"Sagely Wisdom in Confucianism"

Larry D. Harwood

I. Introduction

Though Westerners may count Chinese Confucianism as a religion, some are skeptical that Confucianism is indeed religious, while others see in Confucianism a kind of ethical humanism. Huston Smith noted the Chinese proverb that as a people the Chinese admit to being extraordinarily flatfooted,[1] that is, with an eye toward the earth. By contrast, the West in general has derived much of its ethical framework from an overt theological and religious background.[2] This is decidedly less so in China and in Confucianism. As the Sages of the Chinese people, neither Confucius nor Lao-Tzu is conceived of as a Savior, as Christ is in the Christian religion. There are of course differences between Taoism and Confucianism. Lao-Tzu is reported to have said, "Banish sageliness, discard wisdom, and the people will benefit a hundredfold." However, in Confucianism, sageliness is the personification of an acquired wisdom that benefits the people in a way denied by Lao-Tzu. In this paper I will examine the Confucian notion of the sage, with some comparisons made along the way to Taoism and finally to Western thought.

II.

As part of his humanistic emphasis, Confucius appears to have regarded human nature as exceedingly malleable and thus one of the primary roles of leaders is to provide good ethical models for citizens. Ethical character is thus of paramount importance not only for civic leaders, but also for others. In Confucian eyes cultures may inordinately rely on laws and law enforcement to police humans rather than developing a significant ethical consciousness in people.

In Confucianism the meaning of life is negotiated through education, and specifically moral education. The intent of knowledge is not the acquisition of power, whether over humans or nature, as is easily inferred in Francis Bacon's dictum that knowledge is equivalent to power. The function of knowledge gleaned from moral education for Confucius is rather virtue or goodness. This difference may set Westerners, living the legacy of Bacon, far from Confucius's ideas. In the 20th century Herrlee G. Creel wrote of that difference as the old China's trepidation about what China might become in any interaction with the Western world:

> Far more than these material things, the Chinese valued the things of the mind. They could see the value of skill that could combine various materials to make a machine to produce goods cheaply, but they thought more highly of the art of making it possible for human beings to live together in harmony and happiness. They valued wealth—the Chinese have always valued it—but they could see little usefulness in wealth that did not bring its owner satisfaction, a fuller enjoyment of life, and a sense of security in the esteem of his fellow-men. In these respects they were by no means sure that the way of the West was better. . . [3]

The portrayal of Confucius matches well Creel's description of the Chinese people, for Confucius in many ways molded much of the Chinese cultural character. Confucius—as he is presented in *The Analects*, for example—is refined, culturally and intellectually sophisticated, reflecting a breath of knowledge capable of negotiating the infinite situations that living presents. He exudes the personification of wisdom. He is studied, thoughtful, and is found carefully sticking to the wisdom gleaned from predecessors—attention to history will therefore be important to Confucius. The notion of wiping out cultural memory, such as that undertaken by Qin Shi Huang Di, the first Chinese Emperor, ruling a couple centuries after Confucius, appalled the Confucians of that Emperor's day. This emperor decides that the way to quell dissent against him is to first engage in burning the books attributed to the ancients, and when that does not stop the outcry against him, he buries alive the scholars, chiefly Confucians, who dared to resist him. The point is, moreover, that Confucius sees himself standing on the shoulders of a past culture—he is extending it. The Emperor's plan, by contrast, was to cut the wisdom of the past off at the knees, begin as if yesterday had never been. In this sense, of course, Confucius can be seen as a romantic desirous of returning the older tradition. Lao-Tzu, by way of comparison, is more the romantic in the traditional sense—returning to the forest, the field, or the hermitage or monastery. In these actions there can be sageliness also, but of a different sort than that found in Confucius.

The impression one develops of Confucius on reading the *Analects*—the closest thing we have to the historical Confucius—is that indeed of a formal man, but also a very moral man and one with an eye for details. Confucianism is oftentimes seen as significantly about propriety and the *Analects* lends some credence to such an interpretation. Shirttails should be kept in, and things tidied up. I read some years ago of a claim by an author contending that a messy workplace or home space is indicative of a cluttered and messy mind. So too Confucian thinking, pursuing the wisdom of sageliness, will insist upon order. Without it, not much will happen that we would wish to happen. Confucius's notorious injunction about keeping mats straight reflects,[4] moreover, not an obsession with mats but it does draw attention to Confucius's attention to details that matter, and to the fact that he views all of life as a piece. For Confucius, all the parts and pieces of anything, to include virtually all details, matter. The mat is perhaps such a detail. As the entrance to a home, for example, there is plausible reason to think that the outside may reflect the inside. One scarcely sees a house with a littered and unkempt yard, only to find the inside of the house immaculate. Proper form, then, is about living an ordered and reasoned life. The Confucian is studied and scholarly, down to fine details, and ceremony and protocol serve as aids to such a life, not needless diversions—as the more spontaneous Taoist will contend against the Confucian.

In much of the Confucian notion of wisdom thus far explicated, we see little reference to matters religious, though we can find some; the emphasis nevertheless is upon an ethical humanism, which moves as naturally as does Aristotle from ethics to politics. There is not, however, overt movement between heavenly wisdom and earthy wisdom, as Westerners find in their religious traditions. Confucians look toward earth. Scott Morton remarks that the Forbidden City, architecturally, hugs the earth.[5] The noticeable lines to the eye are virtually all horizontal, not vertical as in Christian places of worship, for example. Thus, in this sense the Chinese have been at home on earth and have not, for the vast stretches of Chinese history, been eager for originality or novelty, with which to propel their culture and nation out of the past. Until the upheavals of the 20th century China on the whole maintained this kind of cultural composure. When they began to see themselves in competition with the Western world, however, this questioning of Chinese culture constituted something of an about face for a nation previously contented with a culture seeing little need for cultural interaction with other nations. This fact is no better illustrated than by a famous incident that occurred between the British ambassador Macartney and his Chinese hosts in 1793. Macartney had been dispatched by his King George III to persuade China into trading with the British Empire. The British request fell on deaf ears, and is pointedly rejected in a surviving letter that Qialong the China Emperor at the time sent to King George of Britain.

> I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain perfect governance and to fulfill the duties of the state: Strange and costly objects do not interest me. If I have commanded that the tribute offerings sent by you, O King, are to be accepted, this was solely in consideration for the spirit

> which prompted you to dispatch them from afar. Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under heaven, and kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures. This then is my answer to your request to appoint a representative at my Court, a request contrary to our dynastic usage, which would only result in inconvenience to yourself.[6]

III.

Confucius's humanistic orientation in his day may have been suspected as giving the ancestors less than their due, because of his primary attention to earth. His shift of focus, however, gleaned from the *Analects* and other sources, seems to be that life in the present is perilously compromised when so little attention is given to it. He has for this reason, been seen by some, as a secularizer. When looked at in this light, his slight attention to heaven seems to suggest that he may have thought his countrymen obsessively religious by way of a supernaturalism of sorts.

Confucius may have drawn away from that previous kind of religious ancestral devotion in part because of the violent and oftentimes lawless age in which he lived. This may have forced the backward gaze of Confucius to ponder the present. Such chaotic social conditions may have been the cause that provoked Confucius to turn his focus on human relations, and less perhaps on the heaven-human relationship. The Christian Gospels occasionally speak of violence in heaven; in Confucianism there seems no such thing; the Mandate of Heaven charges the earthly rulers to keep peace on earth and maintain good will to one another. Confucius, like other competing thinkers of his time—like Lao-Tzu and Mo-Tzu—reasons that a society that perpetually provokes war among its members lacks something significant. However, the discipline of a Confucian sageliness will be lost on the Taoist who views it as shriveling up the natural vitalities of the human person. It is to make a person into a fixture, but for Confucius it is to refashion life into an order that will remove the disordered factionalism that beset so much of his society.

The bonds between men, indeed between all members of society were fractured and broken in his day, and Confucius and rival teachers proposed various ways in which a society torn by strife could be healed. Though Confucius spoke to the proper relationship between the ruler and his subjects—because this relationship was the one causing the most hurt to a society of people in his day—Confucius also emphasized the necessity for the family to understand and abide by rules and regulations dictated by the responsibilities of family members. A Confucius today would probably still contend that most of our large societal problems begin in the home. In Confucianism, proper respect for parents, proper gender roles, and thus obedience, are central values—observance of them brings order into the world. It is not, however, the rules in Confucianism that are paramount in this inquiry. Rather, it is the Confucian belief that rules in a sense are secondary or indeed somewhat superfluous to the sage, the truly good and wise man, whether that be the ruler or the citizen ruled.

In this idea of an inner discipline, Confucianism is somewhat close to an ideological distant Chinese cousin, Taoism.

In Taoism one confronts what has been described as a philosophy of nature which provides a philosophy of society or the state, though unlike the Confucian vision. While Taoism may resemble Confucianism with such a goal, the resemblances seem to cease after that. While Confucianism is about the conduct of human affairs, it discounts anything like the hermitage or the monastery. The isolation such institutions suggest for human community, so prized by Confucius, would be chilling to someone trying to be more human. The Taoist, like its reputed founder, however, would as soon ride off into the sunset and the forest to be forgotten. Taoism gives in a sense as much advice as Confucianism about human conduct, but it is advice that shows their glaring disagreements. Taoism strives to instill in humans an appropriate humbleness, most noticeable perhaps in landscape

painting where humans are drawn to scale with contrasting larger trees and mountains and streams. Taoism encourages the quiet, the meditative, the small, the pause, even going to the point of defining its central doctrine as inaction. Inaction, however, is not doing nothing, but a will that calmly refuses to exert an apprehensive or auspicious plan, or, finished, that waits presumptuously for accolades. In the suggestions in the little five thousand character classic of Taoism, the *Tao Te Ching*, paradoxes abound. To not strive is to get the job done. To enable churning water to clear itself—let it sit. Action as inaction appears mystically effective. Not surprisingly, then, to the Taoist the Confucian looks like the hare of the lost race with the composed and therefore victorious tortoise, who paradoxically looked doomed to fail from the starting line and was mocked by the presumptuous and arrogant hare.

The Taoist likes spontaneity; the Confucian likes a plan and the order that it evokes—the reification of names serves to accomplish a realizable peace for the Confucian society. However, to the Taoist this ordered life smacks of artificiality, but even more detrimental, a fate ensues similar to the fate of the tallest tree in a lumberjack's first look at his work for the day, for such activity is attention-getting. For the sophistication of the Confucian, the Taoist substitutes raw but directed attention to physical nature; the Taoist follows the careful and never clumsy or conniving nature. So too, moreover, the Taoist will blur the distinction between good and evil. After all, that demarcation is made by humans; it may, after all be a distinction of which nature knows nothing. To the Taoist, moreover, the Tao is sacramentally present in the world of nature.

Though there might be little in Confucius the man, and indeed in Confucianism to suggest anything overtly or strongly religious in the Western sense,[7] there is in Confucianism a certain conservatism that pervades his teaching, and it was much of this that the Communists of the 20th century opposed. Respect for parents, proper gender roles, and thus obedience are central values. Respect for one's elders and other persons of responsibility inculcates in Confucianism a conferred blessing on a status quo, that while contributing to stability, could also impede progress. Jonathan Spence, in one of his many books on China relates the story of talking to a Chinese after the 1989 incident of Tiananmen Square. The Chinese man expressed his remorse that his country's leaders had opted for such a violent solution to a protest for freedom and democracy. He went on to add, however, that she was "still your mother" even when her behavior was not so laudable.[8]

Spence comments that maybe it is a mistake to think of your country as your mother; thus maybe Confucianism inculcated this kind of complacency with an institution that on such occasion stood in the way of the people. Of course Confucius the man saw plenty of corruption in his day and protested, but Confucian adherence to tradition has sometimes made the removal and the resistance to the respected older order more painful than it might have been if such strong familial and societal bonds were not so impervious to change.

Because China has had a long history of veneration, if not to say worship of ancestors, the implication of such veneration is that the Chinese believed in a universe that had a spiritual component running through both the world of the living and the dead. Proper respect for the deceased ancestors had its rewards, for by one understanding of the link between worlds, the deceased communicated messages to the living that were of value for negotiating life's present trials and vicissitudes. Neglect of the ancestors was to court disaster. The ancestors in a sense were only visibly absent; their presence was distilled from messages sent to the still living, who needed, above all else, to listen. To this day, respect for the ancestors is a staple of Chinese family and society, and the early Communists who prohibited burials of corpses due to the touted greater need for agricultural land, incurred the muted hostility of the Chinese people for this sacrilege. Even contemporary Chinese Christians, like Brother Yun, tells of his shock at learning about Christians in America not even placing a headstone at the grave of their deceased relatives.[9]

IV.

When we turn to consider what Confucius said about a morality beyond the law, care must be exercised.

Confucius is easily dismissed into being a dreamy idealist when we find, for example, these words from the *Analects*, (12/13): "I can try a lawsuit as well as other men, but surely the great thing is to bring about that there be no going to law." However, while Confucius recognized this goal as the ideal, he also admits the real need for a penal law that will govern citizens who are otherwise ungovernable. Thus, the emphasis and preference upon moral education as making citizens moral did not preclude the necessary existence of laws and law enforcement for him. As a political philosopher, however, Confucius did not simply stop at the necessary requirement of law to capture those individuals who will honor no laws. Confucius also insists upon morality being exercised at another level, beyond that of the law. Indeed, a society that is only held up or together by external fences will have to build them higher and mightier if the broaching of the boundaries grows excessive. Confucius is simply suggesting that the outer law needs to work from within the citizen for maximum effectiveness. Thus, to build the ideal state, the state will need an ideal leader.

Ultimately, Confucius advocates what amounts to citizens capable of morally ruling themselves, as when he writes in the *Analects* (2/3):

> The Master said: 'If you govern the people by laws, and keep them in order by penalties, they will avoid the penalties, yet lose their sense of shame. But if you govern them by your moral excellence, and keep them in order by your dutiful conduct, they will retain their sense of shame, and also live up to this standard.

In this passage, Confucius points out that morality can be cultivated or enforced. At the same time, he also indicates the extreme importance of the ruler ruling by example rather than crude mandate. Indeed it is probable that the ruler will rule better by example than by the laws he has on the books for the citizens. In this sense, Confucius affirms the notion that morality comes before the law, however much it is needful at times to use the law to enforce morality. This difference is most important, moreover, for powerful officials where a discrepancy by them has more drastic impact than it would at the level of an individual citizen. Furthermore, Confucius may even be willing to tolerate a ruler who will rule morally, whatever his inducement to be moral, simply because his example as ruling morally will be with powerful and positive affect among his citizens. Even this possibility, however, makes the ruler more prudent than moral, and so this formulation is not preferred by Confucius. Indeed, the ruler should have a moral authority derivative from his true moral character, and in his example he should seek to instill the same into his citizens. One of Confucius's analogies for this relationship is beautifully stated in the *Analects* (12/19):

> If your aspirations are for good, the people will be good. The moral character of those in high position is the breeze, the character of those below is the grass. When the grass has the breeze upon it, it assuredly bends.

V.

In the general and modern Western conception of law and citizens, broadly speaking, the nation is conceived as one of laws and not men. Leaders were thus not above the law, but law above all, and the duty of leaders is to uphold the law by which all are weighed. The Confucian, by contrast, anticipates the effective leader as in a sense molding the office he holds, through his example of upholding moral principles he exudes. That leader is a sage, however, and not a strategist. The Confucian perspective is sometimes said for this reason to be anti-legal, though this perspective certainly does not encourage lawlessness. If we relegate our comparison to differences, however, we are apt to think that Western thinkers are far from Confucius. In order to indicate something of a Western resonance toward Confucius on this point I shall consider how Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy is similar to Confucius.

Kant is famous for his remark that two things amazed him, the starry heavens above and the moral law within. His significant writings on ethics and the moral law are for the most part separated from religion, similar to Confucius. In fact, at the conclusion of his famous essay entitled "What is Enlightenment," the chains that prevent such enlightenment, he contends, are religious. Kant in effect is one of the turning points in the history of Western ethics, not just for his famous explanations of deontological views on right and wrong, but also for his view that right and wrong bear ever smaller indebtedness to religious belief. One might say, per our previous comments on Confucius, that Kant is perhaps in historical attitude like Confucius, with regard to Confucius' estimation of the excessive religiosity of the Sage's day.

Kant's ethical view is that what makes an action right or wrong is the motivation or intention with which one undertakes the moral choice made. He therefore holds that the purest thing in ethics is the good will, meaning a will with good intent, and not one swayed by possible consequences. Kant holds that a consideration of possible consequences as determining moral choice is itself immoral, meaning it is a consideration of prudence, with little relationship to real morality.

The humanism of Kant's duty ethic warns against the mistreatment of people by advocating a notion of intrinsic rights which Kant gives to human subjects. This simply means that people have certain rights which as a matter of moral integrity we should respect. We therefore should never use (abuse) a person for our own gain, because this is to use a person as a means to our gain, without respect to their wishes, or freedom—for Kant a huge ethical violation. Such action is therefore disrespectful of another person as a person, as grist and gain for our own selves, whom we value less than our own selves. Kant will have none of that, but most important is what he says about what makes a moral person indeed moral and the resemblance to Confucius's notion of true human wisdom.

To some—though not to Confucians I suspect—Kant holds a rather strenuous notion of who qualifies as a truly moral person. That person is not necessarily a person who never commits a crime, for the absence of criminal activity may be the simple result of one having estimated the costs of getting caught too high. In other situations that same person may have done the opposite. Such a person really has no moral boundaries that he has laid down for himself; indeed others, the lawgivers, have laid them down for him, by reason of fearing what this individual might do in a lawless society. He is not really a moral person when he merely and prudently stays on the side of the law rather than goes against it. Ultimately, this person can be considered to be a consequentialist—they are considering the pain and unhappiness of possible jail time as a reason not to do what they might otherwise prefer to do. In Kant's mind, no such person is truly moral, only prudently practical. This is because they would live different moral lives, if they did not have to contend with the possibility of police, for example. Laws are indeed necessary for such people, because without such laws to enforce morality, society would be in mortal peril. Laws are needed; but the prior question is also needed; why are the laws needed? They are needed for the immoral person who will not be "moral" at all without them. The most we can hope for from such a person—but even that is to say too much—is that they need moral authorities or the lawgivers, because they are incapable of giving themselves the law. In Kant's words, they have not self-legislated the moral law for themselves. They need someone to do it for them. They are not therefore, in another matter of speaking, mature or enlightened, but still children, who, even as adults, still require the tutelage of others, because they have not taught themselves the moral rightness of the law.

In a sense, then, law is made for people without sufficient moral foundation to feel the constraints of morality without the constraints of the law added. Law, therefore, truly is made for the lawless. So, contrary to the general Western notion of thinking of such a notion as dispensing with the need for law and as encouraging lawlessness," we find Kant affirming much of the same point made by Confucius.

VI. Conclusion

The internal nature of morality with reference to external law seems easy enough to grasp. That is, it seems thoroughly cogent to argue that behavior is preferable that is self-governing rather than behavior requiring governance. It is thus admittedly a theoretical distinction by which we rightly gauge the better behaviors. Even the New Testament speaks of that "Perfect love which cast out fear."

However, to attempt to prompt perfection by removing regulation is to court responses that may end up requiring regulation. I think Kant and Confucius would admit this judgment and the necessity of penal law and prisons, but nevertheless argue that their distinction is one ever calling us to moral improvement by acknowledging the difference. In other words, there is a standard of sorts by which moral advance is encouraged, and to speak of it often is to remind subjects of the moral hazard of ignoring the fact that that morality is best which needs regulation least.

There is a difference of sorts on this point between Confucius and Kant, however. Kant wants to argue that morality should be ultimately autonomous, whereas for Confucius one way of cultivating a people is with a leader who is cultivated morally and thus offers good moral example to citizens by the way the ruler lives and governs. Confucius' argument for exemplary living from the ruler might be distilled down to "Do as I do," on the part of the moral ruler. Kant I think would accept such a program to a degree, and probably the differences between Confucius and Kant on this point are the historical centuries that separate them more than anything else.

Moreover, Confucius and Kant, I think, would be in agreement that the moral person is indeed the wise person. The wise person is not a technocrat, nor wise simply because they are smart or prudent, but wise because they can manage themselves as humans. Far from human wisdom isolating the wise individual from others, others lacking wisdom are drawn to the wise person. The wise person is not sealed off from others, but affords others a contact with himself that benefits them.

The wisdom the wise person possesses is not encyclopedic wisdom, but the wisdom of knowing how to rightfully live with self and with others. Knowing how to live places such a person in a position to be emulated by those adrift morally and so too distant from wisdom. The wise person is the sound person who draws others to the moral example provided with a life. There is symmetry in such an individual that awakens those without to the moral truth that resides within such a person, while it exudes praise to onlookers. Ultimately, therefore, the communication of such wisdom should be one of the highest aims of education. If the meaning of life is in education, as Confucius taught, the meaning of education is to live rightly.

Endnotes

1 Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, revised edition, San Francisco, Harper, 1991, p. 157.
2 This is not to ignore the Greco-Roman heritage of the West, but to simply point out the presence of a strong religious heritage within the broad tradition of the West.
3 Herrlee G. Creel, *Chinese Thought From Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 2.
4 Confucius, *The Analects*, Book X, Chapter IX.
5 W. Scott Morton and Charlton M. Lewis, *China: Its History and Culture*, 4th edition, McGraw-Hill, 2005, pages 126-7.
6 Morton and Lewis, p. 152.
7 Theodore T.Y. Yeh, in his *Confucianism, Christianity and China*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1969, writes the following, p. 203, "A Confucian may be aware of faults due to the effects of environment, but he is hardly aware of sin in the Christian sense of relating him to a God and to his fellowmen. There can be no need of grace or of a saviour, with sin being only an 'impropriety.'"

8 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search For Modern China*, New York: W.W. Norton, pp. 746-7.
9 Brother Yun, *The Heavenly Man*, by Brother Yun with Paul Hattaway, Monarch Books, London, 1985.

Address Correspondences to:

Larry Harwood
Viterbo University
La Crosse, WI
ldharwood@viterbo.edu