

## CONFUCIUS AND THEOSOPHY

By Richard W. Brooks

Theosophists have rather neglected Chinese philosophy. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* are predominantly Buddhist in their terminology. Indeed, A. P. Sinnett's second little book based on the teachings he was receiving via those letters was called *Esoteric Buddhism*. H. P. Blavatsky's *Voice of the Silence* is essentially a Mahayana Buddhist text. C. W. Leadbeater frequently uses Buddhist terms, as well as Christian, in his writings. When Annie Besant moved to India, she embraced the cause of Indian self-rule and began propagandizing for Hinduism in an effort to instill pride in that religion, which had been so maligned by the Christian missionaries and the British. HPB does mention Chinese philosophy several times in *The Secret Doctrine*, but they are all rather superficial references and add nothing of any substance to that work. And the Mahatma Koot Hoomi quotes in passing in his December 7, 1883, letter to the London Lodge, part of only one sentence from Confucius's *Lun Yu* (usually translated as *Analects*).

While this neglect may be understandable from the standpoint of the historical development of modern Theosophy, it is unfortunate, since Confucius's ideas have had an important influence on Western culture. For example, the British idea of a "classical" education intended to produce a "gentleman" is directly Confucian. It may owe part of its heritage to Plato and Aristotle, filtered through the colleges and universities of medieval Europe, but its main purpose is exactly what Confucius hoped education would accomplish. It came to Europe via Jesuit missionaries who went to China in the 16th century.

Moreover, Confucius taught some moral teachings valuable for us all. KH even identifies him and Plato as "fifth round men" (*Mahatma Letters* 66/14). Although some Theosophists (myself included) prefer the cryptic, and often mystical, ideas of Lao Tzu, Confucius is really of much more immediate relevance to our lives.

First, a little background. Confucius is one of only two Chinese philosophers whose names have been Latinized (the other being the post-Confucian philosopher Mencius, or Mêng K'e, later called Mêng Tzu). Confucius, whose name in Chinese was K'ung Ch'iu (in the Wade-Giles system of transliteration, which indicates aspiration by an apostrophe) or Kong Chiu (in the modern Pinyin system), was born in the state of Lu in 551 BCE (during the decline of the Chou Dynasty).

Tradition identifies his family as formerly part of the aristocracy, but by his time it had declined in both social and economic status. His father died when he was three, and he was raised by his mother. He obviously received an education in ancient litera-

ture, for he was very familiar with it and is said to have written commentaries on some of it. He married and had at least one son and one daughter. At some undetermined point in his early adult life, he decided to devote his entire time to teaching. He is the first person in Chinese history to do so. There is a delightful passage from the collection of his sayings that illustrates his passion for education:

The Duke of Shê asked [Confucius's disciple] Tzu-lu about Master K'ung. Tzu-lu did not reply. The Master said, "Why didn't you say that I am a person who forgets to eat when vigorously investigating a problem, who is so happy he forgets his anxieties, and who is not aware that old age is at hand." [*Analects* 7.18. All translations from the Chinese are my own.]

The texts he chose for his students—along with the collection of his sayings—have become known as "Confucian Classics" and in later centuries formed the basis for the Chinese educational system. He died in 479 BCE at the age of 73, having failed to convince the heads of various warring states to adopt his ideas. It was not until centuries later that his philosophy was adopted and he was given the title of "Grand Master K'ung" or K'ung fu-tzu.

By Confucius's day, the authority of the Chou emperor was ignored and rulers of individual states competed with each other for paramount power. The frequent warfare was not so much to conquer territory as to show the power of one warlord over another. As a result, the common peasant suffered greatly. Confucius was alarmed both at the suffering of the common people and the breakdown of the social order. He developed a method or Way, in Chinese *tao* (pronounced "dao"), which he claimed would restore order and relieve that suffering. When one considers the condition of much of the world today, one sees immediately the relevance of Confucius's philosophy to the twentieth century.

What was Confucius's Way? It was to educate people for character rather than for vocation—to develop what he called a *chun-tzu*, usually translated "gentleman." (Ancient China was a masculine-dominated society, but what applied only to men in Confucius's day can be applied equally well to women today, though the masculine forms used here are historically accurate.) In ancient China the term *chun-tzu* had been reserved for the aristocracy. In effect, Confucius democratized the idea to make it refer to a *moral* aristocracy, irrespective of one's parents' social status. There were several characteristics of such a gentleman, including moral qualities like courtesy, honesty, humility, and impartiality, to which we can all relate. The following passage summarizes some of them:

The Master said, "Make it your guiding principle to do your best for others, to keep your promises [or be trustworthy], and to refuse the friendship of those

not up to your standard. When you make a mistake, do not shrink from correcting it." [*Analects* 9.24]

Another of the important Confucian virtues was filiality, sometimes called filial piety. It meant, essentially, supporting your parents, not only financially, but with genuine, heart-felt respect. Confucius and his disciples identified it as the root of a man's character:

[The disciple] Yu Tzu said, "Rare, indeed, is it for those who are filial to their parents and respectful to their elder brothers to be disrespectful to their superiors. As for such men fomenting civil disorder, it is unheard of. It is upon the root that a gentleman works. When the root is firmly planted, the Way (*tao*) will grow. Surely, filiality and fraternal respect are the root of humaneness (*jên*)." [*Analects* 1.2]

[Another disciple] Tzu-yu asked about filiality. The Master said, "Nowadays filiality means no more than providing one's parents with enough to eat. But we support even dogs and horses that way. If no reverence is shown, where's the difference?" [*Analects* 2.7]

One must remember that the Chinese (like most cultures) felt that the family was the basis of society and if the family structure broke down, so also would the social structure. From a different, and Theosophical, point of view, we realize that we owe a deep debt of gratitude to our parents, for they made this physical incarnation of ours possible—without which we could make no progress, for it is only while we are in physical incarnation that one can initiate moral, intellectual, or spiritual development. And that requires parents. Thus we should be grateful for our parents giving us an opportunity for such further growth.

Another important element of Confucius's Way (*tao*) was promise-keeping (*shin*, sometimes translated "trust," "trustworthiness," or "good faith"). He identified it as essential not only in our interpersonal relations, but especially for government officials. His point was that good government depends upon the trust of people in their rulers. When trust is lost, one gets cynicism, as one finds in so many countries today! And when the people are cynical, morality declines, people become less humane:

[Confucius's disciple] Tzu-kung asked about government. The Master said, "Enough food, enough weapons, and the people's trust." Tzu-kung said, "If you had to give up one of the three, which would you abandon first?" The Master said, "Weapons." Tzu-kung said, "If you had to give up one of the other two, which would you abandon first?" The Master said, "Food. From ancient times death has come to all men, but a state cannot exist without the trust of its people." [*Analects* 12.7]

Another extremely important aspect of gentle behavior for Confucius was *li*, often translated "ritual" or "rites," but implying appropriate action whether in lofty State

rituals or in daily interpersonal behavior. It involved propriety and good manners. It distinguished a cultured person from a socially crude person. It civilized one's behavior:

The Master said, "Courtesy not regulated by the rites (*li*) becomes tiresome; caution not regulated by the rites becomes timidity; bravery not regulated by the rites becomes unruliness; forthrightness not regulated by the rites becomes rudeness. When the gentleman deals sincerely with his kinfolk, the people will be motivated toward humaneness (*jên*); when old friends are not neglected, the people will not shirk their obligations to others." [*Analects* 8.2]

In fact, *li* is somewhat similar in its range of meanings to the Hindu concept of *dharma* in its social (not philosophical) use. Nowadays we (especially in the United States) pay little attention to such things, considering them artificial, stilted, and insincere. But we do acknowledge that there is some behavior which is inappropriate at a funeral or wedding or religious service; and there are some kinds of music one doesn't play at a soccer match (for example, Debussy's "Claire de Lune") or prior to meditation (for example, a Sousa march). So we are aware of propriety. The major difference between us and the ancient Chinese is that they cultivated such behavior self-consciously. But Confucius insisted that it, nevertheless, be motivated by sincerity:

[Someone suggested that the saying] "Sacrifice as if present" means "sacrifice to the spirits as if the spirits were present." But the Master said, "If I am not present at the sacrifice, it is as if there were no sacrifice." [*Analects* 3.12]

In other words, it is of less importance to know whether the spirits of the ancestors are actually present at the ancestral rites than for the person performing the rites to do so with his whole heart. The same idea is suggested indirectly in the following passage:

The Master said, "When one says 'Ritual, ritual,' surely one means more than just jade and silk. When one says 'Music, music,' surely one means more than just bells and drums." [*Analects* 17.11 (or 17.9 in some texts), there being two versions of the *Analects* that differ slightly in numbering]

Confucius also claimed that proper observance of ritual, that is, social propriety, by the aristocracy would have a socializing influence on commoners:

The Master said, "So long as those above [or superior people] love ritual, the common people will be easy to govern." [*Analects* 14.41 (or 14.44 in some texts)]

Perhaps today's societies ought to pay closer attention to this claim, since many of modern society's role models (whether politicians, popular musicians, sports figures, or movie stars) behave in ways which are anything but socially appropriate. And by doing socially inappropriate things, they seem to legitimize that behavior in the eyes of others.

There are a number of other qualities identified by Confucius as essential to a gentleman's character, but perhaps central to all of them is what he called *shu*, usually translated "reciprocity" or "consideration" (sometimes "altruism"). It appears in the Confucian "Golden Rule":

Tzu-kung asked, "Is there a single word which can act as a guide throughout one's life?" The Master said, "Perhaps *shu*: Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you." [*Analects* 15.23 (15.24 in some texts)]

As D. C. Lau points out in the introduction to his translation of the *Analects*, *shu* or reciprocity is only half of the Golden Rule, the negative half. The other, positive half is what Confucius called *chung*, sometimes translated "conscientiousness" or "doing one's best." But neither of those translations adequately captures its meaning. *Chung* really involves the full development of one's heart. In other words, "*shu* is the method of discovering what other people wish or do not wish done to them" by analogy with "what one would like or dislike were one in the position of the person at the receiving end," as Lau puts it. *Chung* is the practice, to the best of one's ability, of what one has realized by means of *shu*. That, indeed, amounts to doing unto others what one would have them do unto you: the positive Golden Rule.

Finally, and most importantly, for Confucius, becoming truly human meant becoming humane (in Chinese *jên*, pronounced something like "zrun"). It was more important even than wisdom:

The Master said, "It is humaneness (*jên*) which gives a neighborhood its beauty. If a man is free to choose, yet does not prefer to live among the humane, how can he be considered wise?" [*Analects* 4.1]

The Master said, "If one sets one's heart on humaneness (*jên*), one will be free from evil [or hatred]." [*Analects* 4.4]

In fact, *jên* was such a lofty ideal for Confucius that he claimed he had never met anyone who completely exemplified it—and even declined to claim that virtue for himself, even though we all have the "strength" or ability to be humane:

The Master said, "I have never met a man who really desired humaneness or a man who really hated inhumaneness. One who really loves humaneness would not put anything ahead of it. . . . Is there a person who is able, even for one day, to devote all his energy to humaneness? I have never met anyone who lacked the strength. There may be such people, but I have never met them." [*Analects* 4.6]

The Master said, "As for being a sage or even a humane man, I would not presume to claim such. Perhaps it may be said that I am a man who never tires of learning, never wearies of teaching others." [*Analects* 7.33 (7.34 in some texts)]

Yet Confucius also felt this quality of *jên* was within anyone's grasp, if they would just make the effort to cultivate it.

The Master said, "Is humaneness so far away? If one really yearned for it, one would find that it is right here." [*Analects* 7.29 (7.30 in some texts)]

Since *jên* can be and often is translated merely "human being," Confucius's attitude toward it suggests that he didn't think we are fully human yet. Indeed, that is what Theosophy claims. At the present stage of human evolution, we are more driven by desire than by either thought or wisdom. As C. Jinarajadasa used to put it, at present we "feel-think" or "flink." We do not let our attitudes and opinions be governed by pure *manas*; that will not come for the mass of humanity until sometime in what is termed the "fifth round."

If becoming fully human involves attaining to wisdom (or *buddhi*), even at that point we will have considerable evolution ahead of us. Yet the potential for both dispassionate thought and real wisdom is inherent in us right now— "right here," as Confucius put it. So, although virtue is its own reward for Confucius, it also humanizes us, makes one more fully a human being—that is, a self-directed being, less like an animal, driven solely by desires and instincts.

Finally, Confucius made a distinction between what he termed "learning" (*hsüeh*) and what he called "thinking" (*ssu*). In Chinese, *hsüeh* implies a change in one's behavior, whereas *ssu* is purely theoretical, abstract thinking, divorced from any change. This highlights a basic difference between Chinese and Western sociopolitical and ethical theory. Much of Western philosophy is abstract and has little or no impact on the actual behavior of those who are doing the theorizing. But, as D. C. Lau observes, "*hsüeh* enables a man to become a better man morally. Thus morals, in the Confucian view, are akin to a skill."

But this skill had more than just a superficial, behavioral effect on oneself and those with whom one associated. It could have an almost magical, transformative effect as well. This effect appears in Confucius's discussion of *tê*, pronounced something like "duhr" and usually translated "virtue," but implying a sort of power, more like "moral force." (It is noteworthy that Lao Tzu was not the only ancient Chinese philosopher to make *tao* and *tê* central notions in his philosophy.)

The Master said, "He who rules by moral force (*tê*) is like the Pole Star which remains in its place while all the other stars do homage to it." [*Analects* 2.1]

At times, Confucius speaks of it as if it were purely behavioral:

The Master said, "Moral force (*tê*) never dwells alone. It is bound to have neighbors." [*Analects* 4.25]

That is to say, when one's country, state, city, or neighborhood is safe, well-maintained, prosperous, and cultured, it is bound to attract people to it; and when it is the opposite, people try to move elsewhere. But at other times, Confucius seems to impart to *tê* a magical effect:

Someone asked for an explanation of the Imperial Ancestral (*Ti*) sacrifice. The Master said, "This is something I do not know. Anyone who understood it would be able to manage all under Heaven as easily as if he had it here." And he pointed to his palm. [*Analects* 3.11]

At still other times, one is uncertain which he means:

Chi K'ang-tzu was troubled by thieves. He asked Master K'ung what he should do. Master K'ung replied, "If you were free from desires, they wouldn't steal even if you paid them. . . . If you long for the good, the people will be good. The nature of the gentleman is like the wind, while the nature of the small man is like grass. When wind blows over the grass, the grass cannot help but bend." [*Analects* 12.18–19]

Indeed, Confucius considered *tê* so mysterious that he felt few people really understood it:

The Master said, "Yu [familiar name of the disciple Tzu-lu], few are those who understand moral force (*tê*)." [*Analects* 15.3 (15.4 in some texts)]

However one understands this power of a moral person, it is the capstone of human development, the quality toward which every ruler and every state should aspire. It was something a Sage had in its fullness; it was something which a gentleman had to a lesser degree. Confucius felt that he had developed a method, a Way (*tao*) which would enable us to attain this quality, which would make us not only more moral, but also more humane, therefore more human. That was Confucius's contribution to philosophy. His ideas, therefore, have relevance to us even 2500 years after he lived, for the basic problems of our world today are not fundamentally different from those of his day. And that, surely, proves that his ideas deserve more attention, more study, from Theosophists.

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