

Introduction: The Rise, Fall and Return of Moral Education

The centrality of education, teaching and learning in Classical Confucian runs throughout the pre-Han corpus, and as is well documented, the emphasis throughout is on *moral* education. While elements of the curriculum of classical Confucian education had something of a practical bent—the chief subjects being the “Six Arts” of ritual, music, archery, chariot driving, calligraphy, and mathematics—these were understood to be of value ultimately for their effects on a person’s developing character. The ultimate goal is transforming ordinary humans into *junzi*, exemplary persons describable as *ren* (仁), *yi* (義), *li* (禮), *zhi* (智) and the like. If, as Tu Weiming nicely puts it, the Confucian *dao* (道) is meant ultimately to help us “learn to be human”, the primary means by which we achieve this is a process of moral cultivation that begins with tutelage under our elders and betters.

The particular aims and methods of Confucian education are brought into particularly sharp focus in a late Warring States or early Han work called the *Xueji* (學記), or *On Teaching and Learning*. This brief work, which was included in the larger *Liji* (禮記)—*On Ritual*—that became one of the ‘Five Classics’ of early Confucianism, concerns proper pedagogy as well as the essential importance of education in maintaining a good and effective social order. It also identifies what I will call goods of education—the beneficial capabilities learning bestows upon successful students. Consistent with the traditional focus on moral educations, the educational goods of the *Xueji* allows successful students to be better people and to live better lives.

The idea that the proper end of education is moral development is also found in the Western traditions. Plato's ideal end of moral education, as outlined in the *Republic*, was a soul marked by wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice. Aristotle expands the list of virtues and adds detail to the moral psychology, while also insisting that a person's upbringing and education makes all the difference to her ability to live the kind of life humans ought to be living. This classical ideal of education as a necessary component of human flourishing also finds a place in Christianity. "Of all human pursuits" St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "the pursuit of wisdom is the more perfect, the more sublime, the more useful, and the more agreeable. The more perfect, because in so far as a man gives himself up to the pursuit of wisdom, to that extent he enjoys already some portion of true happiness."¹ This ideal survived as a mainstay of educational thinking into the 20th century. John Dewey, for example, saw the ultimate benefit of education as "a life that is fruitful and significant."²

Both the Confucian vision of education and liberal educational ideal came to be seriously challenged in the 20th century. The May 4th Movement complained that Confucianism was holding back Chinese progress in science and democracy, while the Maoist revolutionaries would charge that it represented regressive forces of social repression. All this contributed to a sense that Confucian educational ideals had little to offer modern Asian cultures. Consequently, Western ideals of a scientifically oriented practical schooling became increasingly influential in Chinese education during the 20th century and they remain dominant. While educating the best and brightest is still

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Gentile*, 1.1.2. http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,Thomas_Aquinas,Summa_Contra_Gentiles,EN.pdf

² John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 230.

understood as an investment in the common good, the content of that education has firmly shifted to one informed more by Western modernism than Confucianism.

In the West, two trends combined to challenge the prominent role of moral education in thinking about schooling. One was a growing recognition that moral diversity is an uneliminable trait of modern liberal democracies. The other was a greater expectation that education prepare children for eventual employment. The first trend made moral education seem problematic since it assumes a consensus on moral matters that many began to suspect did not exist. “Which moral principles or claims or virtues should we teach?” educators began to ask, as their confidence that it is their job to teach any declined apace.³ If education is in large part preparation for adulthood employment, moral education is a luxury at best. The growing role of high stakes testing in the the industrialized West has only accelerated the marginalizing of curriculum focused on the kind of person—as opposed to the kind of worker—a child might grow up to be.⁴

Moral education has made a comeback however. In the West, recent years have seen the publication of a number of works that challenge both the single minded emphasis on vocational training and the presumption that respect for the diversity of moral views co-existing in liberal democracies precludes explicit and deliberate moral

³ There are other concerns here. Many liberal thinkers began and continue to worry that teaching values is inherently coercive and amounts to some manner of indoctrination. How to accommodate such concerns with the basic nature of teaching remains a lively topic of discussion in philosophy of education. See: Hand, etc.

⁴ This is not to suggest that the tension between liberal education and vocational training is new—concerns about the latter encroaching on and distorting the former go back to the middle ages at least.

education.⁵ Among those writing on the topic, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift have been the most explicit in adopting something reminiscent of the classical ideal of moral education by positing a list of “educational goods” the obtainment of which contributes essentially to “human flourishing.”⁶ Strikingly, Brighouse and Swift make few attempts to either *defend* their list of educational goods, or to ground it in a substantive account of human values or human flourishing. Adhering with little comment to the kind of neutrality between ‘comprehensive doctrines’ that has become orthodoxy in liberal political theory, they couple confidence that their list is acceptable to those with differing fundamental beliefs about the good life with a hope that whatever they might be assuming about human flourishing it is metaphysically ‘thin’ enough to be equally unobjectionable.

In China, a deliberate revival of Confucianism has been spearheaded in recent years by both the governing Communist Party and by Chinese and Western philosophers convinced of the lasting value of the tradition. Of particular interest here are a spate of recent works attempting to present an updated and refined Confucian political philosophy that might provide a viable alternative to the political liberalism so dominant in contemporary discussions of political philosophy. That Confucianism can provide a compelling public philosophy grounding a common political culture in Asian countries facing their own growing diversity is a common theme, and the tradition’s

⁵ See, for example, Harry Brighouse, *Education...*, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values*, and Michael Hand, *Moral Education...*

⁶ I will drawing here both on Brighouse and Swift 2014 and their more recent co-authored volume on educational policy, Harry Brighouse, Helen F. Ladd, Suzanna Loeb, and Adam Swift *Educational Goods: Values, Evidence, and Decision Making...*

contribution to understanding moral education in contemporary states has been a pervasive focus.

A cursory comparison between Brighouse and Swift's lists of educational goods and those that can be gleaned from classical Confucianism is enough to raise doubts about the former's cultural and metaphysical innocence. I will be considering this comparison here. More precisely I will compare Brighouse and Swift's list of educational goods with what I hope is a plausibly updated list of Confucian educational goods. In some respects the New Confucianism project faces a number of the same constraints as political liberals impose on themselves. New Confucians too must work to avoid an overly strong commitment to any one set of metaphysical claims or conceptions of human nature and human flourishing. What is at stake here is ultimately two competing models of a public philosophy adequate to modern liberal democracies, explored here with an eye to what they say about basic educational aims.

Two Lists of Educational Goods

Brighouse et al. use "the term *educational goods* to refer to the knowledge skills, attitudes, and dispositions that children develop both for their own benefit and for the benefit of other."⁽²⁾ Making explicit the distinction between the "skills, attitudes, and dispositions" that benefit children (or the adults they will become), those that benefit others, and those which will benefit both, their list looks this:

Benefits Self

Autonomy

Personal Fulfillment

Benefits Others

Treating Others as Equals

Benefits Both Self and Others

Economic Productivity

Democratic Competence

Healthy Personal Relationships

As *goods*, these items occupy a space somewhere between a summary moral appraisal of a person and her life on the one hand, and the specific skills and bodies of knowledge we might hope children learn in class on the other—the goods are acquired “capacities” that “lead to flourishing.” “Flourishing” is used normatively—we flourish when we live a life among others that can be rightly described as “good.” Though they add little detail about just what constitutes flourishing or what kinds of lives might be counted as flourishing, it is easy enough to discern what Brighthouse et al. have in mind—they conceive of flourishing as combining the satisfaction of legitimate individual interests and the enjoyment of relational and communal goods in the political context of a liberal democracy.⁷

Teasing a similar enough list out of the *Xueji* to allow for a comparison is not difficult. Read in conjunction with classical Confucian texts, the *Xueji* also identifies goods that occupy the space between a specification of the overtly moral qualities of a *junzi* and the Six Arts that made up the actual curriculum of traditional Confucian

⁷ It is probably best to see the list of goods as specifying necessary but perhaps not sufficient conditions for flourishing. Consistent with the political liberalism Brighthouse et. al assume they are presumably remaining neutral about controversial goods many but not all would insist on, such as religious faith.

academies. It seems the goods we can identify also fall into a smaller number of categories, and so I propose the following taxonomy.

To begin, the text includes an emphasis on what is called in the *Analects haoxue* (好学), or “love of learning.” Echoing Confucius’ insistence that students work tirelessly, the *Xueji* insists students must continue to learn towards the constant goal of “self-improvement.” *Junzi*, it tells us, “study [and] immerse themselves in [knowledge] even in leisure and respite, and roam freely within it.” (8) More, “even when separated from teachers and companions, they remain steadfast in the way of learning without faltering.”(8) As Confucius makes clear in *Analects* 2.4, the process of moral cultivation served by learning continues throughout our whole lives. In short, good Confucians are what educational sorts now like to call “life long learners”, albeit of a particularly morally inclined variety.

A second set of goods can be grouped together under the heading of *xuwen* (学文), or *mastery of cultural resources*. These correspond roughly to the specific bodies of knowledge and academic schools mastered by scholars, mastery of which is itself an educational aim in a sense familiar to those urged in ‘great books’ programs. During the course of their education, students should learn to “analyze classical texts”, be able to “demonstrate the breath of their learning” and demonstrate skill in “scholarly debates.” By the end of their training this learning should come together and students should show that they have “mastered their subjects and applied their knowledge broadly and...established themselves and their goals firmly.” (5) This humanistic learning is explicitly tied to a person’s *moral* development, which is striking but plausible in a tradition that sees moral expertise as embodied in social and cultural

competence.⁸ There is a larger importance to this cultural mastery, however.

Learnedness enables these nascent *junzi* to improve *the culture itself* as well as themselves—what comes with academic accomplishment is the ability to “cultivate and transform people and change and reform old habits and people and shape new enlightened ways of living.” (5) *Junzi* are life long learners but also influencers.

Lastly are the goods most overtly tied to moral self-cultivation, which we can group under the heading of *xuedao* (学道), or *mastery of the proper way*. A frequently mentioned good here is the ability to cultivate relationships, a skill which is to be cultivated along side of academic abilities. While again suggesting a link between humanistic learning and moral self cultivation, this tie makes it clear that relationships are a fundamental focus of moral improvement. While busy with their studies, the *Xueji* tells us, students will also be evaluated on “their ability to get on well with the scholarly community”, “their devotion to and respect for their teachers” and “their choice of friends.” (5) While students learn to find “satisfaction in their learning” they will also “grow closer to their teachers [and] enjoy their relationships with friends and peers.” (8) Those who excel, finally, will show themselves to be “evermore committed to the proper way (*dao*)” (8) and will become “virtuous and honest persons.” (9). As summarized by Roger Ames, “*xue* as cultivation and growth is...a necessary condition for all of the ethical values within the specific personal relationships of family and community.”⁹

⁸ See Dennis Arjo...

⁹ Roger T. Ames, “On Teaching and Learning (*Xueji*): Setting the Root in Confucian Education”, in Xu Di and Hunter McEwan eds. *Chinese Philosophy on Teaching and Learning: Xueji in the Twenty-First Century*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016.

To summarize then, the *Xueji*'s list of educational goods looks something like this:

Haixue—Love of Learning

Continuous self-improvement

Life long learning

Xuewen—Cultural Expertise

Humanistic Scholarship

Positive cultural influence

Xuedao—Moral Cultivation

Relational Virtuosity

Excellence in character

Before moving on to a partial and preliminary comparison of our two lists of educational goods a couple of refinements on the *Xueji*'s are in order. If Confucianism is to be a plausible candidate for a public philosophy suitable to contemporary times, its educational aims have to accommodate to some extent what has been imported from the West and thoroughly adopted by Asian cultures. In particular, the broadly humanistic scholarship prized in the *Xueji* should be broadened to include an adequate education in modern science.

More, though there is disagreement among the New Confucians about how deeply and in what fashion liberal ideals of popular sovereignty should be incorporated into a modern Confucian political philosophy, even the most traditionally minded

embrace some manner of participatory citizenship.¹⁰ An element of this should be recognized in the relational virtuosity and cultural competence.

Lastly, while there is something to the idea that “a Confucian worldview of education is helpful in shifting our focus from utilitarian, performative, and individualistic concerns to ethical, non-quantifiable, and communitarian goods” we need to be careful not to exaggerate the divide here.¹¹ Modern nations, and modern economies, are complex and require the acquisition of complex skills as a condition of full economic and social participation. It is a reasonable expectation of a nation’s educational provision that members of such societies reach adulthood with a good chance of securing a livelihood assuming a suitably healthy economic climate. While it is far from an overriding concern, Confucius himself was not indifferent to his students’ worthiness to hold office, and is clear the tradition holds that those who can work should do so to support themselves and their families.¹² We should recognize then, perhaps as an element of *xuedao*, the acquisition of the skills and knowledge necessary for reputable and gainful employment as a Confucian educational good as well.

With the Xueji suitably updated, our two lists look something like this:

¹⁰ I would include in this category Daniel Bell and Quing Jian. See for example...

¹¹ Charlene Tan, “Confucianism and Education”, in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia: Education*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹² See, for example, Confucius’ disgust at a contemporary what has yet to “make something” of himself in ..., and Menicus’ remark that it is shameful to be poor when it is possible to gain wealth in morally acceptable ways.

Xueji

Haoxue—Love of Learning

Continuous self-improvement

Life long learning

Xuewen—Cultural Expertise

Humanistic and scientific scholarship

Positive cultural influence

Political competence

Xuedao—Moral Cultivation

Economic Productivity

Relational Virtuosity

Excellence in character

Brighouse et al.

Benefiting Self

Autonomy

Personal Fulfillment

Benefiting Others

Treating Others as Equals

Benefiting Both Self and Others

Economic Productivity

Democratic Competence

Healthy Personal Relationships

Comparing Two Traditions

There is a lot that can be made of a comparison of these two lists that speak to the divide between the western liberal tradition in which Brighouse and co-authors are working and the modern Confucianism being worked out by the New Confucians. In the interest of space, I will offer some thoughts on two things. One is the greater communitarian focus of the Confucian list, and the other the difference suggested by the inclusion of ‘Autonomy’ and ‘Personal Fulfillment’ on the list offered by Brighouse et al.

It may serve as a useful corrective to see “Healthy Personal Relationships” named as a basic educational good on a list generated from within modern liberal political thought given how often it is characterized as hyper-individualistic. While not

entirely unearned, liberalism's reputation as excessively focused on individuals at the expense of communities and relationships too often comes from reading too much into the idea of a social contract and from a misunderstanding of what manner of individualism is embraced by liberal thinkers. Liberalism insist that each individual be counted and respected rather than being subsumed within communities and relationships, but they do not deny that relationships and membership within communities are basic human goods and typically necessary for flourishing. While they insist that such relationships and membership be *chosen*—an insistence that raises sticky questions about family life—they can happily agree with Confucians that our lives our impoverished without healthy relationships, and that learning can substantially contribute to our abilities to navigate and cultivate relationships successfully. Indeed, the case can be made that just this is an increasing priority in both education in the West.

That said, it is clear that the two lists suggest very different understandings of how individuals, relationships, and communities are to be conceived. Brighthouse et al. assume that we can neatly divide our interests between our own, those of other people —which might be served at a cost to our own interests or without benefit to us—and those that are mutual. Missing from such a taxonomy is recognition of cooperative goods, or goods that can be secured only through cooperative endeavors. Cooperative goods are, it is important to note, different from what is secured through interactions that are mutually beneficial. Economic market exists, ideally, to provide mutual benefits to buyers and sellers—if I pay for some apples both I and the seller benefit. But distinct and separable interests that are being served—I benefit and the seller benefits, but the

benefits are different and they are not shared. Cooperative goods are things that come with things like musical ensembles or sports teams, endeavors whose goods can only be shared collectively. This is not to say that individual members of sports team won't also enjoy individual benefits—I get in better shape through playing on a soccer team and that benefits me individually—but the unique goods of playing the game itself must be shared.