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**A Way of Practice:
On Confucian Learning as a Communal Task**

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While I am alive, I practice and serve, and when death comes I rest.
—Zhang Zai, *The Western Inscription*

Abstract

This article aims at showing the applicability of the Confucian Way in non-Confucian contexts, through referring to the inner connectedness between theory and practice in Confucianism. Its first part addresses the Confucian ideas of knowledge, learning, dialogue and self-realization. Its second part suggests an application of the ideas in a project with women who are looking for a way to “check out” from prostitution. The article suggests that treating these women as partners to the Confucian humanistic Way brings to a new state of mind, which decriminalizes prostitution, and leads both teacher and students to a meaningful practice.

Keywords: *Confucianism, prostitution, Way, human, learning, dialogue, self-realization, responsibility*

Introduction

The Confucian saying, “A person can broaden the way, the way cannot broaden a person” (*Analects* 15:28), implies that the Confucian Way (dao) is not defined hermetically, and never aspires to be so defined. It is dynamic and has a necessary subjective aspect in the sense that in Confucianism there is no Truth in the strict absolute or objective sense, hence neither there is a search for it. Rather, there is a Way, and inherent in its nature is that it is always in human creation. Objective truth can be helpful for mathematical, scientific, and perhaps even for some aspects of historical search, yet it cannot and it should not govern human life. Moreover, humanity (ren) as morality is established through dialogue with others, as we read in Confucian *Analects* 6:30: “The person of humanity, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to realize himself, realizes others.”

The first part of this paper concerns some theoretical implications with regard to classical Confucian ideas of knowledge, learning in dialogue, and joy; moving on to understanding the moral subject, the place of the human heart and mind, and the faith in human moral transformability; and ending with the understanding of one's responsibility to others and the practice of “realizing oneself as realizing others.” Since the theoretical level alone cannot and does not suffice in this framework, the second part of the article moves on to a practical case-study with regard to the above ideas. It describes a volunteering project with a group of women trapped in a cycle of prostitution and determined to return to being valuable partners in society and civilized life. The case-study refers back to the *Great Learning* (Daxue), a text that proved extremely helpful as a bridge between theory and practice, as it embodies a set of workable systematic steps. The *Great*

Learning is one of the Confucian Four Books (Sishū), which are Chinese classic texts illustrating the core value and belief systems in Confucianism. They were selected by the famous scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200) in the Song dynasty to serve as general introduction to Confucian thought. While the first part of this article focuses on three of them—including *Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhongyong), *Analects* (Lunyu) and the *Mencius* (Mencius, named for the most famous of the follower of the Confucian Way)—its second part refers to the *Great Learning* (Daxue), which I find to be the most useful for practice, as I show hereafter. (For more see Bleeker and Widengren 1971:478.)

Part I. The Textual Perspective

(1) Knowledge, Learning, Dialogue and Joy

Learning in the *Analects* is learning morality, and knowledge is moral knowledge; it is “know how.” In the framework of the Confucian Way, dialogue is thus introduced as the foundation for knowledge as understanding others and learning from them. Let us first take a look in an example from *Analects* 7:22:

The Master said, 'Even when walking in a company of three, I am certain to find a teacher. The good in them I choose and follow; the non-good in them I correct in myself.'

We are presented with a short and focused saying, probably referring directly to a question a student posed to the Master, for example: “How can one follow the Way?” or perhaps “How can the Way be learned?”

Apparently, *Analects* does not introduce an organized systematic doctrine for teaching the Way, rather it presents segments of conversations between Confucius (Kongzi 551–479 BC), the first teacher of the moral way (in the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history), and his disciples. At times a student wonders, consults, or voices a difficulty, and the teacher answers; at other times the teacher challenges and a student suggests, attempts, and challenges back. Through dialogue the teacher and his students pave the Way as co-creators. Hence, the dialogical format of the *Analects* is not coincidental. Within the laconic fragments, with no philosophical methodology (in its strict Western sense), one does find a system and a method, and in fact rather practical ones: the dialogue itself is the suggestion of passages like the one cited above. The medium is the message. The methodology of dialogue fits well with the gist of the Confucian Way of learning and transforming oneself.

Tu Wei-ming, a leading Confucian in our generation, explains that Confucius was not a philosopher whose main interest was how to think better; neither was he a prophet, who knew something that was hidden or even forbidden to others but was allowed to him, and who represented a heavenly authority for teaching the Way (see for example Tu 1996:135). Confucius is a partner for the Way. He is a teacher. Confucius the teacher travels with his disciples, and in their steps the Way is paved. Despite the fact that he was (and is still) considered in China the greatest teacher of all times, he represents himself in the sayings as a traveler and seeker of the Way, just like others. Within any company of two people who walk next to him on the Way, he is certain to find a teacher. And within any two partners, there is something positive to follow; and if he sees the negative or

“non-good” in any of them, Confucius is sure to learn about the “non-good” within him. Neither outstanding knowledge nor complex psychological methodologies is required in order to understand the following rule: if anything bothers me in others, I should first search for it within myself; if something truly irritates me, I should search even deeper inside me and correct it within myself. In Confucianism, other and self form a reflective relationship in which the other is a human mirror with which one can pave the way and better direct oneself by means of taking dialogue as one’s ongoing task.

How can the Confucian dialogue as a moral task be characterized? The very opening of *Analects* suggests that a moral task is a pleasure:

Learning and timely practicing what is learned—Is it not a delight? Having friends coming from distance—is it not a joy? Not taking offense when others fail to acknowledge your abilities—is it not being an accomplished person?

This opening of the Confucian Canon is, in some sense, the equivalent of: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (*Genesis* 1:1). In contrast to the grandiose Biblical opening, with God and creation, the beginning, heaven and earth, the opening of *Analects* apparently refers to minor daily issues: learning, pleasure, having a friend, joy, and not taking offense when not appreciated. Yet, are these issues indeed “minor”? Can one suspect that the teacher recommends acting simply in order to achieve joy as self-satisfaction? Could it be presented as some type of egoistic hedonism and nothing more?

The answer is certainly in the negative. Using the Chinese question form “is it not...” (*buyi... hu*), which does not allow a negative response, the passage expresses the unequivocal nature of the issue at hand: it is impossible that learning and then practicing is not a delight, that hosting a friend is not a joy, and that not taking offense when not sufficiently appreciated is not being a morally accomplished person (*junzi*). Yet still, what is it that makes this passage worthy of being placed in the exposition of the *Analects*?

We will first try to understand how learning and pleasure are related, and then move on to the idea of the morally accomplished person in Confucianism. The first part of the passage above emphasizes the delight (*yue*) in learning the moral doctrine, and in rehearsing what is learned. Then it suggests the joy (*le*) in one type of moral conduct (in this case hospitality given to visiting friends). Since I see the two as strongly related, let us discuss them together. (See Patt-Shamir 2004:201-215)

To explain, let us take a look at yet another example. Yan Hui, Confucius’ admired disciple, was noteworthy, in his Master’s words, for his “love of learning.” (6:3) Confucius adds his misgiving: “Hui is no help to me at all. He is pleased with everything I say.” (11:4) There is obvious criticism in the passage—Hui is “no help” (*feizhu*) while a teacher may be helped by the doubts of students that lead to fuller explanations. (See Legge 1966:138n.)

But there is another possible (somewhat Kantian) way of viewing Confucius’ reaction to Yan Hui: according to this possibility, Confucius appreciates Yan Hui because he is not “profitable” for him; rather he is pleased. In this way, being pleased is introduced as the contrast to being prof-

itable. Confucius can't see Yan Hui as a means, but rather he is an "end-in-himself." Hui, through loving the teaching and being delighted with it, treats the doctrine as something to be pleased with (see Kant 1956:136, 132). Having joy in the moral doctrine, rather than profit, is the highest moral response. Learning as pleasure is learning for oneself, since a moral person never studies for a purpose that is external to the learning itself. As moral learning, this learning is learning for the sake of the other. Thus, "mundane" learning gains moral significance, pleasure signifies a moral deed, and in this framework, life as a whole can only be referred to as moral life.

As for profit, since in Confucianism learning is learning morality, a utilitarian or even a simple goal-oriented attitude (as teleological, or consequential) cannot be attributed to it. In the case of study, the pleasure is in the learning itself and is in contrast to profit. Therefore, from within the framework of the moral ideal, when learning is discussed, it can never be intended for seeking profit or even be directed to an achievable aim. In this model, any type of learning for credit, degree, or just to pass exams would not be considered true Confucian learning. Interestingly, this should include the imperial exams in China, despite the fact that they test one's familiarity with the Confucian classics. In fact, learning in order to get an official job can be regarded as exploitation of Confucian ideas since, in this case, learning is converted into a means for attaining an aim, which is external to the very learning, instead of learning for its own sake. In other words, Confucian discourse is non-utilitarian, non-teleological, and its reference is accordingly moral. The moral standard is presented as an ongoing process of getting closer to an ideal. Ideal morality and profit are perceived as two opposing terms (see Patt-Shamir 2005:455-476).

This opposition of ideas is reaffirmed when Confucius is asked about humanity and explains that its essence is in acting in humane ways, regardless of the obstructions that one must overcome; the benefit that can be reaped is secondary, only after completion of the deed (6:22). This suggestion implies that human moral activity is to be performed in spite of obstacles and difficulties, and perhaps the difficulties are part of what makes an act moral (see Kant 1956:119-124 [114-120]). A moral act springs from, and is conducted by, morality itself with total devotion; therefore, the moral act itself is to be willed, and not its consequences. Like its learning, so the moral Way cannot be conceived when extraneous effects are valued, rather than morality itself. If profit is to be considered, it may only have secondary significance; it might be added to one's deliberations as an afterthought, after the moral act has been performed, and not as a parameter to consider before engaging in the act. When profit is not considered, quickest completion and effectiveness lose their merit in favor of a value in the act itself and the love for it. According to this view, the one who longs for profit is not even capable of understanding what morality is. The inferiority of profit to learning morality definitely means its inferiority to moral deeds.

Thus, in the example for rejection of profit in the Mencian discourse, in his conversation with King Hui of Liang, when the king presupposes that if Mencius made the long distance to meet him, he definitely has an idea for profiting the state, Mencius rejects even the mention of the word "profit." He contrasts profit with humanity (*ren*) and rightness (*yi*) as mutually exclusive (Mencius IA:2). Interestingly, in the next recorded conversation in their series of meetings, Mencius emphasizes to the king the significance of aesthetic pleasure enjoyed by the wise (IB:1). Only a moral person can truly enjoy beauty; when one is oriented to profit, one focuses on how nature can be used to promote gain. An attitude of this kind prevents true pleasure from nature and its treasures.

Joy and delight have moral significance in Confucianism. Joy in learning morality and in performing moral acts is a central characteristic of the wished-for personality. In other words, in the Confucian moral world (contrary to hedonistic, consequentialist, or utilitarian world-pictures) joy is in opposition to profit, and an egocentric or profligate attitude to morality is dismissed. This view of morality is an ideal, yet this ideal is practiced daily, and not only by sages. While teleological reasoning can be defined easily and consistently in terms of causes and effects, means and aims, the philosophy of the Way necessitates “process reasoning” that expresses the key ideas of the specific form of life. Whereas teleological reasoning may focus on linguistic forms and arguments, “process reasoning” may focus on human practice, as we will see shortly. As we have seen, rather than egotistic hedonism Confucius’ joy is moral joy. Learning is learning morality and knowledge is moral knowledge, “know how” (4:1). Therefore, learning for oneself is learning morality, and it is, as a matter of fact, learning for others. Pleasure is precisely in the moral act (as opposed to profit which accompanies other acts). Likewise, hosting a friend is at once both a pleasure and a moral practice of giving and taking care of another.

In this way, in the opening of *Analects*, Confucius brings his reader to beginnings, which are close to each and everyone. Learning, having a friend, a meeting, and being content with oneself. This is the beginning of the self, the beginning of morality. In order to understand the moral nature of Confucian learning, we should clarify the Mencian idea of the self.

(2) A Relational Person, One’s Heart, and the Faith in Transformability

We tend to think that the more complex a subject, the harder it should be to suggest a clear definition for it; and we tend to consider ourselves pretty complex. When Mencius says that “humanity is the heart of the person” (ren renxin ye 6A.11) he not only suggests that the human heart is replete with the virtue of humanity, but also implies that humanity in fact defines the human heart. Later he emphasizes that, “humanity is being a person (7B.16). Since the moral virtue of humanity defines being a person as one’s distinguishing characteristic, the definition cannot be considered formal and theoretical, that can only be disapproved by logical considerations; instead it extends the descriptive (lexical) realm into the existential, and its compulsory application in human practice.

In terms of world philosophy, Mencius in fact suggests a revolutionary definition for the human subject. First, a human being is defined in its own terms; the Chinese character denoting “humanity” (as morality) is a compound of the character denoting “person” and the character denoting the number “two.” Accordingly, being moral (human) is in Chinese being a person “in two, that is, a person in relationship, or “person to person.” From the theoretical perspective, just as the rain rains, a human “humans.” In other words, saying “it rains” suffices to understand that the rain is raining; there is no need to ask “who is raining?” or “what is raining?” Subject and predicate are one, as rain can be characterized in a simple and direct way; what rain does is raining and anything that’s raining is rain. Similarly, humanity, or what being human is about, satisfies the logical condition of a definition. Moreover, being “person to person” is in practice being moral. Importantly, this definition of person as “person to person” requires that there is no isolated individual, and for one to realize oneself, one has to be morally related to others. In other words, one is defined by the very realization of what one is about; namely by one’s deeds. As we previously noted from *Analects* 6:30, in wishing to realize oneself, one also realizes others.

This idea stands in opposition to the philosophical idea of “a subject,” meaning a unique being who has a distinctive experience and a singular consciousness, or a distinct entity that relates to other entities outside of itself (usually referred to as “objects”). This presupposition is concerned with human experience and arises from the underlying principle that the world consists of objects, which allegedly are considered by the subject as entities. This duality of experience results in questions regarding the nature of the self, human autonomy or how subjects relate to objects. Truly, pondering the idea of “subject” as distinct, or “individual,” one might find oneself puzzled with the difficulty to isolate both subjective experiences and subjective consciousness from one’s surroundings.

In the Mencian view, thinking of the person, we realize that by definition a person, any person, is a person in relationship. In other words, in every given situation in our lives we are placed within a net of relationships within which we act; I am my parents’ daughter, my children’s mother, a partner, a neighbor, a teacher, a student, a customer, a colleague and so on. In this sense there is no “subject,” no isolated individual. The individual exists within relationships, and the relationships among human beings are necessarily moral relationships. Being related to others, the virtue of humanity, is inseparable from the human beings who practice it, and the practice as noted above is a dialogue.

Moving on to the last part of the opening passage of *Analects*, describing the moral ability of the accomplished person to express indifference to non-appreciation by others, we realize that the point is that what matters is primarily what one knows from within, through one’s own self-reflection. Confucius discusses the personality of the accomplished person as the one who should never be concerned with profit, unlike the shallow person (“small man,” *xiaoren*) (4:16). Mencius is helpful in explaining the strength of one’s inner source for goodness,

All myriad things are already complete in me. There is no greater joy than to find on self-reflection that I am sincere. Do your best to treat others as you wish to be treated by them. When seeking for the realization of humanity, nothing can get you closer to it. (7A:4)

When Mencius turns inward, he finds in himself sincerity, authenticity, integrity, completeness, innocence (*cheng*). Tu Wei-ming sees sincerity as “the most genuine manifestation of human virtue and the truth and reality of man’s heavenly endowed nature” (1989:77). The inner power of morality is innate in every human being, as known from Mencius’ famous example for having a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others:

When I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus: even now-a-days, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favor of the child’s parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing (Legge 1966, 2A.6).

Mencius offers an impressive statement of faith in human nature and in the human moral capability. Complete morality is not about making a great effort to conquer the desire to hurt others. Being moral is having an innate or intuitive aversion to causing harm to others. Rather than “I successfully stopped myself on time, hence I am a moral person,” it is about “I cannot bear the pain of another.” According to Mencius, since we have the feelings that make us feel sympathy, acting morally is innate. Since moral feelings necessitate action, morality is never separate from the person, who is inevitably described and characterized in terms of deeds (and not simply in terms of ideas that may work only on a remote “theoretical” level). (For an illuminating discussion on the absence of act and agent dichotomy in Confucianism, see Hall, and Ames 1984:14-16.)

Repulsion at the suffering of others is a moral feeling; therefore, according to Mencius, a good leader cannot live with slavery, military occupation and misery, and hence must avoid them. According to Mencius’ example, the feeling of alarm, the distress of the other, and the ability to help are part of the situation itself. An ordinary person cannot understand a situation of a young child’s risk of drowning through any different parameters; for example, an ordinary healthy person would not presuppose that the child enjoys her reflection in the water, or is about to leisurely dive in and come out right away, or that the sight of falling in is only a figment of the imagination, a hallucination, or a subjective interpretation by the observing mind of some arbitrary sense-data that are not inherently connected. More importantly, the act of saving the other is done not to achieve some purpose other than saving the child. Not fame nor praise nor a prize motivates a person. Instead, a natural tendency drives our moral deeds. Hence Mencius implies that feelings such as of compassion, shame and disapproval, modesty and yielding, and knowing right from wrong are all essential to the person. In fact, according to Mencius, lacking one of them means one’s exclusion from the community of human beings. (Legge 1966, 2A:6) These feelings acquire such a fundamental position since they serve as “four beginnings” (*siduan*) for what it is to be human:

The feeling of compassion is the beginning of humanity. The feeling of shame and disapproval is the beginning of rightness. The feeling of modesty and yielding is the beginning of propriety. The feeling of knowing right from wrong is the beginning of knowledge. (Legge 1966, 2A:6)

According to Mencius, not being moral is not being a person; it is to be considered a different animal that might appear externally the same. Later on, Mencius modifies this statement using the image of one body: humans have these four beginnings just as they have their four limbs. If one truly cannot develop them, one is a handicapped person. Learning to develop them and bring them to completion is the human task. Then,

It will be like fire being ignited, or a spring gushing forth. Bring them to complete development, and they will suffice to love and protect all within the four seas. Deny their development, and they will not suffice for a person to serve his parents. (Legge 1966, 2A:6)

The inner source of morality is a seed to cultivate in order to fully flourish. Not having it in oneself can be compared to not having a limb or a certain muscle. The “muscle of humanity” is inherent in each person, and like any other muscle it has to be worked on in order to develop and preserve its potency. For this reason Mencius is willing to dig in, not giving up his search for

a “seed” in his discussion with King Xuan of Qi about the true king. In the discussion, Mencius makes every possible attempt, almost to the point of the absurd, when he suggests that the king’s replacing an ox with a lamb for a ceremonial sacrifice is a sign for his inner humanity. While the king himself, knowing that he has sacrificed a living being, sees the inherent problem in the deed, Mencius insists on finding the way to show him that this is a true seed of humanity. Seeing the ox face to face the king was unable to kill it; this is a beginning, a seed to be developed (Legge 1966, 1A.7). According to Mencius, the faith in human goodness is a faith in one’s transformability.

(3) Broadening the Way as Moral Responsibility

Importantly, faith in human moral nature does not eliminate the need for effort; the morality whose cultivation gives pleasure and joy is a demanding morality of duty. This may also be an explanation for some lack of popularity of Confucianism in the Western world as opposed to some other so-called “Eastern philosophies.” More than once my students have let me know that they see Confucianism as “non-juicy,” dogmatic, and having too many directives and moral edicts. It deals with obligation and duty rather than rights. This is extremely interesting. Indeed, a central issue in the modern West since the age of enlightenment is rights. Rights of minorities, rights of children, women’s rights, workers’ rights, animals’ rights all attract us for good reasons. Duty on the other hand is less favored. Yet Confucian morality is clearly duty-oriented. And it is highly significant. The significance lies in the idea of personal responsibility.

In Confucianism there is no divine providence, since there is no idea of one absolute God. Rather than having divine supervision and intervention, full moral responsibility lies on oneself. In this way the one’s duty is the other’s right! However, to allow the other’s right, the one has to be extremely cautious. In the story of the man of Song, Mencius gives a beautiful example of the destructiveness of “taking care” of others’ needs without being aware of the way of doing that, without being attentive to the true need, and with too much self-centeredness. The man was upset that his corn was not higher, so he pulled it up. Then he went home, looking very stupid, saying how tired he was of “helping” the corn to grow high. His son went out to look, and found the corn all withered. (Legge 1966, 2A.2)

The man in the example had an apparent sense of responsibility, but he had no sensitivity to the real need. The sense of duty must be cultivated with great care and true sensitivity to the other. This sensitivity can be cultivated through education, which allows one to burgeon while helping the burgeoning of others. “Helping” has no sense if it does not come out of moral feeling, sincere will, education and understanding.

In The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong) we read:

The enlightenment that comes from sincerity is our own nature. The sincerity that comes from enlightenment is called “education.” If you are sincere you will be enlightened. If you are enlightened, you will be sincere. (Muller 2013, Ch. 21)

The perfectly sincere person can actualize his own essence. Actualizing his own essence, he can fully actualize the essence of others. Fully actualizing the essence of others, he can fully actualize the essence of all things. Being able to fully actualize the essence of all things, he can assist Heaven and Earth in their transformation and sustenance. Able to assist in Heaven and Earth’s transformation and sustenance, he forms a trinity with Heaven and Earth. (Muller 2013, Ch. 22)

Reverting to the beginning of this paper, we see again that by actualizing one's morality, one actualizes others, and then is revealed a complete partner in creation. Moral creation is inseparable from the creation of heaven and earth; in fact, this is the part of heavenly creation that is in the hands of human beings. The writer stresses the practicality and sensibleness of human existence. The Way is thus revealed again as an ideal rather than an attainable goal. It is a unified process in which every human being has a share—indeed an important share. It is notable that the standard being an unattainable ideal rather than a goal is not a lesser demand. It is rather the reverse. Since an ideal cannot be fully attained, it requires daily effort and practice; one can never assume that employing a simple technique accomplishes the Way in a limited span of time. The Way is ideal in the sense of a standard always to be desired and constantly to realize.

Before moving on to a practical case-study, one should ask where does one begin the realization? Where is the first step to be taken? Confucius gives an important clue to what the accomplished person (junzi) takes to be the starting point of this creation:

The accomplished person devotes his efforts to the root, and when the root is resilient, the Way grows henceforth. Being a filial son and brother - isn't it the root of a humanity? (*Analects* 1:2)

The idea that the root (ben) of a moral personality is filial reverence (xiao) does not reflect a simplistic understanding of morality in a traditionalist manner. Rather, the Confucian sense of realism is shown in the passage; no one is devoid of the capacity to practice morality to its utmost. By virtue of being somebody's son or daughter, every person is endowed with the full potentiality to broaden one's moral self and become accomplished; the moral quality is inherently within the reach of any son and daughter.

Being Jewish by origin, my roots are not in Confucianism. Following Confucius' advice, in order to follow the Confucian Way in theory and in practice, let me refer to my own roots, through the great Jewish humanistic philosopher, Martin Buber, who can teach us a lot about dialogue with the other. In one of his early essays he writes:

And how could the life of dialogue be demanded? There is no ordering of dialogue. It is not that you are to answer but that you are able.

You are really able. The life of dialogue is no privilege of intellectual activity like dialectic. It does not begin in the upper story of humanity. It begins no higher than where humanity begins. (Buber 2002:196)

He adds:

But—and this is where all great Asiatic religions and ideologies meet—the unified world must not only be conceived, it must be realized. It is not merely given to man, it is given to him as a task; he is charged with making the true world an actual world. (Buber 1967:60, emphasis added)

Life is dialogue with others. As Confucius says, it is walking with others and learning from them. In this sense, the world “is given to man...as a task.” Confucianism suggests a practice. The

moral human being self-examines and self-reflects in every moment through dialogue. Confucianism is a philosophy of deed, and the deed is creating a dialogue as moral practice. Morality is a morality of duty to others in which their rights are its outcome. In this way, when one realizes oneself one realizes others. The way to realization and to the fulfillment of the duty is learning, which is a pleasure, too. Human beings create a moral world with every step they take, and the Way is a human way. In Confucius' words again: "A person can broaden the way, the way cannot broaden a person." (15:28)

Perhaps this is a Confucian formulation for an understanding of *homo sapiens*. Thinking is turning within and discovering the other. Paraphrasing the familiar words of Descartes, perhaps Confucius suggests, "I think, therefore YOU are."

This is obliging ...

Part II: Practicing Confucianism in a Modern non-Confucian Culture

In recent years I have been voluntarily teaching Confucianism at an Israeli organization called Saleet to women aged 18-65 who have minimal prior education. During this period I have witnessed among these women an eagerness for knowledge and a great appreciation for learning as a part of developing their mental growth. My work at Saleet is based on the "eight details" of the *Great Learning*, which I have found extremely useful in suggesting textual clues in a gradual joint search for self-realization. The underlying premise of this project is that treating the women as partners to the Confucian humanistic Way will lead both teacher and students to meaningful practice.

(1) A Little about Saleet

The Saleet program offers therapeutic support to women trapped in the cycle of prostitution. This unique urban plan was established in Tel Aviv as part of a national support project. The program is supported by the City of Tel Aviv-Jaffa and educational and cultural institutions (Prime Minister's Office Authority for the Advancement of Women, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Education). It offers appropriate treatments addressing all aspects of the prostitution cycle and its implications. Saleet provides assistance to women at each step in the "checkout" process from prostitution. There is a sequence of program care services, assistance and rehabilitation for women, ranging from an emergency apartment to the rehabilitation hostel and day center to the transition homes for women who choose freely to take their first steps in getting out of prostitution.

Understanding that life circumstances of emotional, psychological and economic distress lead women to prostitution, and that these women are "homeless" in mind, and in some physical sense, too, brought the founders of Saleet to recognize the need to provide the experience of a home and a family. Thus the program offers:

- Provision of all needed services under one roof to make checkout a feasible target.
- Support with respect and without judgment to allow healthy development of a new sense of self.
- Continuing treatment services in various frameworks to allow flexibility and customization for each woman.

There are important preliminary requirements expressing the responsibility one takes upon entering the bi-annual program in the Saleet hostel in Tel-Aviv. First, since prostitution in many cases is connected with alcohol or drug addiction (either as a means of escape or as the motivating factor to enter a life of prostitution), being free of drugs and alcohol is demanded before entry. Next, upon entering everyone has to accept house rules, which are strict and not always easy to handle, particularly the first ones. In their first year all women live in the closed hostel and receive about six months' indoor mental and physical treatment and a basic enrichment program. After that they are given limited outdoor rights. During this transition they are appraised by the occupation committee for suitability to start a job search, a task that is not trivial for someone whose past is considered socially deviant.

A woman, who has gone through the first year successfully can in the second year move to a "transition home", which is an apartment in town shared with two or three roommates. Throughout this time all women make weekly visits to Saleet for drug testing, seeing a therapist, participating in a support group, and in participating in enrichment classes. A girl who "fails" (usually for drug use) can stay in the program if she agrees to restart from the beginning. Last but extremely important, every woman is allowed to quit the program at any point.

Neama Rivlin Zeevi, director of Saleet, declares: "We have always spoken about prostitution, the question is: How have we spoken about it?" When I joined Saleet as a volunteer, I felt that the Confucian Way might offer a new "how" that fits with the program's vision. In short, I suggested a decriminalization of prostitution by means of addressing the women as partners to the Confucian Way. Through realizing that they are not incorrigible "criminals," but rather are victims of unfortunate circumstances who can change by seeking roots and a family, by learning with joy, by taking responsibility, and by having faith in the potential for good in human nature, every woman can undergo true change and become a helpful member of society.

The Saleet "Dao Group" meets once weekly for two hours, and is extremely dynamic. In the first year, ten girls started; some quit at different stages, one was hospitalized, some restarted the program due to "failing," and around 15 joined later at various times. Out of some 25 women altogether during this period, two young women moved to the transition home after the first year. This might not seem a great success, but to me it was a significant step in using teaching of the Way to cultivate others as if cultivating oneself.

In the following case-study I describe the way of Lee-Ann, a 28-year-old woman, very skinny and fragile (in fact always on the verge of anorexia), who grew up in a so-called "normal family": she graduated high-school, did two years' military service (mandatory in Israel), and never used drugs. However, during her childhood Lee-Ann suffered six years of sexual abuse by a relative. When she left the military, she worked nine years in "prestigious" prostitution, i.e., in an organized brothel rather than on the streets. Arriving at Saleet, Lee-Ann had no contact or support from family or friends; she was a heavy smoker, a coffee lover, and a reader of romances.

(2) The Way of Lee-Ann through the *Great Learning*

After a few meetings with the group, we talked about the Confucian Way as practice, about learning as dialogue and joy, about relatedness and moral responsibility, and about the Mencian view of the human heart and one's transformability. Then we started reading the *Great Learning*, using its eight "steps" as methodology and practice.

In the group, we reflected on each of the eight steps of the *Great Learning*, starting with the investigation of things (wuge) and the extension of knowledge (zhizhi), after the first year introduced as the “framing steps.” Then we moved to making the thoughts sincere (yicheng), stabilizing the heart (xinzheng), and cultivating the self (shenxiu), presented as “three deepening steps.” Last, we worked on regulating the family (jiaqi), managing the country (guozhi), and making peace under heaven (tianxiaping), presented as “three broadening steps.” After reflecting on each “detail” as a necessary “step” in the Way, each woman had to find her own understanding of how it applied in her personal life. The women were free to give their own creative interpretations, with no academic background in interpretations of the text or other relevant secondary sources. Moreover, it was emphasized that the “steps” were not discrete or disconnected; each progressive “step” included and required cultivation of all preceding steps, as the Way is a single ongoing process.

The learning started with the “Two Framing Steps”. We began with, “When things are investigated, knowledge is extended” (see Zhuxi editions for exegesis):

In the heart of every person there is consciousness which understands that anything under heaven has its own principle... Therefore at the beginning of teaching the great learning, it is important to bring the learner who interacts with everything under heaven, to delve deeper in things... Making the effort for long, one day her eyes will shine with light... and understanding... (Ch. 5)

Lee-Ann's choice for beginning her investigation of things was coffee, a thing she liked and was close to her personal life, which then became the focus of her self-search. She decided that she should first learn what she understood as the “principles” of her own coffee drinking habits. For the first time she realized that she drank a lot, seven to fifteen cups a day (aside from faucet water, coffee is the cheapest drink in Israel). She liked it black, unsweetened, in a mug, and so on. At this phase she was simply investigating her own habit.

Then she referred to “the extension of knowledge” as learning important relevant facts about coffee in general. She learned about types of coffee beans, the history of coffee and its growing conditions. She learned about its sources in Arabia, Turkey, Greece, Ethiopia, Italy, Brazil, and Columbia. She then realized that it was grown in rain forests, a term she was unfamiliar with, and she inquired what they were like. Finally, she was especially intrigued by drinking habits around the world (for example, she was surprised to learn that in Italy, coffee is often drunk with the imbiber standing). Presenting me with an impressive investigation of things (according to her understanding), which expanded her knowledge in history, geography and culture, she was ready to move on to the “Three Deepening Steps.”

The first of these steps is, “When knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere,” with reference to the exegesis:

Making the will sincere, means not to lead oneself astray, like detesting a detested odor, or adoring an adorable sight, this is called self-content. Therefore the accomplished person never stays alone. (Ch. 6)

Lee-Ann courageously set herself tough questions and a commitment to answer sincerely. Examples are “Why do I drink coffee?” “Do I truly like the taste?” “Is it a true passion?” “Perhaps it’s a habit?” “Do I use it as a substitute source of energy?” “Does it substitute food?”

Answering these tough questions sincerely, she understood that her coffee drinking was much more than a dietary habit, that it served many mental and psychological purposes, too. Moreover, the idea of not staying alone, coming from an ancient philosophical text, rather than from her supervisors and superiors, made her better able to come to terms with the strict house rules. Now she was ready to move on with a new and more involved attitude—“When the will is sincere, the heart/mind is stabilized,” again, referring to the exegetic text:

A person in anger	– can't be stabilized
In terror	– can't be stabilized
In ecstasy or extravagance	– can't be stabilized
In anxiety	– can't be stabilized
The heart-mind is not present. (Ch. 7)	

Lee-Ann felt deeply sympathetic and personally affected by this passage. She felt as if its message addressed her personally. She at once grasped the importance of being stabilized and the extent to which she was not. She had a lot of anger—toward her family, toward society, and in particular toward men; she sometimes felt anger toward her peers and the therapists in Saleet. She realized that she lived in constant terror of her past as well as the future. She was moody and sometimes reacted to trivial things with disproportionate reactions, and to serious things as if they were negligible. Lastly, she was a very anxious young woman. Knowing that all these issues had to be better balanced, she started working on them with her professional therapist; in Dao group she found herself simply asking: “How does coffee affect my mind?” She had to admit that true enough, the volumes of coffee she swallowed energized her, but they also caused her nervousness. Without being aware of the Confucian debate over Mencius’ “four feelings” versus the “seven emotions” of joy, anger, anxiety, adoration, grief, fear, and hate, through her own search she came to realize that there was a huge difference between authentic feelings and erroneous emotions. She said clearly: “When I’m angry, anxious, in a state of terror or ecstasy—I can’t feel. I must find out if coffee drinking distances me from my target.”

As she truly expressed the joy of learning and of self-reflecting, she started orienting herself to true change, moving on to the last of the deepening steps: “When the mind is stabilized, the self is cultivated.” She recalled the next lines of the chapter that she liked:

When the heart-mind is not present—we look and do not see; we listen and do not hear; we eat and do not know the taste. This is what is meant by saying that the cultivation of the person depends on the stabilizing of the mind. (Ch. 7)

Lee-Ann grasped that her mind was non-present: at times she overlooked things, or “looked at without seeing” a friend who wished to help or a danger down the road. She sometimes listened to, without hearing, people who cared about her. She never appreciated the taste of good food. At this point Lee-Ann made the first significant change: she limited her coffee drinking to a maximum of seven cups a day. While many of us might not see the major achievement, that is exactly what it was. For the first time in many years Lee-Ann acted out of self-awareness and bravely admitted: “I am not a lover, I am an addict!” At this point, after almost nine months in the program, she was also able to start her first job. She became an assistant at a Tel Aviv cafe. Lee-Ann had become a

self-supporting member of society, with a decent job that she liked, with more self-awareness, a more stabilized heart-mind, and sincere thoughts—all the outcome of the wish to learn and expand her knowledge through investigating things.

Now she was ready to move on to the “Three Broadening Steps.” First, “When the self is cultivated, the family is regulated.” At first, Lee-Ann found this task extremely hard to fulfill. Her father was long since not around, her mother was uncaring, her sisters and brothers had their own troubles, her family was broken. How could she take care of this family on her fragile shoulders? After some time Lee-Ann found a non-traditional solution in seeing Saleet as her family. She regarded the therapists and caregivers as parents and her peers in the program as sisters and partners for the Confucian Way. Lee-Ann decided that she would set about organizing a weekly coffee and cookie break for program participants. For the first time in her life she initiated an organized activity; for the first time in her life she took responsibility for others. For the first time she truly experienced the pleasure of entertaining friends. She learned the joy of caring for others.

Encouraged by new self-esteem, she moved on: “When the family is regulated, the country is well ordered,” assisted again with the commentary:

It is not possible for one to teach others, while she cannot teach her own family.
With family reverence—the sovereign should be served.

With fraternal acceptance—elders and superiors should be served. With kindness—the multitude should be treated.

In the Announcement to Kang, it is said, “Act as if you were watching over an infant.” If a mother is really caring, though she may not hit the target exactly, she will not be far from doing so. There never has been a woman who learned to nurse before she married. From the loving example of one family a whole state becomes loving. (Ch. 9)

Lee-Ann loved the idea of treating others with kindness—an attitude she had never enjoyed in her own childhood or youth. She loved the simile of acting “as if watching an infant” with care and tenderness, and she felt relieved by knowing that if she really cared, even she did not hit the target, she was still getting closer to it. The Way as transformative process became more meaningful than ever. In addition, through the example of marriage and nursing, she learned something about the desired order of things, which by this time was extremely meaningful to her. She had just finished her first year in Saleet and was ready to move out of the hostel to the transition home, where she became pretty much independent, earning her living from her work at the cafe. She was still obliged to make a weekly visit to Saleet, to meet her therapist, take drug tests (according to Saleet regulations) and take part in the Dao Group.

Holding her “family” coffee meeting once a week, she also organized a coffee money-raiser for Saleet in her new neighborhood, selling coffee and donating her profits to Saleet. Again, her interpretation of “ordering the country” was pretty loose, yet still very much in line with Confucian humanism. She became involved in society, demonstrating good citizenship within the turbulent Israeli life. Lee-Ann contributed to an altruistic organization that fostered her growth. Ready to complete the whole process, she reflected on the significance she could give to the last broadening step as, “When the country is well governed, there will be peace in the world,” and the relevant commentary:

What a man dislikes in his superiors, let him not display in the treatment of his inferiors; what he dislikes in inferiors, let him not display in the service of his superiors; what he hates in those who are before him, let him not therewith precede those who are behind him; what he hates in those who are behind him, let him not bestow on the left; what he hates to receive on the left, let him not bestow on the right.

...

Virtues are the roots, assets are tips of branches.

...

When one's words come out through twisted paths, in twisted paths they will turn back to her, and the one whose money comes in twisted paths, will lose it in twisted paths. (Ch. 10)

...

What can this mean to a young Israeli woman, who has just checked out from prostitution, who has no political influence whatsoever, and who lives in a country that not so rarely is considered a war zone? Lee-Ann was determined to be part of heaven's creation by doing her best, being true to herself and following the "golden rule" of never doing to others what she did not wish for herself. At this point, she chose a new horizon to allow her more knowledge and moral practice. She enrolled at the Open University, planning to one day become a social worker, making peace among rivals under heaven. She still holds her "coffee meetings" in Saleet and hopes to realize herself through realizing others in learning and in practice, thus contributing her small share to world peace, even if she doesn't "hit the target."

Epilogue

By my understanding, Confucian humanism cannot be understood except as the unification of knowledge and practice. While I have found my own way to combine my academic task as professor in Chinese philosophy and my volunteering practice in Saleet, I felt that theory and practice have to be unified within the academic teaching of Confucianism, that Confucian knowledge will better be acquired with the aid of practice. I was fortunate enough to learn that the Israeli Council for Higher Education found interest in involving academia with society, and thus approved a course entitled "Confucian Humanism – Theory and Practice" at Tel Aviv University. In academic years 2013-14 and 2014-15 I have been, and will continue, teaching Confucian humanism in a traditional academic style, referring to classical Confucian texts and modern interpreters, while also focusing on the applicability of ideas to life. All students have volunteered in various non-profit organizations (including Saleet). Some completed the course and kept up the volunteering.

The professional accolades for their volunteering projects exceed all expectations; moreover, practice seems to have improved their academic achievements, which so far have proven higher than ever.

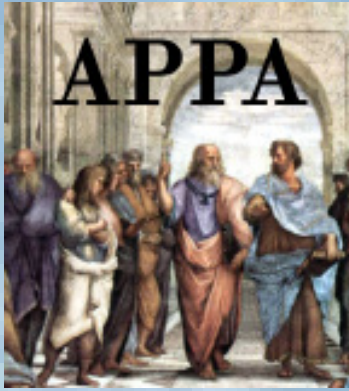
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