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Chosen Topic: 1

“He who learns but does not think is lost; he who thinks but does not learn is in danger.”
Confucius, *Analects* 2.15.

Introduction

“Knowledge is power.”

Individuals of this modern society have taken this quotation perhaps too literally. Each and every behavior of the Modern Man revolves around this central principle of acquiring more knowledge, a deeper understanding of one’s surroundings and attempts to frenetically look through the objects with which we sustain our lives. Such tendency is not invisible in our daily lives. News reports about changes of education systems and successful cases of reform are an essential part of today’s journalism, not to mention that politicians continually seek to better the system through which we teach the youth. (Or, being a student myself, the system through which I am educated)

In such a context, it is important to note the origin of education and the philosophy upon which the fundamental concept of education is based. Confucius, a Chinese thinker that has dominated East Asian culture and education, is my choice today. This ancient philosopher will surely give us some insights about what it means to “seek truth” and to “be educated.” Most primarily, I will delve into the given quotation of Confucius from *Analects* and analyze its meaning. I will then proceed to discuss the limitations of a Confucian viewpoint on education, but also alternatively show how such limitations have drawbacks of their own. The final parts of this essay will be spent to examine my viewpoint on education and knowledge.

Confucian Mode of Education – Master, should I learn, think, or do both?

In the quotation Confucius points to the reader two possible prerequisites of education. In this part of my essay I will analyze the two presumptions and then present my analysis of Confucius’s intentions.

Confucius writes in a rather pedagogical manner that “He who learns but does not think is lost.” The word “lost” seems to point out that Confucius believes “thinking” is an integral process of learning. Nonetheless, what does it mean to “learn” without “think”? In my opinion, Confucius wrote so in order to warn his pupils that while one should actively seek to acquire important concepts of this world, such concepts need to be thoroughly digested by the process of thinking. Even though education inevitably involves attempts to understand operations of this world, Confucius believes that one should take a step further and utilize the faculty of thinking to more clearly understand the world. One that does not do so will be “lost.” Confucius may have claimed that such a person will be “lost” because he/she will stand alone in a flurry of knowledge, without knowing what to do with the information he/she acquired. Without thinking, pieces of information will float around in our brains, without being organized and not ready to form important insights about this world. Thinking, thus, must have been a crucial part of what Confucius believed is “learning.” Then, does it mean that we

should strive hard to improve our process of thinking? Surely, in some aspects, advancements in one's thinking will lead to better incorporation of knowledge.

Confucius warns, however, that betterment of thinking does not necessarily equate progress in education. In the second part of the given quote he says that to think and not learn is putting oneself in danger. What "danger" will it lead to? In my opinion, the danger that Confucius worries about is the danger of self-assurance and arrogance. It has been argued over centuries that the ability to think perfects a human being – that the faculty of thinking is what differentiates human beings from animals, and that difference in the ability to think will make one more superior than the other. If one relies on this ability, with so little knowledge about the world, and make one's own conclusions about this world – whether they be logical or illogical – one will be in the danger of putting himself at the center of this world. And that danger is something from which we cannot easily escape; one who is solely committed to one's own beliefs for a long time will not be able to accept alternative viewpoints unless one's original convictions are comprehensively disproven.

Thus, in conclusion, Confucius warns that education should not only serve to use or improve thinking, nor learning. Two possibilities arise from this interpretation: 1) We should neither learn nor think and 2) We should learn and think in balance.

The first option is one that greatly contradicts much of what is known about Confucius. But it is not because of my rather superficial understanding of Confucius that I reject this option. Rather, I believe Confucius did not advocate for this interpretation because it is one that puts a human being into ultimate nihilism. In my opinion, to not learn and not think is to cease all possible interaction with the world. Learning primarily involves interpreting the world through our senses (a point I will later analyze) and ceasing to observe and feel the world will put a human being to a deeper level of "danger." This nihilistic individual will not be able to position himself in this world and only be a part of a larger picture, one that is not necessarily distinguishable and unique – even more "lost" and more "in danger."

This assertion allows me to consider the more acceptable option of the two – that we should use learning and thinking in balance, however precarious, in our process of education. Ultimate education for Confucius must have involved both interpreting the signs and presumptions of this world (learning) and the ability to independently use the knowledge and digest the information to form important individual philosophy of the world (thinking). Thus, a Confucian mode of education is one that involves an active interaction between the external world and the internal self. A flow of information from the external world into the internal world will be achieved from learning, and the flow of ideas from the internal to the external will form thinking. Through this process, Confucius should have been able to transform himself into a "true learner," one that possesses important insights of this world and one that educates the youth about such acumens.

The Confucian Trap – Balance is great, but can it be achieved?

In the previous section of my essay I analyzed from my perspective what Confucius believed to be the two important presumptions about education. In this part of my essay I will attempt to rebut to his arguments on education and demonstrate why they are limited.

My first rebuttal on the Confucian means of education is that there is little distinction between thinking and learning. He argued that thinking and learning should be achieved in balance. He does

not, however, specifically tell the reader to what extent such balance needs to be practiced. Is this balance something that can be achieved through a rather simple process – perhaps, reading a book for one page for an hour, and thinking about what the book meant for another hour? Or does this involve a lifelong process that cannot be easily identified, something that is only achievable in one's minds? Even though we put such objections aside for individual decisions, questions about his differentiation between thinking and learning still remain. After all, is it possible to learn anything without thinking? Vice versa? Many people believe that learning and thinking are fundamentally related aspects of the human mind that cannot be separated. One cannot acquire insights of this world without being able to use rational thinking in the process. Confucius's logic is under the premise that somehow we will be able to draw a fine line between learning and thinking. He argues that parts of learning that happen without thinking and parts of thinking that happen without learning are inherently perilous. The differentiation itself, however, remains uncertain, blocking further assessment of his argument. A point that arises from this argument is that Confucius fails to accommodate different modes of learning in his ideas of education. Each individual takes on a different form of learning, and one may actually "learn" in the process of "thinking." This lack of distinction makes it particularly difficult to practice what Confucius preached to be ideal.

In addition, Confucius is subject to the same limitation that all human beings face in the process of learning: the limitation of senses. Eventually what he wanted to achieve through balance of learning and thinking would be comprehension of fundamental aspects of this world. Such understanding, however, is merely based on what people "perceive" to be true, and does not necessarily reflect the "real truth." Although it is dangerous to assume that there exists any concept like "the real truth," human beings should not call an object "green" just because the object is seen as green to the human eye. Limitations of the human body make it rather unthinkable to argue that some statements in this world are universally true. Moreover, what we believe as "true" is also subject to experience and conventions. Philosophers of different cultures have not even been able to agree on whether truth exists in the first place; and, if it exists, what form it takes. Eventually, truth may be no more than a statement of belief – one that is necessarily limited because it is derived from a human being. Confucius wishes to acquire these beliefs and believe that they are some inevitable insights of this world. Unfortunately, learning of this form is no more than a trap that forces human beings to learn about truth, only to make them find out later that those truths are intrinsically human inventions.

If we consider the way Confucius taught his pupils, the limitations of a Confucian education becomes only clearer. In one of the most politically turbulent periods of Chinese history, "Spring and Autumn Period," Confucius was revered as one of the greatest thinkers of the world that is able to provide laymen vital philosophical teachings. He met their expectations by educating the Chinese youth about different aspects of the universe and life. A problem that can arise from this process is that he might have committed the same errors that he warns youth to avoid. He practiced a one-way of learning. Being the great intuitive thinker himself, he "taught" his pupils about what he believed to be "true" about life and the virtues that a man should exercise. What if all his teachings were made from an imbalance between learning and thinking? Then, won't his pupils commit the same errors he made? His pupils are often depicted as inferior to Confucius in intelligence and intuition, thus making Confucius's arguments always the more convincing ones. In this lack of interaction, were the students able to employ the "balance" that Confucius encouraged?

Finally, Confucius's perception of "balance" in education seems to suggest that there is little room for practicality in learning. Although I used the term "digestion" in an attempt to imagine what Confucius meant when he talked about "thinking," his perception of education is not one that inherently is relevant to the real world. If, disregarding all the objections stated above, we are capable of differentiating learning and thinking, gaining knowledge about some "ultimate truth" of this world" and Confucius did not commit any errors himself, what point is there to "learn and think"? Of course, it is a question that cannot be fully answered without reading his entire text, but if he believed that knowledge is, in itself, virtuous, this will only serve as some idealistic viewpoints on education, not something that can be achieved as a goal. Confucian thoughts on education, then, will be no more than a conceptual artifact.

Limitations of the Confucian Trap – The Master's arguments remain uncontested in many aspects

As a student striving hard to grasp even the most rudimentary meaning of philosophy, I find it not difficult to imagine the Master's angry face as I have been trying to rebut to his belief on education. (I even named the limitations of his arguments a "trap") In this section of my essay I will examine the limitations of my refutation of Confucius.

Is there a distinction between "learning" and "thinking"?

It is true that if there is a distinction between learning and thinking, then it certainly makes things easier to practice what Confucius preached. However, further analysis of my argument shows that such distinction may not be necessary.

Perhaps the entire process of education exists for the purpose of distinguishing "learning" from "thinking." Then, it is not required that one has such distinctions cleared up before or during the process of his education. The differentiation may be set as the ultimate goal of education, something that should be achieved *through* exercising both. And in this process, one will not only discern "learning" from "thinking," but also achieve the eventual objective of education that Confucius wanted his pupils to achieve.

Is there "truth" in this world?

My analysis of lack of truth in this world is problematic on two levels. Firstly, one cannot substantively prove whether truth exists or not. God's existence is an appropriate analogy – because God cannot be "proven" to exist or "disproven" to exist (all human conclusions about God, essentially, are expectations that he *might* or *might not* exist). Similarly, most arguments about truth or its non-existence start from the assumption that truth does (not) exist. There is an equal possibility of truth's existence or non-existence, and, more importantly, my argument fails to show why human beings should *not* be the central determiners of truth. My perception of truth shows that because human beings have limitations of their own, what they believe as true cannot be the "real truth." What if, however, human beings are the only creatures in this world that can even conceive of the concept of truth? Then, certainly, there is less reason to cast doubt on what is considered "truth" because eventually, human beings are the ones that come to distinguish truth and utilize it to their benefit.

In addition, if truth really does not exist in this world, there are significant negative consequences. There are aspects of the human life in which human beings need to rely on truth for an action. For instance, if a surgeon believes that no truth exists in this world, then should the patient be left

without any action, because human perceptions about this world are necessarily limited? Human beings are creatures that at many times need truth along with its moralistic convictions. My perception of truth fails to accommodate this aspect of human life.

Perhaps, Confucius himself was in his own trap.

This argument is problematic because this is no more than a doubt. It's a poke at Confucius's reasoning, not one that can clearly disprove his arguments. If it is true, then his arguments would be certainly less convincing, but there is an equal possibility that it may be not true as well.

In addition, because my argument is no more than a simple disagreement, it is possible to imagine the implications of Confucius's arguments being valid. I have noted in the previous section that because Confucius taught in a specific, one-way manner, it may not have been possible to accommodate different educational needs of individuals. However, if Confucius himself was the ultimate "intuitive thinker" that possessed insights about this world, then it is also possible that his argument on education can take into account different forms of learning. His statement could have been the central principle of all forms of education, and no matter what methodology education adopts, "learning" and "thinking" should be balanced in an appropriate manner.

Confucian mode of education has no implication for this world.

The final argument I made in the previous section is that Confucius does not seem to suggest any practical applications of knowledge that we gain. I have previously acknowledged that this argument cannot be fully persuasive because of the sheer limitation of Confucius's philosophy. If we consider the historical background in which Confucius lived, this argument becomes less cogent. Confucius lived in a period in which there were many different groups vying for power, invading each other in an uncontrolled manner. In the middle of this confusion Confucius wished to educate the youth about the world and how it should be approached. In such turbulence, no practical application of knowledge may have been required. Because people were dissatisfied with the real world to a significant degree, perhaps what they sought for was philosophical analysis of the world and ideals to be achieved. If that is the case, my attack on Confucian philosophy is no longer than a straw-man attack; my argument, then, is one that ignored the historical connotations of Confucius.

Meaning of Education – What should we conclude from the Master?

After long philosophical musing about Confucius's belief on education, it is now time to consider what implication Confucian philosophy has in the modern world today.

There is an important presumption that Confucius makes in the given quotation. He assumes that whether it be learning or thinking, the individual himself/herself should be the subject of this process. No one forces "He" to learn and not think, or vice versa – "He" is to decide for himself, whether he has fallen to imbalance that Confucius warns against, and if so, put himself aside from such imbalance and strive to achieve a state of balance.

This is a significant assumption because it is one that is often neglected in education. For long, education has focused on transferring the knowledge of ancestors to descendants. This process, obviously, is required to some extent; it is a necessary process for sustenance of life. The problem, however, is that oftentimes, education has focused too much on the transmission of insight.

This imbalanced attention has given birth to certain boundaries, from which students cannot be rescued. They have created homogenized viewpoints and submissive individuals who neither “learn” nor “think.” These boundaries may be considered a failure to Confucius because such a process does not create an ego, the “I” – instead, it makes an individual a passive receptor of knowledge. From Confucius, therefore, we can conclude that an education system needs to create the “I”s from students. The “I”s may be individual representations of characters, intellect, and morals. The “I”s, through a process of active interaction, will be able to achieve diversity in this world at a deeper level, which is only superficially accomplished in the status quo.

Only if individual identity is fully developed will one be able to “learn” and “think” in balance. Without clear philosophy of one’s life the Master’s goals are only idealistic.

Conclusion

Setting Confucius’s quote on learning as the starting point of my discussion, I went through a number of aspects of his philosophy. Firstly, I interpreted the given quotation from my perspective and concluded that he wanted his students to both “think” and “learn.” Then I endeavored to challenge the viewpoint held by Confucius, and also examined the limitations of my challenges. Moving further from discussion of his philosophy and possible limitations of his logic, I tried to relate Confucius’s philosophy on education with the real world, attempting to present my viewpoint on education.

Although in the previous paragraphs I have confidently argued, inspired by Confucius’s argumentation, that there needs to be a change in the philosophy of education, I find it difficult and embarrassing to write about education in the face of teachers and professors. I have to also acknowledge that my discussion, in some parts, was less philosophical but more secular. However, analysis of my “naked” arguments in front of Confucius’s statements made it possible for me to think deeply about the philosophy of Confucius and what he believed is the ideal education. I have also had the opportunity to link his philosophy to the real world and see its implications. A great chance it was, as now I am clearly motivated to study the more complex concepts of Confucius, along with his arguments on a range of different issues.