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Chosen Topic: Topic 1: Confucius

Like most of Confucian teachings, this statement is an advice to people who wish to live a virtuous life or to wisely govern a state. It names two common errors: not thinking and not learning, stating that they have different undesirable consequences.

To examine this statement, we need to understand what thinking and learning means in this context. The meaning of “thinking” is clear, it is no different than in the Western culture. But what learning means is dependent on one’s cultural roots. For a Chinese student in Confucius’ age, learning meant at first learning the complex Chinese writing system and then studying the theoretical and historical works of the past (later the Confucian works were taught as the old classics). According to his (as always, unreliable) biography by his followers, Confucius spent no less than thirty years of his life with studying the classics. So I interpret it so that he uses “learning” in a sense closer to “studying” and not in the senses of learning from experience or learning a trade. In this essay I will use the word learning as Confucius did, to mean the reading and memorization of the artistic, historical and legal literature.

This already shows a distinctive feature of learning: dependence on one’s cultural environment. Most of the literature Western children can learn in school didn’t exist in Confucius’ age, except the Homeric epics and some parts of the Bible. So would Confucius approve of modern education of learning if they don’t learn the material he learned when he was young? This is open to interpretation, but here are some possible answers.

1. Western society is misguided exactly because it does not teach to its children the same texts that Confucius learned when he was young.
2. Knowledge of humanity is increasing, so the curriculum in modern schools is justified because it teaches literature whose wisdom already superseded the wisdom of ancient Chinese literature.
3. Ultimately, we can learn the same knowledge of universal humanity hidden in both modern Western and ancient Chinese literature.
4. Children should learn whatever their teachers and parents tell them to learn.

To see more clearly, we can generalize these statements:

1. There is one particular set of texts that everyone would need to read and interpret.
2. Knowledge of humanity is always progressing, so children need to learn the latest developments, that is, the latest texts deemed to have value.
3. Whatever texts children learn, they will get universal knowledge about humanity and the world.

4. The principal aim of learning is not gaining knowledge, but being immersed in one's culture.

Of course, Western philosophers prefer autonomous thinking, that is, reason as a way of learning philosophy. Plato implicitly denied these four general statements by saying that the Homeric epics shouldn't be taught to young people because they are confusing.

The first opinion is mostly held by religious people, and these people often think that even nonbelievers will gain spiritual insights and join their religion if they read their holy books. Also, dictators often found their personality cult by writing a book and having it taught in school. Mao Tse Tung's Red Book is an archetypal example (followed by e.g. Gadhaffi's Green Book), and also builds on the traditional Chinese emphasis on learning and quoting classic works, the same tradition Confucius refers to. But Confucius never gave a complete list or recommendation of his readings, so probably he did not insist that his followers should read all the books he has read.

The second view is most prominently represented by the optimism of the Enlightenment. They criticized classical books and wrote their own views, believing that the authority of the classics is superseded by their use of reason. Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason invalidated the then-prestigious Aristotelian metaphysics using this principle. Regarding Confucius, he didn't hold the second view. He appealed to authority, especially fathers and kings, as an important part of his philosophy, which in turn became the philosophy endorsed by the Han Empire after its rise.

A strange fusion of the first and the second view sometimes appears when thinkers try to back their thoughts with the authority of previous philosophers, for example Lenin stating that his work is the logical continuation of that of Karl Marx, and Mao Tse Tung in turn claiming himself to be the true theoretical and practical follower of Lenin, then Cambodian dictator Pol Pot appealing to the authority of Mao. In the end, Pol Pot's actions and theories had nothing to do with Marx. (Also, the debate of whether Stalin or Trotsky represented the true continuation of Marxism-Leninism was quite definitively solved with a bluntly unphilosophical ice axe.) So we could accept the first two views in themselves, but not the fusion of the two.

The third view is also optimistic, because it states there are many kinds of equally legitimate paths of learning to the same universal truth. This is problematic because talking about the universal truth about humanity in a non-rigorous way is the domain of religion, but religions usually hold the first view. Talking about the universal truth about humanity in a rigorous way is the domain of philosophy. Modern philosophy takes a variant of this third view by recommending texts so that the student will have something to agree or disagree with, thus, it will inspire thoughts, and these thoughts will hopefully make the student a better philosopher.

The fourth view may seem to be somewhat cynical, as it disregards any inherent value of the works and only takes into account the surrounding culture, but this appears to be the actual purpose of learning in Confucius' quoted statement. Of course, there is always something to learn from classic works, but the emphasis here is that reading the literature of a culture, country or family where one belongs builds a connection to that culture, and thus it makes a step towards being the member of a community. On a miscellaneous note, this points to a sad and interesting dilemma for modern people. If we are given a choice between reading poetry by an old seldom-read poet of our language and simply watching a popular TV show, which one should we choose if we want to get closer to our community? (For simplicity, assume this community is a nation.) If we read poetry, we get closer to our nation as an abstract concept. On the other hand, watching the TV show gives us a common

experience with the other people of our nation, thus we get closer to the people of the nation or community. As long as the nation or community itself is not intellectual, its intellectual members are practically excluded. This results in intellectuals turning away from the community and anti-intellectualism opinions in the nation. This results in character of the lone thinker that we will discuss.

Communities provide safety to the individual. This is why Confucius says that he who thinks but does not learn is in danger. He tries to understand the world on his own, and will understand more than others, but he does not have the community to support him nor cautioning examples from history, and is alone with his thoughts. At first, he will think critically about society, later he will think radically, finally, he will act radically. Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is an archetypical example from literature.

On the other hand, Confucius knew well that much of the learned material is arbitrary and specific to his Chinese culture, but it is necessary to maintain order. This is why he says that learning without thinking will get one lost. If one does not think, one cannot judge the importance of what one reads, he cannot resolve the conflicts between contradictory opinions one has read, and will believe almost anything that is written. He is not in direct danger, but he doesn't have an appropriate perspective on his culture and community. From a western point of view, he is incapable of both cultural and personal self-reflection. Heraclitus, who is approximately Confucius' Greek contemporary, explicitly stated in one his fragments that knowledge alone does not teach people to be wise, and then gave a list of famous knowledgeable authors like Hesiod whom he considered to be in error.

Confucius' quoted statement encourages finding a balance between studying and thinking. From now on, I will attempt to show that this balance exists only in utopian societies, and in reality, we should choose thinking over studying whenever possible, except in social philosophy.

Confucius says that he who thinks but does not learn is in danger. As we have seen, this is true, but I will argue he who learns and thinks is also in danger. This is because we said that he is ought to be protected from radical thoughts by the community and by examples from history. But protection in matters of philosophy cannot be given only by the sheer numbers of people and past events, only by a community of philosophical people, which is very rare. Many philosophers have recognized this and decided to live away from their community sometimes even in physical sense. Among them were Heraclitus, the hedonist Epicurus, the Taoist Lao Tzu, and later on Friedrich Nietzsche. They have seen that by thinking, they are in danger, but they could not hope for protection from their philosophically ignorant communities.

These people have indeed produced radical thoughts, and sometimes these thoughts had a destructive effect both on the philosopher and the society. This danger stems from the fact that they wanted to reform their communities without themselves participating in the community life. They tried to handle society in an abstract way, from an intellectual viewpoint. Successful social reformer, like Confucianists, worked within the society they wanted to reform, and great philosophers who have successfully lived intellectually "outside" of their society which they perceived as corrupt were successful exactly because they did not build abstract social theories, but rather endorsed a simple lifestyle in small communities like Lao Tzu does in the last chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, or like Epicurus considered the closed garden with his friends a place he wouldn't want to leave.

So it seems that philosophers have a choice between the type of philosopher exemplified by Confucius, reforming the society by advising those in power, and the type exemplified by Lao Tzu, removed from his contemporary society, but seeking wisdom independently. Although it may be worthwhile to note that Taoist philosophy was effectively wiped out by the order of the Chinese emperor, who was advised by the followers of Confucius.