

An Introduction to Confucius and Eastern Philosophy

Notes taken from several sources:

Weeks, Marcus, (2014) *Philosophy in Minutes*, Quercus

Hughes, Bettany, (2015) *Genius of the Ancient World*, BBC 4, available on iplayer

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Puett, Michael and Gross-Loh, Christine (2017) *The Path*, Penguin

Eastern Philosophy

“ Until quite recently, Western philosophy developed in isolation from the traditions of China and India. The division between religion and philosophy was less clear-cut in the East, where adherence to a religion involved acceptance of its moral philosophy, and philosophy assumed belief in a religious, or at least unsupported, metaphysical explanation. The first great Eastern philosophers, such as Laozi and Confucius in China and Siddharta Gautama in India, were roughly contemporary with the first Greek philosophers, but their emphasis on morals anticipated Athenian philosophy. In some respects, their conclusions are strikingly similar, but with the arrival of Christianity, Eastern and Western philosophies became marked by differences rather than similarities. In the 19th century some western philosophers ‘discovered’ Indian religion and philosophy, and realised the similarity to the views of German idealism in particular. More recently, the religious aspects of Eastern philosophies have taken precedence, while philosophical thinking in the East has come under Western influences.” (Weeks, p106)

Q: *Why might this be?*

DAOISM

Before Confucius’ birth in the 6th century BCE China was in political chaos, with factionalism, tribalism and pillage rife between warlords throughout the vast region. There was a need to establish a system of government to try and bring order to a land where the ancients prized order and harmony above all things. This system had to reflect traditional religious ideas and - cometh the hour, cometh the man - Laozi led a group of scholars in proposing a moral philosophy to underpin social and political organisation – Daoism. The Way (dao) was a process of flux, in which the complementary states that go to make up the world of humans – light, dark, night, day, life and death, are in cycles that are in eternal harmony and balance. We disturb this cosmic balance when we give in to desire, ambition or social convention. To avoid the ensuing chaos, we must adopt a simple and tranquil life in harmony with nature, behaving intuitively and thoughtfully, not impulsively. (Weeks, p108)

Confucianism

Confucius (Kong Fuzi) was of the generation following Laozi and possibly they discussed some issues when Confucius was the court archivist. Confucius was concerned with providing a stable and just government, rather than with moral philosophy. His country was beginning to emerge as an advanced and sophisticated state with art, metalwork, agriculture and weaponry, but was threatened by political instability and ruthless cycles of war that resulted in many independent states vying for power. Avoidance of the collapse of the state was the catalyst for his quest for the fundamentals of good governance.

He believed that education could transform individuals and society, and that education should harness lessons from history and the family. For Confucius a study of history, poetry and rituals, developed understanding of how to achieve the essential goals of order and harmony on earth and in the cosmos. Balancing the heavenly and earthly forces could be achieved through ritual.

Confucius came into conflict with the Daoists who thought him arrogant for questioning The Way, which did not accept the need for change. He consulted and studied the archives from The Golden Age (records written on bamboo from 4000 years BCE) which showed that harmony was possible, but proper ritual observance was required to make it happen.

Ritual requires an all-encompassing ethos of etiquette and customs, courtesy, respect and reverence. He believed that learning was continuous and one lifetime was not enough to learn the way to behave. Man should strive towards virtue, and that good leadership demanded that the leader should learn how to be a good father to his people and, in doing so, engender loyalty and obedience in his subjects. The family was a potent model for how authority could be exercised through mutual assent.

Might conferred a responsibility to behave virtuously, if a ruler is corrupt then the people have a right to overthrow him.

In his middle age Confucius fell into disfavour and his political career faltered. However, he was tenacious and resourceful, charismatic and held compelling new ideas. He began to gather around him a group of around 70 young men who formed a vanguard to infiltrate the courts and spread his ideas. He was scrupulously meritocratic in choosing his vanguard (no women though!) urging that Chinese society should be led by the virtuous, whichever strata of society they came from. He introduced the concept of Junza – the ultimate moral person, one who behaved intuitively, thought independently, and was prepared to challenge and engage in debate.

Qs: Can you serve a corrupt master?

What is the essence of goodness?

He promoted the concept of Ren – the good feeling experienced when one is behaving altruistically, human heartedness, an extra dimension to positive

human traits, such as courage, justice, wisdom, that enables humans to flourish. But achieving it is a continuous struggle.

He developed The Golden Rule – reciprocity (empathy) is the guiding principle in our behaviour towards others:

What you do not desire for yourself, do not do to others.

Weeks (p112) makes the point that in Eastern thought it is common to express a maxim negatively, whereas a more familiar Western way of putting it is, 'Do as you would be done by'

Q: How much should a government incorporate this rule to impinge upon the lives of citizens – how authoritarian or libertarian should it be?

Confucius fell ill and died in his 70s. By the time of his death he was disillusioned with the unwillingness of government to embrace his principles. However, his students continued to work with his ideas, collating the Analects, which embody his philosophy.

300 years later the Han Dynasty came into being and the stability it created changed the political landscape. It recognized that ruling with brutality didn't work, and Confucian values were effective in cementing the new Empire. It was very convenient for leaders to have a philosophy of obedience that reinforced a top down structure.

The Cultural Revolution under Mao in the 1960s put an end to any official recognition of Confucianism, indeed Confucius was declared an enemy of the state. However, his principles were strongly embedded in Chinese culture, and today there is a renaissance of Confucian education.

Qs: How relevant are his ideas now – to Chinese culture? To ours?

What principles of moral philosophy underpin democracy?

In what ways are Eastern and Western thought different?

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20 April 2017