* is both the source of moral principles and, when embodied in the sage or wise person, represents the outcome of a life lived doing the right things. Viewed as love or benevolence, *jen* gives rise to the principles of conscientiousness and altruism, which ought to govern relationships among humans. We should not, Confucius contended, do to others what we would not have them do to us. Long before Judaism and Christianity, Confucius had articulated a form of the “Golden Rule.”

Li (pronounced “lee”) is another central concept. It can mean order, ritual or rite, custom, manners, ceremony, appropriateness, or propriety. Humans should behave appropriately. The models for appropriate behavior came, according to Confucius, from the traditional rites and customs handed down from the past Golden Age. He regarded himself as a traditionalist and spent much of his time teaching and interpreting the cultural classics (called the “Six Disciplines”) from China’s past. Tradition is important in his view because it provides an external check on what one may subjectively believe to be the right way to act and is a repository of the wisdom of the past with regard to proper conduct.

One of the major traditional virtues in China is **hsiao** (pronounced “shee-ow”). *Hsiao* is familial love or devotion (often translated as filial piety) and involves the practice of kindness, honor, respect, and loyalty among family members. Confucius believed that a strong family is the basis of a strong society. In fact, the family is the microcosmic version of society. Society ought to be one large family, and ultimately familial love should be extended to the whole human community.

Yi (pronounced “yee” and sometimes spelled “i”) can be translated as “rightness” or “righteousness.” It is both a virtue and a principle of behavior. As a principle,

it states that one should do what is right just because it is right. In other words, your motive should be pure. You should not follow *li* just because it is traditional to do so, nor practice *hsiao* because you will be rewarded, or seek to realize *jen* because it will make you happy or give you pleasure or make you wealthy. You should do what is right simply because it is the right thing to do. Doing good is *intrinsically* valuable. It is not *merely extrinsically* or instrumentally valuable (i.e., valuable as a means to something else). This is not to say that it does not have any extrinsic value. It does insofar as it will promote the good family and the good society, but its primary value is intrinsic.

Although it is usual to interpret Confucius as primarily concerned with moral, social, and political values, the aesthetic dimension of his thought needs to be emphasized as well. Ethics has to do with moral value; aesthetics has to do with artistic value or beauty. The Confucian concern with balance, harmony, and appropriateness reflects aesthetic values. Indeed, the very division between moral and aesthetic value is something Confucius probably did not recognize. For him to call an action right was not merely to pass a moral judgment, but an aesthetic judgment as well. Moral order is aesthetic order. The good and the beautiful are one.

Education plays a key role in the process of becoming a virtuous person because knowledge of the past is a clue to proper action in the present. Since becoming a virtuous person or developing good character is a process, it is something we must *learn* how to do. Hence, proper instruction and good education is one of the keys to self-cultivation.

Because of present-day concerns with individual self-realization associated with the human potential movement and because of the "cult of individual privacy and freedom" that has developed in U.S. society, it is tempting to read Confucius as if he were concerned exclusively with the self-improvement of the individual. However, the individual can never be abstracted from society. Ultimately, for Confucius, there can be no absolute separation between the public and private realms of life. If *jen* is the foundation of one's individual life, it is also the foundation of society. His vision of the ideal world is one in which the world is like a home shared by all. Trust among all prevails and "all people love and respect their parents and children . . . there is caring for the old . . . sharing replaces selfishness and materialistic greed . . . and the door to every home need never be locked and bolted by day or night" (*The Record of Rites*, Book IX).

The selection that follows is from the *Analects* (*Lun Yü*), a collection of Confucius's sayings and dialogues with his pupils. Confucius did not write this book, but it was compiled by his students sometime between 475 and 221 BCE. It is a compendium or summary intended for instruction. Much appears to be left out, and just when the reader wants further clarification or argumentation to support a point, the text breaks off. The text seems designed to stimulate reflection on the part of the reader.

Analects

CONFUCIUS

Book I

CONFUCIUS SAID: "Isn't it a pleasure to learn and then constantly carry into practice what has been learned? Isn't it a delight to have friends coming from afar, who cherish the same ideals and follow the same path? Isn't such a man one of established virtue as does not feel resentful even when others do not understand him?"

Youzi said: "There are few who have faith in filial and fraternal duties but should be fond of going against their superiors; there have been none who are not fond of going against their superiors but should be fond of standing up in rebellion. The superior man always tries to do what is radical; that being achieved, the highest principle will naturally be brought forth. So filial piety and respect and love for one's elder brothers are the fundamental principles of humanity, aren't they?"

Confucius said: "Those who are capable of sweet words and fine appearances are rarely men of true virtue."

Zengzi said: "Every day I make several self-examinations on the following points: whether I have or not exerted my utmost in helping others; whether I have or not been honest and sincere in

intercourse with friends; whether I have or not practiced the instructions of my teacher." . . .

Confucius said: "The young people should be filial to parents at home and polite and respectful to their elders in society. They should be guarded in speech and true in words. While constantly keeping on good terms with all, they should foster closer ties with kindhearted men. With all this performed, if they still have energy to spare, they should engage themselves in studying the literature handed down from the ancients." . . .

Confucius said: "Even a man of virtue cannot stand on his dignity if he does not keep gravity in his conduct. Such a flaw can be overcome through learning. Focus your personal cultivation on the two principal virtues: faithfulness and truthfulness. Do not associate with those who are not equal to yourself. When you have made mistakes, be bold enough to correct them."

Zengzi said: "Through carefully performing funeral rites to parents and reverently offering sacrifices to remote ancestors, popular feelings can be molded into a higher moral stature of honesty, sincerity and faithfulness." . . .

Confucius said: "Let a man observe his father's aspirations when his father is alive, and study his father's concrete conduct when his fa-

From Confucius, The Analects of Confucius, translated by Lao An (Jinan, China: Shandong Friendship Press, 1992).

ther is dead. If a man can for long adhere to the correct principles formerly advocated by his father, he may be considered a filial son.”

Youzi said: “The precious role that rites and the rules of decorum can play is that they can harmonize human relations. That has been the most valuable experience drawn by the ancient sagacious kings in governing their states, who, in dealing with both their major and minor assignments, used to take that as their starting point. However, it is not advisable in all cases, for, without being regulated with certain rules of decorum, harmony for harmony’s sake is not always practical.”

Youzi said: “Commitments are honored only when they are in keeping with moral norms, while courtesy and politeness prevent shame and disgrace only when they are in keeping with the rules of decorum. Make friends with those who deserve your friendship and you will find a reliable backing.”

Confucius said: “A man of virtue does not insist on gratifying his appetite in eating, nor does he indulge himself in seeking comforts in dwelling. He is diligent in work and careful in speech and associates with worthy men so as to follow their examples. Such a man may well be said as being eager to learn.”

Zigong asked: “What would you say of a man who is poor but never flatters, and who is rich but is never arrogant?” Confucius said: “That is fairly good. But he is not yet as good as one who is poor but attaches great importance to moral cultivation, and who is rich but observes strict rules of decorum in his conduct.” . . .

Confucius said: “I do not worry about people not knowing me; I am worrying that I myself do not know others.”

Book II

Confucius said: “A sovereign who exercises government on moral principles may be likened to the pole-star, which holds its place while all the lesser stars revolve around it.” . . .

Confucius said: “Lead the people by laws and regulate them by penalties, and the people will

try to avoid offenses and punishments, but will have no sense of shame; lead the people on moral principles and educate them with the rules of decorum, and the people will not only have a sense of shame, but also behave well.”

Confucius said: “At fifteen, I set my heart on learning. At thirty, I had already a good grasp of the rites and morals. At forty, I could form my own judgments of things. At fifty, I began to know the objective laws of nature. At sixty, I could know a man from his words and make a clear distinction between right and wrong. At seventy, I could follow my inclinations without any of my words or deeds ever running counter to the rules.”

Meng Yizi consulted Confucius on filial piety. Confucius said: “Do not violate the proprieties.” Later when Fan Chi was driving for him Confucius told the man: “Mengsun asked me about filial piety, and I answered him ‘Do not violate the proprieties.’” Fan Chi asked: “What did you mean by that?” Confucius replied: “I meant that parents, when alive, should be served according to the rules of propriety, that, when dead, they should be buried according to the funeral rites, and that they should be sacrificed to according to the sacrificial rites.”

Meng Wubo asked about filial piety. Confucius said: “For a filial son, the biggest worry should be about his parents’ health.”

Ziyou asked about filial piety. Confucius said: “Nowadays filial piety is simply mistaken for supporting one’s parents with food. But even dogs or horses are given food, too. If one practices filial piety without reverence and obedience to his parents, then, what is its difference from raising dogs or horses?”

Zixia asked about filial piety. Confucius said: “In attending one’s parents, the most difficult thing for one to do is to constantly maintain an affable and pleasant manner. When anything has to be done, the young people undertake it; when there is wine and food, the elders are served—is this all there is to filial piety?”

Zigong asked how to be a gentleman. Confucius said: “Let his deeds go before his words.” . . .

Confucius said: "Do bear in mind, You, what I am now teaching you: when you know a thing, say that you know it; when you do not know a thing, admit you do not know it. That is wisdom." . . .

Book III

. . . Confucius said: "If a man is void of humanity, even though he perseveres in rites and decorum, what's the good of that? If a man is void of humanity, even though he enjoys music, singing and dancing, what's the good of that?" . . .

Book IV

Confucius said: "It is indeed a privilege to live in a neighborhood where humanity is prevalent. If a man does not insist on such an environment in selecting his residence, how can he be counted as being wise?"

Confucius said: "Without humanity, a man cannot long endure adversity or poverty, nor can he long enjoy ease or prosperity. The humane feel relieved in carrying out humanity, while the wise find it beneficial to practice humanity."

Confucius said: "Only the kindhearted men can love the good and hate the evil."

Confucius said: "As long as one is resolved to bring about the spirit of humanity, there won't be any wickedness."

Confucius said: "Riches and honor are what every man desires; but if they can be obtained only by transgressing the right way, a virtuous man will disdain to hold them. Poverty and lowliness are what every man detests; but if they can be avoided only by transgressing the right way, a virtuous man will not try to evade them. If a man of true virtue should ignore humanity, how can he achieve his noble reputation? So not even for the lapse of a single meal does a man of true virtue depart from humanity. In moments of haste he cleaves to it; in seasons of peril he cleaves to it, too."

Confucius said: "I have not seen a person who hankered after humanity or a person who ab-

horred inhumanity. One who hankers after humanity would certainly be the best; one who abhors inhumanity would practice humanity in such a way that he would not allow any act of inhumanity in his own conduct. Is there anyone who can exert himself to achieve humanity for a whole day? I have never seen anyone who was willing to do so but did not have the ability; there might be such men, but I have not seen them." . . .

Confucius said: "Amidst the universe of men and events, the superior man does not set his mind either absolutely for anything or absolutely against anything. The sole measure of them all is morality and justice."

Confucius said: "The superior man takes pains in moral culture; the inferior man is sentimentally attached to his native soil. The superior man cares about the sanctions of law; the inferior man is concerned with small favors." . . .

Confucius said: "The superior man understands what is moral; the inferior man understands only what is profitable."

Confucius said: "When you have met a virtuous man, try to follow his example; when you have met an immoral man, try to examine yourself inwardly."

Confucius said: "In serving his parents, a son should express his different opinions in a mild tone. If he sees that his suggestions are not accepted, he should keep up his reverence and should not go against them. He should never complain even though he has a worried heart."

Confucius said: "While his parents are alive, the son should not go abroad to a great distance. If he does go on a long journey, he must tell his parents the definite place he is going to."

Confucius said: "If a man manages not to alter, for a number of years, from the correct principles formerly advocated by his dead father, he can be called a filial son."

Confucius said: "For the son, the ages of his parents should not be kept out of mind, for he should feel at once joyful for their healthiness and fearful for their aging." . . .

Confucius said: "A man of virtue never stands isolate; he will always have comrades." . . .

Book V

. . . Speaking of Zichan, Confucius said: "He has displayed in himself four characteristics of moral excellence: courtesy and gravity in the conduct of himself; loyalty and reverence in serving his prince; kindness and benevolence in nourishing the people; and morality and justice in ordering and employing the people." . . .

Book XI

. . . Zizhang asked about a man of moral excellence. Confucius said: "To be a man of moral excellence, although he doesn't have to follow in the footsteps of his predecessors, he can hardly attain to the lofty realm of a sage in the cultivation of his moral character." He added: "Isn't he a man whose words are truthful and sincere? Isn't he a man of moral integrity? Isn't he a man whose appearances are dignified and simple?" . . .

Book XII

Yan Yuan asked how to achieve the quality of humanity. Confucius said: "The quality of humanity consists in restraining yourself and making your words and deeds conform to decorum. Once you have restrained your personal desires and made your words and deeds conform to decorum, you will be universally acknowledged as bearing the virtue of humanity. To achieve the quality of humanity depends upon yourself; can it depend on others?" Yan Yuan said: "Allow me, sir, to further ask what the focal points are." Confucius said: "Do not look at what is contrary to decorum; do not listen to what is contrary to decorum; do not speak what is contrary to decorum; and do not do what is contrary to decorum." Yan Yuan said: "I will act upon these instructions although I am dull."

Zhonggong asked Confucius how to achieve the quality of humanity. Confucius said: "Be-

have with great respect and prudence when away from home as though you were receiving a distinguished guest. Preside over the common people with gravity and seriousness as though you were officiating at a grand sacrifice. Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you. Try not to incur any dissatisfaction both in administrating the state and in managing your family affairs." Zhonggong said: "I will act upon these instructions although I am dull."

Sima Niu asked Confucius how to achieve the quality of humanity. Confucius said: "The humane are slow to talk." Sima Niu asked again: "Can it be counted as one of the characteristics of humanity to be slow to talk?" Confucius said: "It is no easy task to achieve the quality of humanity, and so one cannot but be slow to talk, can one?"

Sima Niu asked Confucius how to be a gentleman. Confucius said: "The gentleman has neither anxiety nor fear." Sima Niu said: "Neither anxiety nor fear—does that characterize a gentleman?" Confucius said: "Since he has a clear conscience, what has he to be anxious about, and what has he to fear?" . . .

Zizhang asked Confucius how to promote one's moral culture and dispel one's delusion. Confucius said: "Focus on the qualities of faithfulness and honesty, and act always upon the cardinal principles of morality and justice, and then your moral character will be improved. For the same person, you would wish him to enjoy a long life when you love him; you would wish him to die immediately when you hate him. So, you wish him a long life one moment, and you wish him to be short-lived the next—this is a case of delusion. Indeed, it is no good to yourself, and, besides, it will only make people feel absurd." . . .

Confucius said: "Study extensively the ancient literature, and regulate yourself with the rules of decorum, and then you won't go so far as to transgress the right way."

Confucius said: "The superior man seeks to enable people to succeed in what is good, but does not help them in what is evil. The inferior man does just the contrary." . . .

Fan Chi asked what humanity was. Confucius said: "Love men." Then Fan Chi asked about wisdom. Confucius said: "Know men." Fan Chi still could not understand thoroughly. Confucius said: "Promote upright men over those who are not upright, and you will be able to remold the latter into uprightness." When he retired, Fan Chi met Zixia and told him: "Just a moment ago, I saw our master and asked about wisdom. The master said: 'Promote upright men over those who are not upright, and you will be able to remold the latter into uprightness.' What did he mean by saying that?" Zixia said: "Oh, his statement has rich meanings indeed. When Emperor Shun gained the ruling power of his empire, he managed to select able persons from among all the people, and finally employed Gao Yao, and then all inhumane practices began to be kept away; when Emperor Tang gained the ruling power of his empire, he also managed to select able persons from among all the people, and finally employed Yi Yin, and then all inhumane practices began to be kept away." . . .

Zigong asked: "What would you say of a man who is loved by all the people of the whole village?" Confucius said: "That is not so good." Zigong asked again: "What would you say of a man who is hated by all the people of the whole village?" Confucius said: "That is not so good either. It would be better that all the good people of the whole village love him, and all the bad people there hate him." . . .

Confucius said: "The superior man is even-tempered and good-humored but never self-important. The inferior man is self-important but never even-tempered and good-humored."

Confucius said: "Those who possess such qualities as firmness, resolution, simplicity, and prudence in speech are close to the virtue of humanity." . . .

Book XIV

. . . Confucius said: "Virtuous men are sure to speak beautifully, but those who speak beautifully are not necessarily virtuous. Humane men

are always found to be bold, but those who are bold are not necessarily humane." . . .

Confucius said: "The superior man loves morality and justice; the inferior man hankers after wealth and profits." . . .

Confucius said: "A gentleman feels ashamed of talking much but doing little."

Confucius said: "There are three principles a gentleman follows, but I myself have not been able to attain any of them: being humane, he has no anxieties; being wise, he has no perplexities; being brave, he has no fear."

Zigong said: "That is just our master's own way." . . .

Confucius said: "Do not worry about people not knowing your ability, but worry that you have not enough of it." . . .

Someone asked: "What do you think of requiting enmity with kindness?" Confucius said: "Then how will you requite kindness? Enmity should be requited with justice, and kindness should be requited with kindness." . . .

Book XV

. . . Confucius and his party ran out of food in the State of Chen, and all his followers fell ill and became so weak that they even could not stand up. Zilu came to see Confucius in resentment, saying, "Then, even the superior man can be driven to a wall?" Confucius said: "Yes, but the superior man when reduced to such straits can stick to his moral integrity, while the inferior man when thus reduced tends to do all manner of evil." . . .

Confucius said: "Men of lofty ideals and moral integrity will under no circumstance seek life at the expense of the principles of humanity. On occasion they will be brave enough to sacrifice their lives to accomplish the cultivation of the quality of humanity." . . .

Confucius said: "More blame on yourself and less blame on others, and you will be able to keep away from resentment." . . .

Confucius said: "A gentleman takes propriety as the cardinal principle in his conduct. He per-

forms it according to the rule of decorum. He brings it forth in terms of modesty and magnanimity, and completes it with honesty and sincerity. Such a man is a true gentleman."

Confucius said: "The superior man merely worries that he himself is wanting in ability, and does not worry about people not knowing him." . . .

Confucius said: "The superior man always seeks the cause of any error in himself. The inferior man always finds an excuse for any error in others." . . .

Zigong asked Confucius: "Is there any one word that can serve as a lasting principle for the conduct of one's whole life?" Confucius said: "Perhaps it is the word 'reciprocity.' Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you." . . .

Confucius said: "The superior man may not be observed and tested in small matters, but can be entrusted with great concerns. The inferior man cannot be entrusted with great concerns, but can be observed and tested in small matters." . . .

Confucius said: "When it comes to the cardinal principle of realizing the spirit of humanity, a man should not defer even to his master."

Confucius said: "A gentleman is as good as his words on moral principles, but does not necessarily keep his promise in trifling matters." . . .

Book XVII

. . . Zizhang asked Confucius about the principles of humanity. Confucius said: "A man who is able to practice the five virtues everywhere at any moment is an adherent to the principles of humanity." Zizhang said: "I would like to ask what the five virtues are." Confucius said: "They are courtesy, magnanimity, good faith, diligence, and kindness. He who is courteous will not be humiliated; he who is magnanimous will win the multitude; he who is of good faith will be trusted by others; he who is diligent will achieve a great deal; and he who is kind will be able to get service from others." . . .