Confucian Perspectives on Educational Policy and Practice

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Abstract

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Confucian philosophy and its perspectives on education has a substantial contribution to make to educational theory, policy and practice. It is of particular relevance as Asian Studies emerges as a national educational priority in response to Federal and State initiatives in curriculum development. Its pertinence is also evident as educational systems in Australia adopt an eighth Key Competency, that of Cultural Understanding.

This paper reports on the first stage of a three year study which investigates Confucian philosophy and its influences on contemporary educational discourse. The study seeks to contribute to the development of cultural literacy and an intellectual preparedness cultivated through the acquisition of knowledge, experience and understanding of one of Asia's contemporary philosophies.

Confucius spoke constantly of a unifying principle which gave meaning and guidance to human interaction. This unifying principle was jen, translated by a variety of scholars as "benevolence", "magnanimity", "virtue", "compassion", "human-heartedness".
The purpose of the paper is to focus on this key tenet of Confucian philosophy and to draw some implications for educational theory and practice. The paper contributes to the process of making more accessible one of the most influential philosophies of the East and assists in opening up channels for future discourse between educational theorists from both the East and West.

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Confucian Perspectives on Educational Policy and Practice, AARE, 1994.

CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to provide a brief analysis of Confucianism's fundamental tenet, jen, to show how its development is inextricably linked with education and to draw some implications for educational theory and practice. Confucian philosophy and its perspectives on education and citizenship formation has a substantial contribution to make to educational theory, policy and practice. It is of particular relevance as Asian Studies emerges as a national educational priority in response to Federal and State initiatives in curriculum development (Wong, 1990; FitzGerald, 1991; Lim, 1991; Viviani, 1992). Recognising that much of our educational history has been characterised by a predominately Western understanding of education, the Federal Government has called for a national strategy to design education in such a way that the outcomes will help equip Australia to accept with confidence its newly emerging role as a nation in the Asian region of the world. An examination of Confucian philosophy and its relevance to and influence upon educational theory will encourage the diversity of philosophical positions in educational thought which are clearly called for within the current national agenda.

The methodology used in this paper is in the qualitative domain and includes historical analysis as described by Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Cohen & Manion, 1987; Wiersma, 1991 and discourse analysis, as defined by Holsti, 1968 and Weber, 1990. The conclusions are based on an interpretation of a number of classic texts, (in particular, The Analects of Confucius) and an analysis of Confucian educational discourse.

Confucianism is a system of philosophical tenets and ethical teachings which have endured for over two millennia and have influenced people's thinking beyond the confines of the Chinese world. It has had an enormous
persuasion on Asian cultures and in particular, on thoughts about education, government, justice and ethics. There were a number of different schools of thought which overlapped with each other, but it was the Confucianist school which has had the most influence and has prompted the most debate.

Confucianism is considered a form of social thought which acccents the need for a society to be administered by an ethical, adept ruler who maintains as a priority the well-being of one's subjects. The teacher in a Confucian tradition educates young people to embrace a moral code, workplace competency and to seek to play a useful and effective role in society. It does not have the characteristics of Eastern nor Western religions but is rather a system of beliefs and teachings about ethical behaviour which emphasises cultivation of the self and responsiveness to the responsibilities of family and state as the primary objectives of education (Burk, 1980, pp. 61-63).

Confucius was a savant who gathered around him a group of disciples who continued to teach his wisdom after his death. He was interested in the development of moral character with societal harmony the primary outcome. As Confucianism developed into the dominant philosophy of China, Confucius was exalted to the status of a sage, even though he would have described himself in a more humble way as merely a teacher of moral principles. Biographers of Confucius have portrayed him primarily as a moral educator. Kelen (1971, pp. 134/137) suggests that he:

guiding children in their letters and numbers, but a professor of education, one who purposefully collects the tools of thought that have been shaped in the past and hands them down for the young to use or to pass on in their turn. "I do not create, I transmit," he said.

Confucius accepted rustic boys as pupils, but he treated them as gentlemen and obliged them to live up to his treatment, not letting them go forth from his house with unpolished manners to face the scorn of the comfortably born, as he had done. Still it was not the hollow motions of good breeding, but self-cultivation that he emphasised, including the improvement of the personality, ethics and moral qualities, the qualities of the superior man.

Confucius lived at a time that was politically unsettled and socially chaotic. He was interested in restoring a previous "golden age" when relationships between states and individuals were more harmonious. He was preoccupied with returning to the ancient truths which had served his society well for so long. He found that his society did not practice the wisdom of the past, so it was the task of education to teach the virtues necessary to produce such an ideal society. A summary of the Confucian vision for society may be found in the Ta Hsueh (The Great Learning):

The way of the Great Learning consists in the clarification of originally clear predispositions, in the love of mankind, and in resting in the
highest excellence ...

Only through grasp of actuality does one attain to complete knowledge; only through complete knowledge do thoughts become sincere; only through sincere thoughts does one attain to the right state of mind; only the right state of mind makes possible the ennobling of life; only through the ennobling of one's life does the regulation of one's family become possible; only through the regulation of the family does the ordering of the state become possible; only through the ordering of the individual states does peace on earth become possible. (Wilhelm, R., 1931, p. 163-164)

According to the Confucian vision, then, education has a pivotal role to play in cultivating the knowledge which leads to appropriate attitudes which are essential for the achievement of global harmony.

(Jen) Benevolence

Confucius spoke constantly of a unifying principle which gave meaning and guidance to human interaction; it is the key concept for understanding Confucianist thinking. This unifying principle was jen, translated by a variety of scholars (Legge, Ku Hung-ming, Lin Yutang, Bodde, Hughes) as "benevolence", "magnanimity", "virtue", "compassion", "human-heartedness". Jen is a difficult concept to define and the English language cannot provide us with an exact translation for this central concept, however, its central propositions can be revealed through an analysis of the various discourses in which it is presented.

When Mencius (one of Confucius' leading adherents), asked about the difference between humanity and animality the reply he received was that the difference was jen. In the Book of Mencius (VII,B16) jen is described as the "distinguishing characteristic of man". Mencius explained that every person possessed jen by telling the following story:

exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain favour of the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike of hearing such a noise. From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man ... The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of jen. (The Analects, II,A6)

In the Doctrine of the Mean (Chung yung, XX,5) it states, "Jen is man, and the greatest exercise of it is in loving relatives". In the same document, (XX) it is described as "personhood". Jen was not only an endowment reserved for the privileged but within the grasp of the most common of persons. But whilst all persons possessed the capacity for jen, it was only the beginning of jen; a seed which would need to be nurtured.

One of the earliest commentaries on The Analects, by Cheng Hsuan (127-200)
referred to it as denoting "what is common in two men". Mei (1967, p. 153) explains that jen is "both the innermost and the highest ideal of true manhood, the beginning and the end of the way of life. All virtues, like love, reciprocity, loyalty, courage, trustworthiness etc., may be regarded as expressions of jen, and jen is thus, like the Socratic justice, the super-virtue of virtues."

According to Legge (1970), The Analects defines jen as the principle of love or the virtue of the heart without which a person cannot exist. According to Munro (1977), jen is the capacity of the human person to extend benevolent affection for kin manifested in filial conduct to all of humanity.

Jen is the most important moral attribute and whilst there is some debate as to whether the concept antedates Confucius, it is appropriate to suggest that it was Confucius who developed the notion to gain prominence as the premier moral quality. The following saying confirms this point:

If the gentleman forsakes benevolence, in what way can he make a name for himself? The gentleman never deserts benevolence, not even for as long as it takes to eat a meal. If he hurries and stumbles, one can be sure that it is in benevolence that he does so. (The Analects, IV,5)

It is necessary here, to include a brief discussion of the notion of reciprocity which is fundamental for an understanding of jen.

Reciprocity
Lau (1979, p. 15) proposes, the essence of benevolence can be found in the replies that Confucius gives to Chung-kung, and on another occasion to Tzu-kung:

Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire. (The Analects, XII, 2)

Tzu-kung asked, "Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life?" The Master said, "It is perhaps the word "shu". Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire." (The Analects, XV,24)

In The Analects (IV, 15) Tseng Tzu says, "the way of the Master consists in chung and shu. That is all." In yet another reference to shu, Confucius replies to Tzu-kung thus:

A benevolent man helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can be called the method of benevolence. (The Analects, VI, 30)
Shu, then is the way to uncover what others want or do not want what done to them by looking at oneself and placing oneself in the other’s position. But shu is only one component of benevolence. Once we know what the other wants and does not want our willingness to respond depends on chung. Lau (1979, p. 16) describes chung as the "doing of one's best and it is through chung that one puts into effect what one had found out by the method of shu." Tseng Tzu announced, "every day I examine myself on three counts, and of these the first is "In what I have undertaken on another's behalf, have I failed to be chung?" There is at least one further instance where this concept is mentioned; when Confucius was asked how a person should serve one's ruler, he replied that "he should serve his ruler with chung". (The Analects, III.19)

Confucius believed that it was impossible to govern effectively without virtue and an official would not have gained this respect unless that official could show benevolence in everyday conduct. High office alone was not sufficient to gain acceptance from Confucius:

Meng Wu Po asked whether Tzu-lu was benevolent. The Master said, "I cannot say." Meng Wu Po repeated the question. The Master said, "He can be given the responsibility of managing the military levies in a state of a thousand chariots, but whether he is benevolent or not I cannot say."

"What about Ch'iu?"
The Master said, "Ch'iu can be given the responsibility as a steward in a town with a thousand households or in a noble family with a hundred chariots, but whether he is benevolent or not I cannot say."

(The Analects, V,8)

A benevolent person was concerned with helping and improving other people. Pleasure and contentment were to be found in assisting other people to be successful. The ability and the disposition to do this was an important goal of the genuinely virtuous person which Clark (1986, p. 28) claims came close to resembling the virtue of the sagacious kings of the past, Yao and Shun. In The Analects, it is recorded:

Tzu-kung said, "If there were a man who gave extensively to the common people and brought help to the multitude, what would you think of him? Could he be called benevolent?"

The Master said, "It is no longer a matter of benevolence with such a man. If you must describe him, "sage" is, perhaps, the right word. Even Yao and Shun would have found it difficult to accomplish as much. Now, on the other hand, a benevolent man helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can be called the method of benevolence."
The Analects VI,30

These references to benevolence in The Analects indicate that in order to be benevolent, the person must not only be learned, but also able to evaluate oneself. This idea of "self-evaluation" and "self-awareness" is featured in The Analects:

them? It may simply be said of me, that I strive to become such without satiety, and teach others without weariness. (The Analects, VIII,33)

Confucius was direct as to how people should relate to each other. One should treat the other with respect and in a manner which will cause the other to feel worthwhile:

great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself. (Legge, 1970, p. 251)

In reference to the nature of benevolence, Confucius gives another response:

Yen Yuan asked about benevolence. The Master said, "To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence. If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites trough overcoming himself, then the whole Empire would consider benevolence to be his. However, the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others." (The Analects, XII,1)

It is clear that benevolence required the person to overcome the interests of the self. The reason why Confucius was adamant that self-interest had no relationship with morality is well explained by Lau (1979, p. 20) who says: "Of all things that are likely to distort a man’s moral judgement and deflect him from his moral purpose, self-interest is the strongest, the most persistent and the most insidious." Confucius reminded people that at the sight of profit one should think of what is right. (The Analects, XIV,12; XVI,10; XIX,1) He also offers the following admonition for those who seek riches:

Is it really possible to work side by side with a mean fellow in the service of a lord? Before he gets want he wants, he worries lest he should not get it. After he has got it, he worries lest he should lose it, and when that happens he will not stop at anything." (The Analects, XVII,15)

The virtue of benevolence should permeate all aspects of one's life. Even, for example, when one is participating in the arts, the benevolent person must possess benevolence:

The Master said, "If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with the rites of propriety? If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has that to do with music?" (Legge, 1970, p. 155)
Even in the choice of where to live, the benevolent person must choose a place where benevolence can abound, where proper treatment of each other is expected:

The Master said, "It is virtuous manners which constitute the excellence of a neighbourhood. If a person in selecting a residence, does not fix on one where such prevail, how can he be wise? ... Those who are without virtue cannot abide long either in a condition of poverty and hardship, or in a condition of enjoyment. The virtuous rest in virtue; the wise desire virtue (Legge, 1970, p. 161).

There is substantial evidence in The Analects to indicate that Confucius considered benevolence to be quite difficult to achieve (VI,22; XII,3; V,8; V,19) but he nevertheless thought that success in achieving benevolence depended entirely upon oneself. He told Yen Yuan, "the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others" (The Analects, XII,1). To achieve benevolence one needed strength and conviction. Everyone possessed the strength: "Is there a man who, for the space of a single day, is able to devote all his strength to benevolence? I have not come across such a man whose strength proves insufficient for the task" but it was conviction and purpose which people lacked. When Jan Ch'iu said: "It is not that I am not pleased with your way, but rather that my strength gives out", Confucius replied, "A man whose strength gives out collapses along the course. In your case you set the limits before-hand"(The Analects, VI,12). In a further attempt to explain there was no excuse and that it was conviction that people needed, he said, "Is benevolence really far away? No sooner do I desire it than it is here". (The Analects, VII,30)

Jen and Education

The concept of jen is the central tenet and unifying theme in Confucian philosophy and a number of implications can be drawn for educational policy and practice. This paper will deal with three of the more significant issues: education as action which transforms practice, education as teaching ethics and education as promoting social harmony.

Education as Transforming Action

Confucius maintained that knowledge would serve little purpose if it was not embedded in the fabric of life. Wan (1980, p.127) describes it as a "cultural refinement, which adorns a 'gentleman', but without any essence." Confucius' concept of knowledge is distinctive in that he said its purpose was to "know" humanity. The search for knowledge is indeed a search for one's humanity but it was also important for knowledge to be applied into action which was practical rather than remain as conjecture or speculation. Kaizuka (1956 pp. 116-18) makes the point very clearly that Confucius regarded practical reasoning on a higher level than theoretical reasoning. For example, it was not good enough for a person to possess the
intellectual capacity to know and understand moral principles if they were not able to manifest them in appropriate moral behaviours. Confucius could not see the point of intellectual accomplishment if it was separated from moral attainment. In fact, Confucius would maintain that it was impossible to achieve the one without the other.

Even though subsequent tradition rendered Confucianist education very book centred (e.g. the emphasis on memorisation in the civil service examinations) it is unlikely that it was intended to be so. It is not that Confucius was anti-intellectual but he held the firm view that knowledge from books should be applied to understanding humanity rather than sought after because of its intrinsic value. It is obvious that Confucius was not interested in learning for learning's sake; it was important to practice what was learned. As Wong (1976, p. 187) puts it, "The intellectual in China was charged with the mission to use his learning not only to cultivate himself but to order society."

Added to the reality that knowledge which does not inform and transform practice, is of little use, was the clear implication that the acquisition of knowledge without moral judgement was precarious. In the beginning of The Analects it is asserted:

To learn and frequently practice what has been learned - is this not a pleasure?

And further:

The scholar who is widely versed in letters and who restrains his learning within the bounds of li is not likely to get off the track. (The Analects, XV, 32)

Education as Training in Ethics
Traditional Chinese education has been described as a program of ethical training, the purpose of which was to develop the character of the individual and to teach proper relational behaviour in the context of family and state responsibilities. Education was revered as the foundation upon which relationships within the family and state would be established. As Burk (1980, p. 62) states, the philosophical foundations of Chinese education positioned the "cultivation of the individual's character in its relationship with others above all other goals of civilisation"

The role of the teacher was of critical importance within the Confucian tradition and it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop fully the notion of "teacher". It will suffice to say that the teacher was regarded as the moral guide of society. The teacher was revered as a sage because the sage epitomised what was considered to be ideal moral conduct. Clark (1986, p. 33) suggests that in some ways, it was this that gave the teacher the certification and authority to teach. Each person however, had to
accept the responsibility for emulating the attitude and behaviour of appropriate models. The model was to be guided by an abstract ideal of what was "right" as opposed to what was considered to be simply of material advantage:

"...if a ruler sought personal profit rather than doing what was right, every one of his subjects would do the same, and social disharmony would result." (Legge, 1970, p. 94)

Education is essential because it is the means by which virtue can be nurtured; individual virtue is the basis for a society which is virtuous. The teacher, as the key participant in the educational process, should be an example of ideal principled conduct.

Education as Maintenance of Social Harmony
There was a strong Confucian belief in the relationship between the individual and community. In ancient China each person was seen to be a part of and gained recognition as a member of a family and as part of a local community of citizens. The Confucian concept of "community" was not a fellowship of local inhabitants but embraced an ideal existence where the relationships between people were completely harmonious. The role of education was to lead people to live their lives in peaceful harmony within a community. Confucius "... envisioned a utopia of world commonwealth and aimed to establish education as a means of teaching the virtues that noble citizens would possess in this ideal society." (Burk, 1980, p. 68)

According to Kelen (1971, p. 103) there is an inscription from the Li Chi (Book of Rites) which hangs in the United Nations. It reads:

When the great principle prevails, the world is a commonwealth in which rulers are selected according to their wisdom and ability. Mutual confidence is promoted and good neighbourliness cultivated. Hence men do not regard as parents only their own parents, nor do they treat as children only their own children. Provision is secured for the aged until death, employment for the able-bodied, and means for growing up for the young. Helpless widows and the disabled, are well cared for. Men have their respective wealth lying idle, yet they do not keep it for their own gratification. They despise indolence, yet they do not use their energies for their own benefit. In this way, selfish schemings are repressed, and robbers, thieves and other lawless men no longer exist, and there is no need for people to shut their outer doors.

Social harmony is a fundamental objective of a Confucianist worldview. Confucius saw education as the vehicle by which one would learn the moral principles and standards of conduct that would lead to this harmony.

As mentioned earlier, social harmony can be achieved only if the individual
is able to overcome self-interest and observe the rites. Observance of such rules of behaviour would result in social harmony.

As humanity relied on interaction and social intercourse, this was an essential goal which taught the value of co-operation and collaboration within an environment of service to society as a whole. The task of education, then, was to develop and encourage the acceptance of laws and codes of conduct that would govern and regulate thought and behaviour.

Conclusion

According to Hsu Fu-kuan (1963, p.91) The basis for Confucius' humanistic education, jen, is at once the motivation, direction, process and goal of learning. The person is innately compassionate and humane; it is the task of education to bring it to the forefront in the individual. Jen and education are inextricably linked because whilst jen is available to each person, it needs to be learned, developed and nurtured. So education plays this central function in cultivating jen in the individual and society. The person's consciousness of being human needs to be raised as much as one's intellectual processes. This is why Confucius promoted a harmony between the emotions and the intellectual. In modern parlance, one may argue that Confucius promoted a balance between left brain and right brain thinking.

The purpose of jen was to cultivate the personality to refute one's selfishness by channelling one's energy to promoting the goodness that is found naturally in the human person. The educational process cannot be seen as an individual process. It does not begin with and end with the individual. It begins with the self but it expresses itself in the family and community. Once jen is brought to the forefront in one's personality it necessitates extending to others.

The goal of education is to achieve jen, which is the practice of goodness and civility. It may well be argued that the abovementioned implications are characteristics of an educational philosophy, the primary purpose of which was to foster an active and responsible citizenship, based on values which have become universally accepted.

References


