

Confucius 101

Confucius (~551-479 BC) was explicitly humanist, indeed the most influential humanist who ever lived. Confucius taught that relations between humans were the most important aspect of human life, and that becoming a person who behaved well towards other humans was the primary goal of human existence. Gods, spirits, life after death etc. may or may not exist. It is our job as humans to do the best job we can with the life we have in the world we inhabit.



Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, 'While you are not able to serve people, how can you serve their spirits?' Chi Lu added, 'I venture to ask about death?' He was answered, 'While you do not know life, how can you know about death?' (Analects: 11:11)

Confucius believed that all people are naturally good. Confucius' follower Mencius explained:

Why do I say that all people possess within them a moral sense that cannot bear the suffering of others? Well, imagine now a person who all of a sudden sees a small child on the verge of falling down into a well. Any such person would experience a sudden sense of fright and dismay. This feeling would not be one that they summoned up in order to establish good relations with the child's parents. They would not purposefully feel this way in order to win the praise of their friends and neighbors. Nor would they feel this way because the screams of the child would be unpleasant. (Mencius 2A6)

All people are very similar at birth.

The Master said, 'By nature, people are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart' (Analects 17:2)

Education is the key to the transforming people's natural goodness into mature virtue. But it can take a long time. If everything goes well, one will continue to become more virtuous throughout a long life.

The Master said, 'At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning.
At thirty, I stood firm.
At forty, I had no doubts.
At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven.
At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth.
At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.'
(Analects: 2:4)

The most important thing in life is becoming a good person, someone who contributes to making all society better. This requires a lot of effort over a lifetime. For adults, managing their ongoing education is a major individual responsibility. The ultimate goal is to become a person who thinks independently and virtuously, to achieve wisdom. This will make a person an effective political activist who will make the world better.

One of Confucius' students compiled a summary of Confucius' philosophy of individual moral improvement leading to social improvement in a "book" known as the Great Learning (Da Xue). Over the last 2500 years it has become revered for its ability to convey the essence of Confucianism, social progress through individual self-improvement, in just one page.

The Great Learning, entire text (~450 BC)

The way of great learning consists in manifesting one's bright virtue, consists in loving the people, consists in stopping in perfect goodness.

When you know where to stop, you have stability.

When you have stability, you can be tranquil.

When you are tranquil, you can be at ease.

When you are at ease, you can deliberate.

When you can deliberate you can attain your aims.

Things have their roots and branches, affairs have their end and beginning. When you know what comes first and what comes last, then you are near the Way.

The ancients who wanted to manifest their bright virtue to all in the world first governed well their own states.

Wanting to govern well their states, they first harmonized their own clans.

Wanting to harmonize their own clan, they first cultivated themselves.

Wanting to cultivate themselves, they first corrected their minds.

Wanting to correct their minds, they first made their wills sincere.

Wanting to make their wills sincere, they first extended their knowledge.

Extension of knowledge consists of the investigation of things.

When things are investigated, knowledge is extended.

When knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere.

When the will is sincere, the mind is correct.

When the mind is correct, the self is cultivated.

When the self is cultivated, the clan is harmonized.

When the clan is harmonized, the country is well governed.

When the country is well governed, there will be peace throughout the land.

From the king down to the common people, all must regard the cultivation of the self as the most essential thing.

It is impossible to have a situation wherein the essentials are in disorder, and the externals are well-managed. You simply cannot take the essential things as superficial, and the superficial things as essential. This is called, "Knowing the root." This is called "The extension of knowledge."

The key to the philosophy is the "investigation of things". What exactly does that mean? Are we talking about science experiments? The mainstream interpretation is that while Confucius has nothing against science, it is social science that really matters. "Investigation of Things" means observing how humans live with one another. Astronomy is nice but it is sociology which really matters.

A striking thing about the Great Learning are the absence of any sort of divine authority. Confucius does not invoke God. Nor is there any prophetic revelation. There is no Jesus or Muhammed. Confucius' ideas stand on their own. There is also no reference to China or Chinese culture. One could know nothing about China and still understand the Great Learning perfectly.

For these reasons Zhu Xi (1130-1200) the great philosopher of the Song dynasty promoted the Great Learning. Everyone could understand it. No advanced education was necessary, although advanced education was still desirable if available.

American Impact

When Jesuit missionaries arrived in China in the 1500s they asked about the core beliefs of the Chinese and were shown the Great Learning, Analects etc. They translated them into Latin and sent copies to Europe. By the 1690s they became available several European languages. This caused a great sensation in humanist circles. Since Marco Polo's time (~1300) Europeans had thought of China as a powerful mysterious place. Reading Confucius, they were amazed to discover that this very successful country was based on readily comprehensible humanism. If China could succeed without Christianity, so could anyone! The German philosopher Leibniz, upon reading Confucius and hearing of a plan to send missionaries to China, suggested that the Chinese should send missionaries to Europe.

Benjamin Franklin, an exemplary Confucian

In 1724 an eighteen-year-old Benjamin Franklin visited London and apparently read Confucius. Upon his return to Philadelphia in 1726, Franklin founded a newspaper, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, which had a strong emphasis on individual self-improvement. In 1737 Franklin devoted two issues to long excerpts from Confucius's writing. In my view this is an amazing choice for a frontier paper, only 44 years after the Salem Witch Trials.

Franklin's life was, from a Confucian point of view, exemplary. He combined a highly individualistic intellectual and spiritual life with an energetic willingness to work with others for common goals. For example, Franklin the agnostic could hardly have had religious views more different from those of George Whitefield, the most popular evangelical preacher of his time. Yet Franklin worked with Whitefield to convince Whitefield's rich evangelical friends to contribute to create the University of Pennsylvania, the first non-sectarian University in the English-speaking world, possibly the entire world. Confucius would have approved. In his long service as lead diplomat for the American Revolution, Franklin made lots of deals. He somehow convinced Louis XVI of France to support an explicitly anti-monarchy revolution.

Of course, Confucius was far from the only influence on Franklin. Much of Confucius' philosophy is similar to Aristotle's. But Confucius was very much a part of mainstream Enlightenment culture.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a good Confucian

Ralph Waldo Emerson was also impressed by Confucius' doctrine of individual self-improvement and published excerpts in the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial* under the title "ethnical", meaning apparently non-Christian, "scriptures". He referenced Confucius often in his writing. In his diary for 1845 he expressed frustration at the compromises of practical politics, complaining that he was torn "between God and the Whig party". Emerson then takes Confucius as an example of someone who could simultaneously know the truth and work with others less enlightened.

Yes; but Confucius. Confucius, glory of the nations, Confucius, sage of the Absolute East, was a middle man. He is the Washington of philosophy, the Moderator of modern history (Emerson, Journals VII, 126, 1845)

THE Pennsylvania GAZETTE.

Containing the freshest Advice Foreign and Domestic.

FROM MARCH 14. TO MARCH 21. 1737,8.

[Continuation of the Morals of Confucius.]



HERE is nothing that gives a greater Idea of the Virtue of the Ancient Chinese, than what they have Wit and Profund in respect of their Law-Saints. They Teach, that Adversity ought not to be considered against any one; That Poverty, Servitude, and Exile, which are the general Accompaniments and Consequences of Law-Saints, were ushering Men; That the whole World ought to live in Unity and Concord, and

repe, and which himself also very strongly inculcated. Thus this; always before the lot with the same Passion and Desire, as you would do, if you were directed by Ten Eyes, and pointed on by many Hands.

To render Virtue yet more commendable, and more easily to inspire the Scintillas thereof, the same Diligence demonstrates, That, whenever is honest and advantageous, it is able; and we are obliged to lose Virtue, because it includes both these Qualities. Thus whatever Virtue is an Ornament which establishes, as I may say, the whole Pedestal, of him that possesses it, his interior and exterior; that in the Mind is conversant inexpressible Beauties, and Perfections; that as to the Body, it there produces very joyful Delights; that it affords a certain Physio-

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SAYINGS OF CONFUCIUS.

Chee says, if in the morning I hear about the right way, and in the evening die, I can be happy.

A man's life is properly connected with virtue. The life of the evil man is preserved by mere good fortune.

Coarse rice for food, water to drink, and the bended arm for a pillow — happiness may be enjoyed even in these. Without virtue, riches and honor seem to me like a passing cloud.

A wise and good man was Hooi. A piece of bamboo was his dish, a cocoa-nut his cup, his dwelling a miserable shed. Men could not sustain the sight of his wretchedness; but Hooi did not change the serenity of his mind. A wise and good man was Hooi.

Henry David Thoreau, a good person but a Bad Confucian

In 1841 a twenty-four year old Henry David Thoreau was house-sitting for Emerson and read Emerson's copies of Confucius's works. Throughout his writings, Thoreau references Confucius approvingly. Yet in his political activities he showed none of Confucius' pragmatism. For example, Confucius would not have refused to pay local taxes because of a national political issue as Thoreau famously described in *On Civil Disobedience*. Confucius would certainly not have approved of Thoreau's Walden experiment in solitary living. Indeed Confucius's explicit rejection of solitary living in favor of political engagement was accurately quoted in Emerson's Journal in May 1843, two years before Thoreau's Walden experiment began.

ChangTsoo and KeeNeih retired from the state to the fields on account of misrule, and showed their displeasure at Confucius who remained in the world. Confucius sighed and said, "I cannot associate with birds and beasts. If follow not man, whom shall I follow? If the world were in possession of right principles, I should not seek to change it." (Emerson, Journals VI, p 403)

Modern Confucian scholars have suggested that Thoreau would have been attracted to Daoism (Taoism) if he had known about it. Unfortunately, Daoist texts were not readily available in English in Thoreau's time.