

CONFUCIUS AND FRANKL ON HUMANNESS

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Mere philosophy without psychology is empty;
mere psychology without philosophy is blind!¹
Suncrates

Our conversants, Confucius and Viktor Frankl, although separated by centuries and beyond mere culture, see human beings in their uniqueness and in their relationships with others. Life quality, as lived, is the yardstick of their own measure when considering the amplitude of their own (and others') humanness which speaks of reality which is not thinned down or refined by abstraction. Confucius says the human being is the measure. "A man can enlarge his Way; but there is no Way that can enlarge a man."² Frankl says, "Man...determines himself."³

With the thought of Confucius we shall concentrate on human heartedness to explore the potentiality for "right action" and the reciprocal influence this action has upon others. With the thought of Frankl we will concentrate on the dialectical impact brought to bear upon self and others by "freely chosen action."

Although *jen* is for Confucius only one aspect in a comprehensive moral social philosophy which describes the entire social context within which human heartedness stands at both ends of the process, it can be discussed as the-center-of-personal-life-in-chosen-action. It serves as a guide to the person in the development of potentiality and movement toward an ultimate goal of being a true person. According to Confucius the true person is a superior person. To feel in one's heart while acting according to the principle of true person, all seems like but one.

Confucius is saying: We are the One. To achieve *jen* is to become a true person, by learning to know the proper context of action. Achievement of *jen* is an ongoing movement in the moral and ethical growth of each person. True person in the Confucian thought, although difficult to translate in the English, has been called benevolence. If the goal of the person is guided by the ethic of benevolence, then to achieve one's ownmost possibilities one chooses actions to be taken in the light of their impact on others. This is reciprocity (*shu*). It is the true spirit of Confucian thought and the central theme in the Confucian Golden Rule, "Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you."⁴ This is the principle of Central Harmony which is foundational for Confucian ethics as a guide for human relationships through all aspects of social interaction including government.

For Frankl too, choice of action is central to personal meaning found within a given social context. While Confucius centers on “right action,” Frankl centers on “freely chosen action.” But “freely chosen action” frequently means to act in spite of determining or limiting aspects of a situation. The freedom to choose the “right action” in the face of limiting circumstances is, for Frankl, the power of the human spirit.

By investigating the place of human action (within the social, moral, ethical context), we find that both Confucius and Frankl unite the quality of lived human action, in terms of impact on self and other, with responsible/obligation. For Frankl, “*being human means being conscious and being responsible.*”⁵ Being responsible is, for Frankl, central to human existence, it is meaning, in what human beings are and can be. This responsibility refers not only to that dimension of human existence in personal terms but to one’s social responsibility toward others. Although we are finite beings with the gift of consciousness, we can choose that which is of meaning and value. This gift of consciousness is a freedom in a certain sense in that it goes beyond a mere perception of self and others to the knowledge of self-in-relation-with-others. Reflection is in itself freedom. To be able to reflect is to be able to choose other possibilities. This calls for responsible action. For Frankl, “we do have a responsibility—the responsibility of selecting *what* becomes part of eternity as a consequence of our choices.”⁶

Confucius utilizes the term obligation to describe those qualities which ethically and morally guide human action. The duties of universal obligation are five and the moral qualities are three. The five duties to which Confucius refers exist in relationships with people, from the ruler and the subject, to family members and friends. The three qualities are: wisdom, compassion and courage. According to Confucius, regardless of how these qualities are learned the result is right human action.

For Confucius and Frankl the directions in which responsibility takes our presentation are two-fold: 1) toward one’s responsibility to those in one’s life (and present society); 2) toward one’s responsibility to those who represent one’s culture (ancestors and tradition). First we will discuss the effect of personal responsibility toward those with whom one shares both personal and social life.

Going back to the term humanness, we refer to *jen* for Confucius and to *logos* for Frankl. Raymond Dawson says, “Basically *jen* means the manifestation of ideal human nature.”⁷ For Frankl:

In addition to meaning “meaning,” “logos” here means “spirit”—but again without any primarily religious connotation.

Here “logos” means the humanness of the human being—plus the meaning of being human!⁸

Both Confucius and Frankl emphasize qualities found in interpersonal relationships which display the potential to be most fully who one can be. The extent to which the ideal human nature is, is a measure to gauge the quality found in personal and social relationships. In order to be in “right relationship” the heart must be in the right place. Human heartedness then, is the center of human relationships. But for one’s heart to be in the right place, for Confucius self-cultivation of social and moral virtues is required. While for Frankl, it is our freedom which requires responsible action, “Being human is being responsible because it is being free.”⁹

The principle underlying the “rightness” of human relationships is described by Sandra A. Wawrytko as respect.¹⁰ This respect for one another in Frankl’s thought could be described as respect for the dignity of the human spirit.¹¹ Although Frankl says, “man’s search for meaning,” *in search of*, conscious of, thinking of (or thinking on), might be more appropriate. How well a person treats another, to a great extent, will determine how that person will likewise be treated in return. Although relationships themselves may be reciprocal but not necessarily symmetrical¹² it can be said that respect may be present in the interpersonal encounter. Put simply, relationships are of existential weight. Indeed, if any “rightness” can exist in a relationship with a jailer and the charge, respect would be the most humane quality. For Wawrytko, “The root of broader social interaction is described in these terms: it is the reciprocal cultivation of respect toward and for others and self.”¹³

Reciprocity in Frankl’s Logotherapy is respect for the dignity of the human spirit and is the quality upon which the therapist and patient set out in search of meaning. Again the principle of harmony in action, interaction and re-action is found as common ground in the thought of our two conversants.

In either world of time and thought, Confucian or Franklian, the true person is one whose potentiality for humanness is fully developed. This person has come to find personal meaning and value as well as to respect the meaning and value of others. This means to achieve further attainment of these virtues leading to the Confucian true person or the Franklian self-transcending person who continually reaches out beyond self to others, displays the meaning of humanness.

Although Frankl’s thought has been primarily applied in the field of therapy, the qualities found in the logotherapist could also be found in the teacher. Indeed, the therapist does help in the cultivation and expression of the fullest potential of the client. This is to become all that one can be. The

same might be said of the teacher who, for Confucius, may assist the student in a like manner:

The more I strain my gaze up towards it, the higher it soars. The deeper I bore down into it, the harder it becomes. I see it in front; but suddenly it is behind. Step by step the Master skilfully [skillfully] lures one on. ...Just when I feel that I have exhausted every resource, something seems to rise up, standing out sharp and clear.¹⁴

We are all enlarging the Way. For Confucius, the importance of education, of learning, is fundamental. The significance of the teacher is in guiding¹⁵ the cultivation of learning and the development of the virtues. Confucius says, “Learn as if you were following someone who you could not catch up, as though it were someone you were frightened of losing.”¹⁶

Through the example set by the teacher, the student learns. The quality of the encounter is essential for the student to think *on* and *in* turn to stimulate the student to listen to the self-in-relation-with-others. For Confucius education begins with song, “For the *Songs* will help you to incite people’s emotions, to observe their feelings, to keep company, to express your grievances.”¹⁷ Thus a poetess writes:

hear,
there in the void,
where a mind extends itself,
poetry echoes.¹⁸

For Confucius teaching and learning stimulate each other. Teaching is a half-pillar of the learning. Together teaching and learning create an arch. The teacher and the student not only stand toward each other but it is in the touching that creates the arch. All human interaction is an expression of the great Central Harmony and is guided by the principle of reciprocity for it is the teaching of the Way, the wisdom of the ancestors. Confucius is a transmitter of knowledge rather than an innovator, “The Master said, I have ‘transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own.’”¹⁹ To be a true person is to be an educated person, to study music, poetry, the arts and to learn the Way as set forth by the ancestors and to teach others, to transmit the teaching and maintain that which is worthy of human heartedness. Poetry is foundational for humanness. A philosopher, George Chih-Hsin Sun says, “The poet is a philosopher in the primordial sense.”²⁰

Both Confucius and Frankl emphasize the importance of bringing forward the best human history has to offer. For both, it is the potential to choose ‘*freely-chosen-right-action*’ to re-institute the best of all human

possibilities. For Frankl this is a natural outgrowth of each person's "search for meaning" because this search is guided by conscience. For Confucius each person's search re-discovers the universal values. For Frankl, "Conscience could be defined as the intuitive capacity of man to find out, to scent out, as it were, the meaning of a situation."²¹ Because of the person's responsibility toward others and because conscience impels the person to freely choose an action, meaning arises when one is guided by universal values in that action. The meaning of a situation is true to the degree that it is both discovered and preserved. As Frankl says, "if man is not to contradict his own human-ness, he has to obey his conscience."²²

Considering the reciprocal nature and impact of influence brought to bear upon one another by our actions, it becomes apparent that the dignity of the human spirit is preserved and cultivated by "right action" which is freely chosen. The Confucian characteristic of *hsiao* (*filial piety*), the virtue of reverence, describes the ways in which respect of the family of humankind is the principle (in conjunction with *jen*—humanness) which establishes *li* (social order). The basic characteristic of benevolence is the heart of interpersonal relations as well as respect for tradition.

It is the characteristic of reverence which permits the attitude originally established in the family setting to extend to the entire family of humankind, previously described as respect. We saw in Frankl's way of thinking that each person reaches out beyond self toward others in care. This is self-transcendence. This reaching out describes benevolence. The struggle to reach out beyond self, to overcome self-serving interests, requires care. To care is to be secure in one's own being in order to be able to reach out to the other. Thomas Langan describes this dialectic in terms of self-appropriation:

This is what we have discovered the dialectic of appropriation to be: only when *eros* is coupled with *benevolentia*, only when what it wants is coupled with the good of the object desired in and for itself will the existent work to meet the needs of the object, without the satisfaction of which the object will shrivel and decline, thereby ceasing to serve. In the case of the desired person, only a mutually solicitous growing together responds to the needs of both.²³

The dialectical, reciprocal, caring of the other in and for the good of the other is the nexus of "right" interpersonal relationships. It is the heart of humanness and involves a giving up of self to become more of oneself in return. To be other-directed and respectful, benevolent, caring through self-transcending action which is freely chosen achieves in increasing degrees, self-appropriation in spite of limiting circumstances. If the human being is the measure then, when taking-to-heart, to the vast depth of the heart,

humanness is the “measure” of the heart. The word “measure,” as we have placed in quotes, could be immeasurable when considering humanness, as humanness goes beyond self. Responsibility to be all of who we can be and to remain open to meaning which arises and impels us beyond our own boundaries includes the characteristic of benevolence. Our consciousness (consciousness and reciprocity) of these dimensions is relevant to our capacity to cultivate our ownmost possibilities.

In conclusion, we have during this conversation with Confucius and Frankl, explored the ongoing quest of philosophy to find the most adequate way to understand and elaborate upon the meaning of humanness of our existence. Surprisingly, despite thousands of years and tremendous changes in social and cultural conditions, the philosopher is in search of the meaning of it all and opportunities to exchange ideas continue to exist. In this way we transcend ourselves and in this self-transcendence arises the possibility to foster and strengthen our humanness.

Notes

- 1) The introductory quote for this paper comes from a personal correspondence from George Chih-Hsin Sun, San Francisco, California, 4 May 1985.
- 2) *The Analects of Confucius*, trans., annot. Arthur Waley (New York: Vintage Books, 1938), p. 199, (XV, 28).
- 3) Viktor E. Frankl, “Determinism and Humanism”, *Humanitas*, VII, no. 1 (Spring 1971), p. 32.
- 4) *The Analects of Confucius*, *op. cit.*, p. 198 (XV, 23).
- 5) Viktor E. Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 5.
- 6) Viktor E. Frankl, “Time and Responsibility”, *Existential Psychiatry*, I, no. 3 (Fall 1966), p. 363.
- 7) Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), p. 38.
- 8) Viktor E. Frankl, *The Will to Meaning* (New York: New American Library, 1970), pp. 17-18.
- 9) Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

- 10) Sandra A. Wawrytko, "Confucius and Kant: The Ethics of Respect", *Philosophy East and West*, 32, no. 3 (July 1982), p. 237. Cf. Sandra A. Wawrytko, "The Value of Spirituality: Philosophical and Psychological Reflections", *Philosophy, Psychology and Spirituality*, ed. James W. Kidd (San Francisco: Golden Phoenix Press, 1984).
- 11) Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969), pp. 103-105.
- 12) Stephan Strasser, *The Idea of Dialogal Phenomenology* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 56. Cf. James W. Kidd, "Dialogal Modes of Presence: Buber, Rosenstock-Huessy and Strasser in Relation to Frankl and Scheler" (Hebron: Practitioner's Press, 1985).
- 13) Wawrytko, "Confucius and Kant: The Ethics of Respect", *op. cit.*, p. 239.
- 14) *The Analects of Confucius*, *op. cit.*, p. 140 (IX, 10).
- 15) From a phenomenological approach "guiding" would be seen as the condition for the possibility of the other to discover a path.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 136 (VIII, 17).
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 212 (XVII, 9).
- 18) Personal communication from Sandra A. Wawrytko, San Diego, California, 25 January 1985. For the writers, our interpretation is that the poetess is saying that the echo long re-echoes in us, not in the ear (hear) but in the heart which is here and there. This is speaking of eternity.
- 19) *The Analects of Confucius*, *op. cit.*, p. 123 (VII, 1,2,3).
- 20) Personal conversation, San Francisco, California. 24 March 1985, George Chih-Hsin Sun at the Cliff House.
- 21) Viktor E. Frankl, "What is Meant by Meaning?", *Journal of Existentialism*, VII, no. 25 (Fall 1966), p. 26.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 23) Thomas Langan, "Appropriation and the Irrational: Eros and Benevolentia", *Philosophy, Psychology and Spirituality*, ed. James W. Kidd (San Francisco: Golden Phoenix Press, 1984), p. 37. In a personal conversation, San Francisco, California, 27 January 1985,

Thomas Langan thought the idea of “Both of us can go where neither of us alone could go” displayed appropriation. Cf. fn. 12, article on “Dialogal Modes of Presence”.