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**Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi**

**Virtue in Ancient China**

**Essential Points**

* Ancient Chinese Philosophy is Moral and Political Philosophy
* Focus on virtue and self-betterment/self-cultivation
* Better individuals contribute to better societies

Confucius – focus on tradition makes individuals better

Mengzi – emphasizing innate human goodness makes individuals better

Xunzi – education makes individuals better

* Hardship in the life of Confucius

Grew up in poverty and had menial jobs

Saw the value of hard work and how those at the bottom saw the world

Studied the ancient history classics and rituals of the Zhou Dynasty

Became inspired to spread the wisdom of old, along with novel additions by himself, but was unable to find a ruler who would support him.

He died without knowing how influential his ideas would become.

* The *Analects* of Confucius

Collected sayings recorded by his students

Answers, not inquiries, into how one ought to act and how society will be best organized

In order to bring about harmony, each person must train themselves to be good citizens

To be a good citizen, one must perform and internalize the rituals and etiquette inspired by the Zhou Dynasty and strive to perfect and optimize their relationships with those close to them.

Our affection for others is partial and determined by our social roles. We seek to take care of our parents and siblings first, then those in our neighborhood and at our workplaces, then our city, etc.

* The central virtue of *rén*

Pre-Confucius connotation of being an upstanding and honorable aristocrat/upper-level bureaucrat

Modified to mean being a good person whom others would do well to emulate, or Goodness.

Achieved through moral self-cultivation, the consistent reflection on one’s actions and place in society for the purpose of modifying and bettering one’s behavior.

Not an individualistic but a systematic pursuit, achieved by learning the gestures and emulating those who have achieved mastery

* Understanding as Reciprocity and Empathy

Knowledge is not attained simply through scholarship

The person who truly understands the world is the one who understands the expectation of everyone around them and has a view of how things can be made more harmonious.

Silver Rule: Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself.

The ideal is to eliminate greed and envy, as well as awkwardness and confusion from human interaction to facilitate effortless societal harmony.

* Filial Piety

Behaviors appropriate for respectful adult children that serve as models for other relationships in which one person is below the other person in status

It demonstrates that one must authentically carry out what is expected in one’s relationships, not simply go through the motions, unsympathetically.

* Ritual Propriety

The expectation people have of one another can be met by adhering to standards for public and private, formal and casual behavior

The rites follow the model of older Chinese civilizations

The social rules we follow for formal ritual, such as funerals, are just as important as those we follow when we meet someone and offer the appropriate greeting.

The consistent performance of rites leads to the development of pristine moral habits and attitudes.

Once the rites and rituals are internalized and one’s behavior is refined, then one can begin to act spontaneously and freely, with the certainty that one’s actions are morally approvable.

* Rectification of Names

The connection between personal Goodness and government/societal harmony

This is how we refine our expectations of others and the ability to communicate among large groups of people.

It ensures that everyone knows their roles and that they carry them out properly, e.g., no one ought to wonder what behaviors are appropriate for a son or a friend.

The rectification must be performed by the rulers, both in terms of setting the definitions and meeting the expectations themselves.

Only when the rulers follow the rules can a harmonious society. come about.

* *Dé* “Virtue”

A person who has this makes being good look good – moral charisma.

*Dé* makes other people want to be around this person.

Just by being near, a person with *dé* inspires others to behave better.

The more moral power one has, the more political and societal power they will be able to attain.

The ruler ought to have the most *dé*.

* Mencius – following in Confucius’ steps

He brought ideas about human nature to the fore.

He argued that human nature is good, but it must be cultivated and nurtured, much like a plant in a garden.

Human nature tends toward goodness and only when exposed to damaging conditions does it become bad.

Humans have an inborn, emotional capacity for goodness.

His writings were longer and featured more dialogue.

He had strongly negative opinions about *Mozi*’s theory of “universal love.”

If we care for everyone equally, we will overextend our ability to care.

Everyone must care more for those closest to them, then everyone will get the care they need.

He also disagreed with Yang Zhu’s ideas about the primacy of one’s own wellbeing.

In order to bring about a harmonious society, people must be willing to put others’ needs above their own.

* Situations call for unique responses - there is no code of conduct for spontaneous moral action

Many of the decisions we make are complicated and require moral dexterity.

Shun gave his younger brother a territory to rule even though he was cruel because it was his duty to do so. But he arranged it so that his brother could not inflict damage on the people under his rulership.

* The Four Sprouts

When one cultivates these values, one will become a Good person: compassion, disdain, respect, and approval/disapproval.

It is the ability to make the appropriate distinctions that leads one to Goodness.

* Child in a Well

We will immediately try to save a dying child because there is something innate in us that compels us to help. This is evidence of our innate goodness

* King Xuan and the Ox

We will always care more for what is right in front of us than what is far away.

King Xuan, seeing the ox being led to sacrifice, could not bear to let it be killed. He said to take a sheep instead. The sheep was not near, so it did not influence his compassion.

* Xunzi – Veering on Confucius’ path

Goodness must be taught to all people. No one is born Good.

Human nature is “bad” in the sense that we are not born with compassion and empathy.

Humans crave wealth and power and if left to their own devices will become thieves and try to control others.

The only way to stem these desires is a robust and ubiquitous societal education structure and deliberate effort on behalf of individuals.

He emphasized the rites and rituals, as did Confucius.

He elaborated the psychological effects of these performances. One feels the value of doing things a certain way.

Once everyone has received this social education, they are insured against misunderstandings and disappointments.

Moral education is the only way that human nature can be reformed to achieve *dé* and a harmonious society can be achieved.

* Confucianism was the political doctrine of the Han Dynasty, which lasted about 400 years.