

## CONFUCIUS ON HUMAN-NESS

Sunnie D. Kidd  
James W. Kidd

Regardless of the millennium, the nationality, the culture or the thinker, its philosophers develop philosophies in search of answers to questions which are fundamental to the nature and quality of human-ness. Put simply: the philosopher is in search of the meaning of it all. Human-ness, its meaning, cultivation and assured continuation, is the center which permits not only global conversation (dialogue) in thought but transcends the boundaries imposed by time. This presentation questions how human beings, letting-be-what-they-are and becoming that which resides within, are who and what they are. This is the heart, the center of human-ness.

If we view human beings in their uniqueness and in their relationships with others, life quality as lived is the yardstick of one's own measure. When considering the amplitude of one's own human-ness one 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."<sup>1</sup>

With the thought of Confucius we shall concentrate on human hearted-ness to explore "right action" and the reciprocal influence this action has upon others. Although *jen* is for Confucius only one aspect in a comprehensive moral social philosophy which describes the entire social context within which human hearted-ness 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 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.<sup>2</sup> If the goal of the person is guided by the ethic of benevolence, 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."<sup>3</sup> 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. Central Harmony can be likened to one of interchanging concentric circles where one pebble, person, tossed into the

ongoing stream of life, society, is an initiating aspect of the outward, centrifugal movement of concentric circles, in social relationships, to the banks of the stream, the governing structure, the government. In reverse flow from the governing dynamic structure back to the person is the reciprocal, centripetal movement of concentric circles, the initiating principle of “right action” which is embodied both in personal and social order. Choice of “right action” always-already presumes reciprocity of impact, inward/ outward.

By investigating the place of human action, within the social, moral, ethical context, we find that Confucius unites the quality of lived human action, in terms of impact on self and other, with responsible/obligation. Responsible/obligation is a bond.<sup>4</sup> Together they form the word: *responsobli*. *Responsobli* is a *reciprocate-in-action*. 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 a freedom. To be able to reflect is to be able to choose other possibilities. This calls for responsible action.

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 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 relationships.

For Confucius the directions in which “responsibility” takes our presentation are twofold: 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. Going back to the term human-ness, we refer to *jen*. Raymond Dawson says, “Basically *jen* means the manifestation of ideal human nature.”<sup>5</sup> Confucius emphasizes qualities found in interpersonal relationships which display most fully who one can be. The extent to which the ideal human nature is present, is a measure to gauge the quality found in personal and social relationships. In order to be in “right relationship” one’s heart must be in the right place. Human heartedness 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. The Confucian concept of Reciprocity is the ongoing and in and out flowing wave of human-ness. Following this metaphor, we can say that a wave poises itself and hurdles itself beyond its own limits only by being in relation with other waves which support and give to the whole continuous

flow.

The true person is one whose human-ness is fully developed. This person has come to find personal meaning and value as well as to respect the meaning and value of others. The means to achieve further attainment of these virtues leading to the Confucian true person who continually reaches out beyond self to others, displays the meaning of human-ness. 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 lures one on. ...Just when I feel that I have exhausted every resource, something seems to rise up, standing out sharp and clear.<sup>6</sup>

The word “student” is used to remind us that we are all enlarging the Way. For Confucius, the importance of education, of learning, is fundamental. Rather than discuss the merits of education itself, this presentation stays with the significance of the teacher in guiding<sup>7</sup> the cultivation of learning and the development of the virtues. Confucius says, “Learn as if you were following someone whom you could not catch up, as though it were someone you were frightened of losing.”<sup>8</sup>

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.”<sup>9</sup>

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.’”<sup>10</sup> 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 hearted-ness.

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*, human-ness, which establishes *li*, social order. The basic characteristic of benevolence is the heart of interpersonal relationships 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, described as respect.<sup>11</sup> The heart of human-ness involves a giving up of self to become more of oneself in return. If the human being is the measure, when taking-to-heart, to the vast depth of the heart, human-ness is the measure of the heart. The word “measure,” could be immeasurable when considering human-ness, as human-ness goes beyond self. Human hearted-ness does not necessarily have to die! 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 own human-ness. The following example depicts this fourfold dynamic structure:

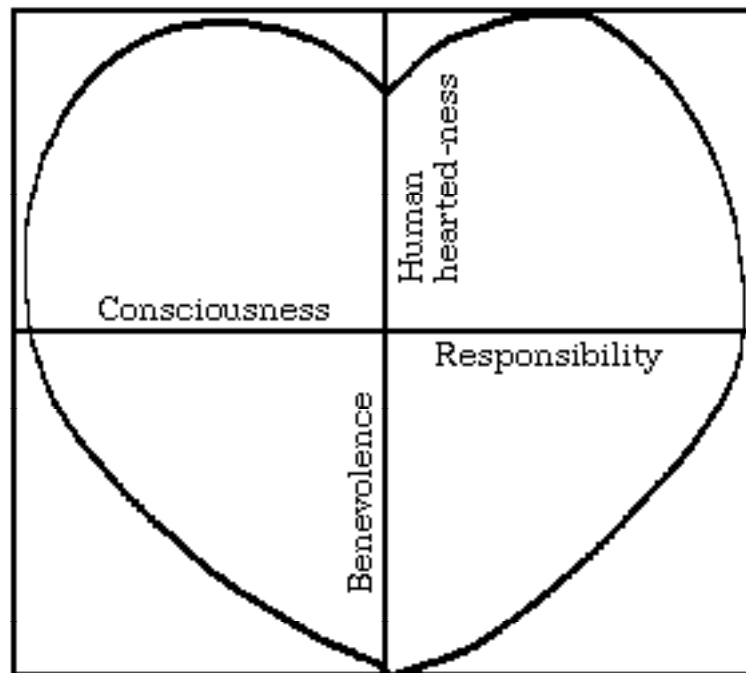


Figure I

As can be seen in the above example, the heart is the center of the cross and the square giving-life to a fourfold dynamic structure of: Human hearted-ness; Benevolence; Consciousness; Responsibility. *The heart is transcendence*. It is the center of the East, West, South, North, the unifying thread of Confucius.<sup>12</sup> The heart is the center of meaning, where meaning is found to come through obliquely, from directions other than the logical.

### Notes

- 1) *The Analects of Confucius*, trans., annot. Arthur Waley (New York: Vintage Books, 1938), p. 199 (XV, 28).
- 2) Although Martin Heidegger says that *Dasein* (there-being) resides most of the time in the inauthentic mode of being, true person could be *li* likened to an authentic mode, as a call to conscience within. Since we are being-in-the-world-with-others it is a condition for the possibility of the other to light up that which is within the other.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 198 (XV, 23).
- 4) *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1959 edition): *Responsibility* —trust or duty, for which one is responsible (p. 1718).  
*Responsible*—correspondent or answering *to* something. Morally accountable for one's actions. Capable of fulfilling an obligation or trust (p. 1718).  
*Obligation* —the condition of being morally or legally obligated or bound; a moral or legal tie binding to some performance; the binding power of a law, moral percept, duty. Action or an act, to which one is morally or legally obligated (p. 1350).  
 Responsible/obligation is a bond. Each, alone is a half-pillar, together they create an arch (responsobligation). The *responsobli (li)* is a *reciprocate-in-action*.
- 5) Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 38.
- 6) *The Analects of Confucius, op. cit.*, p. 140 (IX, 10).
- 7) From a phenomenological approach “guiding” would be seen as the condition for the possibility of the other to discover a path.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 136 (VIII, 17).
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 212 (XVII, 9).
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 123 (VII, 1,2,3).

- 11) Put simply: the beginning of *jen* in *hsiao* extends. For Confucius, *li* represents an entire moral and social philosophy constituted by *jen*, human-ness, *yi*, righteousness, *hsiao*, filial piety.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 105 (IV, 15), p. 193 (XV, 2).