

Confucius Offered Vision for Social Harmony

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02-25-03

To learn and from time to time to apply what one has learned—isn't that a pleasure?—*Analects* 1:1

He was a wandering teacher largely unappreciated in his own time. He was a failure as a politician. Yet his teachings became the foundation of an ethical philosophy, a religion and a culture. His name is K'ung Fu-tzu, or Confucius.

Confucius (551-479 BCE) lived in a China that was falling apart. The ruling Chou dynasty was losing its grip. Warfare was breaking out among rival states. Social anarchy was growing. Confucius offered a vision for social harmony that he claimed was based on ancient wisdom.

Confucius became a tutor in his 20s. His reputation as a teacher spread, and he had many students. His real goal was to become a politician, but he spoke too frankly and had too much integrity for any success in that realm. At age 50 he went on a 13-year journey across China. He offered his wisdom and services to a variety of rulers, but they all turned him down.

Finally, he returned home and spent his last five years editing China's classics. He was a lifelong student of history, poetry, music and literature—a "Renaissance man" centuries before the Renaissance.

Confucius was a world-class teacher. His method was lively and dialogical, like Socrates. He refused to say that he was a wise person, only that "I strive to become wise without ceasing." While serious about learning and teaching, he was also endearing in his love for people, dining and music. He is described as "firm but fun, dignified but pleasant."

He never gained much power or wealth due to his ethical adherence to principle. He said: "With simple food to eat, water to drink and my arm for a pillow, I still have joy in the midst of these things. Riches and honor acquired by unrighteousness mean no more to me than the floating clouds."

He taught in pithy sayings, preserved in *The Analects*. These still have a striking quality:

- What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.
- Do not wish for quick results, nor look for small advantages. If you seek quick results, you will not attain the ultimate goal.
- To go too far is as bad as to fall too short.

The heart of Confucius' philosophy is the Five Relationships. All people find themselves in the relationships of Parent/Child, Older Sibling/Younger Sibling, Husband/Wife, Elder/Junior, Ruler/Subject.

The key to life is living appropriately in each of these relationships. Confucius called this process the "rectification of names." He meant that in each of these 10 attitudes, one should act out the ideal in reality. (Despite the inclusive language in this article, Confucius was hardly egalitarian toward women and was hierarchical in his formulation of these relationships.)

The ethical stance governing all relationships is *jen* (translated as love, human-heartedness, goodness and benevolence). The Chinese word for *jen* is the character for "human being" linked to the character for "two." For Confucius, it meant reciprocity (*shu*) in relationships: "Jen is to love people." He said, "Work for the good of others as you would work for your own good."

Jen expresses itself practically through proper behavior (*li*). One should conduct oneself with propriety in all relationships and situations. If this were done by all, then true harmony would result. Improper and insincere conduct is the opposite of *jen*: "Someone who is a clever speaker and maintains a 'too-smiley' face is seldom

considered a person of jen”

The desired goal is to become a Mature Person (*chun tzu*). The Mature Person is perfectly balanced. Confucius formulated this ideal through statements like:

- The Mature Person is universally minded and is no partisan.
- The Mature Person thinks of virtue; the petty person thinks of material things.
- The Mature Person thinks of what is right; the petty person thinks of what will pay.
- The Mature Person regrets not knowing; the petty person regrets not being known.
- The Mature Person acts before speaking and then speaks according to action.
- The Mature Person has friends, but doesn't belong to a clique.
- The Mature Person is humble in speech but superb in actions.

Confucius desired that his students would lead society. True power (*te*) to lead comes from moral example: “The ruler who governs the state through virtue is like the pole star, which stays put while other stars revolve around it.”

Because of his ethical focus, Confucius did not speak much about many traditionally religious topics. When asked about the afterlife, he replied, “We do not understand life, how can we understand death?” He also said, “Respect spiritual beings but keep them at a distance.” He did say that one should harmonize one's life with heaven (*tien*), but he meant the universal moral order.

The sheer force of Confucius' own character and teachings shaped East Asia. Through education and integrity, he attained his goal of molding character through his impact on Chinese culture and politics.

He said of himself: “At fifteen my heart was set on learning; at thirty I stood firm; at forty I had no more doubts; at fifty I knew the mandate of heaven; at sixty my ear was obedient; at seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing the norm.”

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Read Browning's introduction to this series, “Founders of Religions Were ‘Virtuosos’”

Online Confucius Resources:

The Analects of Confucius

Confucius: Biography, Teachings, Links

For further reading:

In the Path of the Masters: Understanding the Spirituality of Buddha, Confucius, Jesus and Muhammad, by Denise and John Carmody

The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions, by Huston Smith

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