

## John Dewey and Confucius in Dialogue: 1919-2019<sup>1</sup>

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In April 1919, when John Dewey arrived in China, the time was not ripe for a dialogue—on fair and equal terms—between his philosophical standpoint and the Confucian tradition.

Dewey's reputation as philosopher and educator was sharply on the rise. He had just, three years earlier, published his magisterial *Democracy and Education*. In this work, he built on his theory, advanced in *The School and Society*, of active learning through school occupations, and offered a new vision of democratic education for inter-ethnic understanding and world peace. As World War One came to an end, both he and this groundbreaking book had gained worldwide attention.

By contrast, the Confucian tradition, which had dominated Chinese education for more than 2000 years, was in sharp decline. This tradition had developed directly from the works of Confucius, and became frozen in orthodoxy after the revival of the Confucian tradition by the Song period philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200), whose work became regarded as the benchmark in further Confucian discourses.<sup>2</sup>

The educational ideals expressed in this tradition have recently been elegantly synthesized by Charlene Tan (2017) as follows:

The aim of education is to inculcate *ren* (humanity) through *li* (normative behaviours) so that learners could realise and broaden *dao* (Way). To achieve this aim, the curriculum should be holistic, broad-based and integrated where students constantly practise what they have learnt through self-cultivation and social interaction.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, as the educational program prescribed by Zhu Xi became institutionalized, students took up the study of the classic Confucian works primarily to compete in the rigid examination system. The ideal aim of Confucian education eroded, and the orthodox curriculum impeded the introduction of educational arrangements more suited to modern conditions.

At the time of Dewey's arrival, leading Chinese scholars including Cal Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, and Hu Shih were denouncing the Confucian past and calling for a new forward-looking Chinese culture shaped by Western ideas. "Democracy" and "Science" were their watchwords. They demanded the rejection of hierarchical and paternalist structures, the replacement of traditional Chinese with an accessible vernacular language, mass education, and the liberation of women. "Down with Confucius and Sons!" was the popular slogan of the day.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper appeared in the *Journal of East China Normal University* 2 (2019), 59-66.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Berthrong, "Neo-Confucian Philosophy," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (n.d.), available at <https://www.iep.utm.edu/neo-conf/>.

<sup>3</sup> C. Tan, "Confucianism and education," in G. Noblit (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-18. Draft retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326412668\\_Confucianism\\_and\\_Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326412668_Confucianism_and_Education).

<sup>4</sup> Ho Hsin-chuan & Prof. Axel Schneider, "Workshop Report" (paper presented at Confucianism and Modern Society, Leiden, Netherlands, May 28-29, 2009), available at <http://www.doc88.com/p-9743327692163.html>.

The challenge to Confucian orthodoxy was not unprecedented. In the Ming period, the great philosopher-poet Wang Yangming (1472–1529) offered an opposing account of self-cultivation of the *xin*, or mind-heart, which implied a different pattern of education.<sup>5</sup> From the 17th century, when Chinese scholars were introduced to Western ideas by Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci and others, the Confucianism cultural monopoly was itself eroding. New trends of skepticism and empiricism converged in the School of Evidential Learning, which subjected Confucian classics to philological criticism, and adapted the slogan “seek truth from facts.”

By the mid-19th century, even traditional Confucian scholars were aware of the vulnerability of China to foreign military and industrial powers. Recognizing that the long-standing Confucian aversion to technical arts had contributed to China’s military weakness, they sought to import Western science and technology.<sup>6</sup> But the attitude of Confucian elites was deeply ambivalent. They wanted to import science and technology, but also to contain them as mere add-ons to Confucian culture. They tolerated Western technology as “function,” but sought to retain Confucian “substance.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Significantly, Wang’s position on the sequence of thought and action in learning opposed that of both Confucius and Zhu Xi. For the latter, investigating the classic works was the preliminary stepping stone to action as a wise person. Wang, like Dewey, conceived on the contrary that thought grew directly out of action situations, and that thought and action were always discrete facets of one complex action-thought-action complex. As a result, my account of Confucian educational theory does not fit Wang and his followers.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> James Yang, *When Confucius “Encounters” John Dewey: A Historical and Philosophical Analysis of Dewey’s Visit to China*, PhD dissertation, (University of Oklahoma, 2016).

By the time of Dewey’s visit in 1919, the humiliating defeats in the Sino-Japanese War (1905) and the First World War proved that importing science and technology as mere “function”—cut off from its cultural roots in the scientific revolution and Enlightenment—could not protect China from Japan and the West.

The table was thus set for Dewey’s arrival. China was calling for help from “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” and Dewey exemplified both.

## Dewey in China

Among the young intellectuals who greeted Dewey upon his arrival in China, many had studied abroad; seeing China from a distance, they appreciated it as one nation among others in the modern world and asked: In what direction should the new China advance? They now sought in modern science, technology, and democracy new cultural ideals for China.

While in China, Dewey gave almost 200 lectures in eleven provinces. He was welcomed everywhere—his audiences frequently numbered in the thousands. He spent the majority of his time, however, in two provinces (Jiangsu and Zhejiang), homes of the dynamic industrial and commercial cities of Nanjing and Hangzhou. It was there that he had the most lasting influence.<sup>8</sup>

Two series of Dewey’s lectures were translated into Chinese and widely circulated during Dewey’s visit. These have been re-translated into English.<sup>9</sup> He also gave many lectures on

<sup>8</sup> Zou Zhenhuan, “The ‘Dewey Fever’ in Jiangsu and Zhejiang During the May Fourth Movement and Its Relation to the Cultural Tradition in Jiangnan,” *Chinese Studies in History* 43, no. 4, (Summer 2010), 43–62.

<sup>9</sup> Robert W. Clopton & Tsuin-Chen Ou, *John Dewey, Lectures in China, 1919-20*, (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1975).

educational topics—ranging from popular education, student self-motivation, and the improvement of teaching materials—all of which were widely reported in the Chinese press.<sup>10</sup> Most of these have not yet been translated into English.

Dewey's primary message in his published lectures was that the conception of "science" had failed to penetrate China—Chinese intellectuals, in the wake of the Boxer rebellion, had been interested not in science, but only on its technological payoff. Dewey stated that "Oriental people . . . do not really grasp the significance of the development of science; they confuse the results of science—the development of technology—with science itself, and consequently fail to develop a scientific attitude."<sup>11</sup>

This "scientific attitude" implied, for Dewey, not just the acceptance of science as the best method for understanding the natural world, but also the wholehearted embrace of an empirical mindset in addressing problems of everyday social life. He condemned the "predisposition to obey the ancients"—to treat knowledge as already fixed and transmitted through memorization, recitation, and examination. In 1921 he wrote that, for China to adapt to prevailing world conditions, "a new mind must be created."<sup>12</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of Dewey's visit, new experimental schools were established—especially in Nanjing and Hangzhou. These

persisted through the Republican period.<sup>13</sup> Later, China adopted a model for higher secondary and tertiary education with many American features, though one far from Dewey's ideal vision. In the wake of the "Four Modernizations" movement, science and technology have now replaced Confucianism as the basis for Chinese higher education. Indeed, unless today's Chinese students major in Chinese studies, they may complete their entire period of university study without even coming into contact with classical Confucian texts or ideas.<sup>14</sup>

Contemporary Chinese scholars are, however, now reconsidering the Chinese intellectual tradition. The term "New Confucianism" is currently used to refer to a movement to revive elements of the Confucian tradition and bring them into conversation with Western ideas. New Confucianism holds that China must learn from the West's modern science and democracy, while the West must learn from China's Wisdom traditions.<sup>15</sup> The time for a dialogue on equal terms between the Deweyan and Confucian traditions has arrived.

## Dewey's Contribution to the Dialogue

What does Dewey bring to the table for this dialogue? We can understand Dewey's vision of education only by setting it within his theory of the individual in society, and the relations

<sup>10</sup> Zhenhuan, "The 'Dewey Fever.'"

<sup>11</sup> Robert Clopton and Tsuin-Chen Ou, *John Dewey, Lectures in China*, 238.

<sup>12</sup> Sor-hoon Tan, "The Pragmatic Confucian Approach to Tradition in Modernizing China," *History and Theory* 51 (December 2012), 23–44. See also John Dewey, MW13:95, in Jo Ann Boydston (Ed.), *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–1991). All subsequent citations to the collected works will be cited in notes, with EW standing for *Early Works*, MW for *Middle Works*, and LW for *Late Works*.

<sup>13</sup> Zhenhuan, "The 'Dewey Fever.'"

<sup>14</sup> Wm. Theodore De Bary, "Confucian Education and the 'Point of Democracy'" in Wm. Theodore de Bary (Ed.), *Confucian Tradition and Global Education*, with contributions by Cheung Chan Fai and Kwan Tze-wan, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 18ff.

<sup>15</sup> See Umberto Bresciani, *Reinventing Confucianism: The New Confucian Movement* (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2001).

among individual action, learning, and knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

**The Individual in Society.** Dewey shared with classical Chinese thought the idea that individual human beings are thrown into historical society between past and future.<sup>17</sup> Through early cultural conditioning grounded in cultural tradition, human infants acquire the ways of the group, which filter down into habit. Individuals are thus thoroughly saturated by society and inconceivable apart from their social relations. Dewey wrote, “men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations to one another.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, humans only become “individuals” through social habituation and social relationships.

**Acting, Thinking, and Learning.** Habits acquired through social experience can guide individuals through qualitative feeling and spontaneous thought-in-action as they act to satisfy needs and ends.<sup>19</sup> By “experience,” Dewey meant the complex of acting and undergoing the consequences that result. By “primary experience,” Dewey meant action undertaken without the guidance of explicit knowledge. Sometimes such acts prompted by habit fail qualitatively to fit emerging situations; action impulses may not feel quite appropriate. Or acts may

simply fail to achieve their desired ends. In both cases, individuals then sense frustration and the hesitation of doubt. This hesitation marks the terminus of “primary” experience.

For Dewey, the first response to doubt is “thinking”—considering possible alternative means to the desired ends. This may involve the utilization of available knowledge, and when it does, it enters the realm of “secondary experience.”<sup>20</sup> If individual thinking, even when assisted by available knowledge, fails to resolve doubt, individuals can seek further insight from others, including peers and elders through communication. When informal knowledge sharing still fails to resolve problems, individuals and groups must then resort to more methodical inquiry. Contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies establish research universities as the primary homes for systematic inquiry.<sup>21</sup>

A good society for Dewey is a democratic society, characterized by rich communication within and across all social groups, so that each individual gains access to the best ideas for solving individual and collective problems. For Dewey, individuals develop democratic dispositions and thus become moral agents by acting cooperatively and openly exchanging ideas. Schools and universities conduce to democracy by building learning experiences around cooperative inquiry and ameliorative social action.

**Dewey’s Critique of Conventional Classroom Education.** On the basis of these ideas, Dewey offered a sharp critique of conventional education. By the late-19th century, a conventional model for top-down classroom learning

<sup>16</sup> In this section I draw on materials from my article “Thinking in Dewey’s Experimentalist Education: The Contribution of the Internet and Digital Tools,” *ECNU Review of Education* 1, no. 2, (2018), 1–22. Retrieved from [http://www.roe.ecnu.edu.cn/\\_upload/article/files/87/db/4437d47342a0acc3f0b7cbc39152/e4dd08e5-3e41-4554-8d84-3782a4dba555.pdf](http://www.roe.ecnu.edu.cn/_upload/article/files/87/db/4437d47342a0acc3f0b7cbc39152/e4dd08e5-3e41-4554-8d84-3782a4dba555.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Dewey lays out this picture of human action in his first China lecture, Dewey, “*Lectures in China*,” 45ff, and many other places. For Confucian parallels, see Geir Sigurdson, *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning*, (Albany: SUNY Press): 19–38.

<sup>18</sup> John Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy,” in EW1:231–2.

<sup>19</sup> Dewey discussed the role of qualitative awareness and the non-cognitive background of action in John Dewey, “Qualitative Thought,” in LW5: 243–262.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey drew this distinction between primary and secondary experience in John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in LW1.

<sup>21</sup> For further elaboration of this point, see Leonard J. Waks, “John Dewey’s Conception of the University,” in Steven Fesmire (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

prevailed in the United States. By the 20th century, this model has been extended throughout the world—from Albania to Zimbabwe.

In picture after picture of classrooms, students sit facing forward, pencil poised, notebooks opened, listening to their teachers and taking notes, trying to understand and memorize their lessons. The lesson content is prescribed and pre-organized. Learners have no input. Teachers give tests to assure that lessons have been learned. This conventional approach has been called the “factory” model of education because it uses an assembly line approach.

In *The School and Society*, Dewey demonstrated his total rejection of this conventional model:

If we put before the mind’s eye the ordinary schoolroom, with its rows of ugly desks placed in geometrical order, crowded together so that there shall be as little moving room as possible, desks almost all of the same size, with just space enough to hold books, pencils and paper, and add a table, some chairs, the bare walls, and possibly a few pictures, we can reconstruct the only educational activity that can possibly go on in such a place. It is all made “for listening” ... passivity, absorption; there are certain ready-made materials . . . which the child is to take in as much as possible in the least possible time.<sup>22</sup>

The subject matter, he added, “remains unassimilated, unorganized, not really understood. It stands on a dead level, hostile to the selective arrangements characteristic of thinking; matter for memorizing, rather than for judgment; existing as verbal symbols to be mechanically ma-

nipulated, rather than as genuine realities, intelligently appreciated.”<sup>23</sup>

**Learning by Doing.** In Dewey’s alternative model, student thinking about their own issues and concerns replaces rote memorization and shallow understanding. Learners learn by acting and getting feedback from the world. They face difficulties and are forced to think. Thinking does not take place in the students’ heads. Their *thinking* is not something distinct from their *doing*. Consider a schoolgirl growing tomatoes in the school garden. Expressing her expansive personality, she sets out to grow the *biggest* tomatoes. To achieve this end, she will have to *think*—for example, by researching different tomato varieties, testing her soil for necessary nutrients, perhaps experimenting with different varieties under varying soil conditions. She has to make observations, gather data, record and analyze results.

**Learning by Communicating.** In addition to learning by doing, which implies learning by *thinking*, we also learn by *communicating*. To listen and to speak to another, a learner must *think about* points of contact with others, *trying and testing* so as gradually to *receive* other’s way of experiencing and being, and *responding* to contribute to a meaningful exchange. Pictures of students in schools influenced by Dewey show images of students growing gardens, building sheds, taking care of farm animals, experimenting with robots, sharing in groups, and making presentations. The contrast with pictures of conventional classrooms is *stark*.

**Learning from Teachers and Other Adults.** Teachers and other adults help to bring young people along by designing settings and activities which stimulate acting in pursuit of ends made specific by the learners. They con-

<sup>22</sup> Dewey, MW1:22.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey, MW7:269. Dewey also spoke of the “the traits which are characteristic of thinking, namely, uncertainty, ambiguity, alternatives, inquiring, search, selection, experimental reshaping of external conditions,” in LW1:63.

sult with and coach the learners. They *think with* the learners about how the ends may be achieved; through these consultations the learners acquire moral dispositions and thinking habits and skills in these areas of activity. They learn to *think as* gardeners, builders, athletes, or writers. Teachers eventually gather together the lessons that their students learn by doing and thinking and communicating, summarizing them, and eventually connecting them to the stream of organized knowledge as may be found in textbooks.

What is most important is the *sequence* in the presentation of subject matter. First, action in pursuit of learner ends—like growing the biggest tomatoes. Action on the environment generates feedback, including setbacks and difficulties, giving rise to thinking. Second, informal communication with peers and teachers and other adults. Third, instruction that combines what has already been learned in the first two stages with pre-existing, already organized knowledge, in a form that guide and enrich further action.

## The Confucian Contribution to the Dialogue

The Confucian education tradition, as has been suggested above, is diverse. Confucian philosophers over the centuries have developed different—and in some cases conflicting—educational ideas. These ideas, nonetheless, have been adapted by educational officials throughout East Asia in school practices aimed at obedience and conformity.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> T. Kim, “Confucianism, Modernities and Knowledge: China, South Korea and Japan,” in R. Cowen & A.M. Kazamias (Eds.), *International Handbook of Comparative Education*, (Dordrecht: Springer International Handbooks of Education, vol. 22, 2009).

The survival of such practices—top-down, teacher-centered learning aimed at memorization for test preparation—is seen in contemporary China as a problem to be overcome by school reform. When we place Dewey and Confucius in dialogue in the context of school reform, we seek to stimulate new ideas that might be useful—in different ways—for educational renewal, in both East and West.

What, then, can Confucian educators offer in dialogue with Dewey?<sup>25</sup>

Confucian and Deweyan educators have important common starting points. They both see individuals as historically and culturally situated, and existing only in their social-cultural relationships. In both traditions, individuals are seen not as distinct from the socio-cultural or natural environments, but saturated with both.<sup>26</sup> Through language learning and early cultural conditioning, the brute human individual becomes a member of the group and a morally considerable person. Both traditions share the explicit goal of harmonious living for “all under heaven.” Both also offer a view of knowledge as inherently practical, existing for the sake of action for harmony and peace. From these common starting points, the traditions diverge.

**Theory, Practice, Production.** I borrow some conceptual distinctions from ancient Western philosophy to explain this divergence. For Aristotle, there were three basic activities of

<sup>25</sup> In this section I draw on materials from my article “Democracy and the Research University: Confucian Tradition and John Dewey’s Pragmatist Ideal,” (Proceedings of the Conference Fudan University, December 2017) 会议 |

实用主义与儒学思想”国际学术研讨会会□日程.

<sup>26</sup> For the Confucian view of the relational self, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), and Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 18-61.

humans: *theoria* (thinking), *praxis* (doing), and *poiesis* (making, producing).

*Theory*, θεωρία, signified “looking at” or “beholding,” and in philosophy, came to mean contemplative beholding, as in Plato’s theory of contemplation of the Forms. Theory was included in education in the four classical liberal arts—geometry, astronomy, arithmetic and musical harmony—in which mathematical objects are treated as pure forms. Even today, deep thinking is considered to exist “in the mind”—as illustrated by Rodin’s *The Thinker*.

Aristotle sharply distinguished practice, πράξις, or *doing*—from theory. Even general ideas used to guide action were not theory, because theory was self-sufficient—involving no doing, apart from itself. Theoretical thinking is passionate contemplation. Those engaged in *praxis* were *doers*—e.g., government officials, military officers. *Making*, ποίησις, signified activities in which people bring something into being.<sup>27</sup> For Aristotle, all making is a form of imitation of nature or mechanical repetition of ideas formed by others. Aristotle thus had a low opinion of making, as an activity suitable for slaves, and of makers—craftspersons—whose repetitive, other-directed motions makes them like slaves.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: Book 6, chapter 4, 1140a 1–23: “making is different from doing ...All Art deals with bringing something into existence; and to pursue an art means to study how to bring into existence a thing which may either exist or not, and the efficient cause of which lies in the maker and not in the thing made; for Art does not deal with things that exist or come into existence of necessity, or according to nature, since these have their efficient cause in themselves. But as doing and making are distinct, it follows that Art, being concerned with making, is not concerned with doing.”

<sup>28</sup> The discussion of Aristotle here and in the next paragraph cites Aristotle, *Politics*, translated with Introduction and Notes by C.D.C. Reeve, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998).

For Aristotle, therefore, technical education was a contradiction in terms. Education aims at knowledge, but making does not use knowledge—it relies on imitation and repetition. He thus argued that the life as an artisan craftsperson is ignoble and inimical to virtue, and that it is impossible for craftsmen even to engage in virtuous pursuits; the craftsperson only attains excellence as a craftsperson in proportion as he or she becomes a slave. Indeed, so slavish was making that Aristotle in his *Politics* refused even to admit makers as citizens of a well-governed city.<sup>29</sup>

Aristotle accepts that craft products may have some basis in knowledge, e.g., of geometry or physics. But makers merely go through motions prescribed by those who possess such knowledge. In this, he agrees with Confucius that officials do not need to know *how* to make or produce, but only *how to make use of* those who do, and that just *learning* how actually to make or produce is servile.<sup>30</sup>

**Thinking and Doing in Confucian Education.** For Confucian educators, the aim is the *self-cultivation* of learners, leading to their eventual *moral transformation*. Confucian education aims to make learners *jūnzǐ*—superior persons. Like Dewey’s model, the Confucian model has a normative sequence.<sup>31</sup> It begins by initiating

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277b, 1278a, 1260b, 1328.

<sup>30</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 13.4. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277a.

<sup>31</sup> As note 5 indicates, this sequence was challenged in the 15th century by the Ming philosopher Wang Yang-ming. “Despite the emphasis on the need for knowledge to be put into practice, the traditional position presupposed two possibilities: first, that one can have knowledge without/prior to corresponding action; and second, that one can know what is the proper action, but still fail to act. Because of these two possibilities, the traditional position left open the possibility of separating knowledge and action, but called for the overcoming of this separation. However, Wang denied both possibilities. These two denials constitute the essence of Wang’s theory of the unity of knowledge and action. First, according to Wang, it is only through simultaneous action that one

individuals, along with their peers, into ritual practice and study of classical Confucian texts, under the guidance of a Confucian scholar-teacher.

For Dewey, text-based learning is *last* in the sequence. For Confucians, canonical texts come *first*—they are the initial focus of learning, and students are expected to master them. But the aim of study is not merely to memorize them or grasp their literal meaning, but rather to absorb through discussions about them the ancient wisdom they depict. As Barry Allen puts this point, in Confucian education, “classical learning is a school of experience ... The Classics are the works of ancient sages and a record of their experience. The study of this material is a method for establishing an intuitive continuity between that experience and our own.”<sup>32</sup>

While this form of education is said to encourage the “investigation of all things,” this investigation entails reflection upon, and discussion of, canonical classics so as to generate moral knowledge. As Allen explains, investigating all things, as understood by Zhu Xi, signified investigating *principle*: not the *truth* but the *right use* of things, the right way to handle them.

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can obtain knowledge: “If you want to know bitterness, you have to eat a bitter melon yourself.” Wang denied any other possible routes to obtain knowledge. According to Wang, it is not possible for one to put something into practice after acquiring knowledge. This is because knowledge and action are unified already, from beginning to end. We cannot unify knowledge and action because they are already unified.” Youngmin Kim, “Wang Yangming,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (n.d.), retrieved from <https://www.iep.utm.edu/wangyang/>. See also, Bryan Van Norden, “Wang Yangming,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014), retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wang-yangming/>.

<sup>32</sup> Barry Allen, “Pragmatism and Confucian Empiricism,” (Proceedings of the Conference Fudan University, December 2017), 会 □ |

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The concern is to be able to understand, for anything one might confront ... how it fits with humanity in the big picture of everything under Heaven. Having such a place means having a use, a “function” (用), a right, correct, best way of being handled. That is what the investigation of principle investigates.<sup>33</sup>

Knowledge in this sense is inherently moral. Knowledge attained through self-cultivation is thus not merely abstract, or, as we may say, “theoretical,” but inherently practical knowledge.

In sharp contrast with Aristotle, then, Confucian thought, like Dewey’s pragmatism, makes no sharp distinction between thinking and doing, *theoria* and *praxis*. As Elliot and Tsai put it:

For Confucius, “pursuing knowledge” or “knowing” refers to a dynamic process of becoming intelligent, of “realizing” new possibilities for action within a specific set of circumstances of which he is a participant . . . Knowledge is not determined independently of action in the circumstances of everyday life; the relationship between knowledge and action is a non-instrumental one. Knowledge is only fully achieved in action.<sup>34</sup>

The aim of learning is effectiveness in these actions. “You can recite the 300 poems from the *Book of Odes*, but when you try to use them in administration, they are not effective, and in handling the outlying regions, you cannot apply

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<sup>33</sup> Allen, “Pragmatism and Confucian Empiricism,” 262.

<sup>34</sup> John Elliott and Ching tien Tsai, “What Might Confucius Have to Say about Action Research?” *Educational Action Research* 16, (2008), 569–578.

them, then even though you know a lot, what good is it?”<sup>35</sup>

This insistence on the practical point of learning and knowledge became a special emphasis in the Neo-Confucian school of Wang Yangming. For Wang, as for Dewey, learners can gain knowledge only in and through action; knowledge acquired in isolation from action and then *put into* action—*applied to* situations—will always provide a false or misleading guide to action.<sup>36</sup>

In mainstream Confucian education, however, the “investigation of things” in the academy does not involve active interventions in problematic situations. Thus, a thought-action gap between study and real-world action persists in Confucian education.

**Doing and Making in Confucian Education.** Unlike the theory practice distinction, however, that between *practice* and *poesis*, doing and making/producing, is as strong in Confucius as in Aristotle. What *kind* of action is appropriate for the superior person? In the *Analects*, the actions appropriate for *junzi* are typically consulting and advising leaders on policy decisions and regulations—actions appropriate for officials.

But like Aristotle, Confucius urges the *junzi* to stand away from technical arts, from making or producing. The technical arts are denounced as mean and petty:

When Fan Chi requested that he be taught animal husbandry, the Master said “I am not so good for that as an old husbandman.” He requested also to be taught gardening, and was answered, “I am not so good for that as an old gardener.” Fan Chi having

gone out, the Master said, “A small man (*xiao ren*), indeed, is Fan Xu!”<sup>37</sup>

Chinese devaluation of technical arts persisted through the Qing dynasty. While government officials had to complete a classical education and pass a daunting exam, medical practice was for centuries unregulated and devalued.<sup>38</sup> Even after examinations for medical practice were introduced in the Song period, medical doctors still retained relatively low status.

Confucius characteristically asserts that if a superior man loves propriety and righteousness, his influence will be *immediately* felt: “the people from all quarters will come to him, bearing their children on their backs—what need has he of a knowledge of husbandry?”<sup>39</sup> The superior man relies on ordinary men (*xiao ren*) for technical tasks appropriate to their status. The superior man, for example, would never work the land or advise farmers. That would be “servile.”

## What Can Deweyans and Confucians Learn from One Another in Dialogue?

While Dewey agrees with the Confucian tradition on the intimate relationship between knowledge and action, his approach *starts* by situating school learners *directly* in engaging *social and technical action*. Technical arts are not devalued, but honored. There is no place in Dewey’s system of ideas for either moral self-cultivation or textual study outside of the scene of cooperative action.

<sup>35</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 13.5.

<sup>36</sup> Van Norden, “Wang Yangming.”

<sup>37</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 13.4.

<sup>38</sup> Asaf Moshe Goldschmidt, *The Evolution of Chinese Medicine: Song Dynasty, 960–1200*, (New York: Routledge, 2009): 19.

<sup>39</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 13.4.

Given these differences, can we find opportunities for fruitful dialogue?

I argue that we can. Confucians can gain useful insight from Deweyan experimentalists about education in technical arts, while experimentalists can gain equally useful insights from Confucian educators about moral self-cultivation.

We may start with the distinction between social practice/doing and technical action/making. In the Confucian tradition, this has been the distinction between virtuous practical arts requiring knowledge and judgment—those suitable for superior persons—and petty arts requiring mere technical skill—those suitable for ordinary, servile underlings.

This distinction might have been appropriate for Chinese society in the 6th Century BCE (or Greek society in the 4th century BCE). Farming and artisan crafts were governed by unchanging traditional norms. Ordinary people (*xiao ren*) absorbed such norms by osmosis as they grew up. They were expected to demonstrate conformity with convention and obedience to officials in applying them. As Confucius proclaimed, “The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it.”<sup>40</sup>

This passage in the *Analects* may be read in two ways. We may take Confucius here as saying that officials and their advisers possess such sufficient power and authority that ordinary people wouldn't *dare* to disobey. This meaning, however, is not consistent with the main ideas in the *Analects*, as it suggests that superior persons rule by force. We should instead be taking Confucius as telling us that when rulers have undergone moral self-transformation, their worlds—inner and outer—are in proper order. Their integration can be felt by others as a

moral *fact*. Their presence makes itself felt; others *cannot help but* bring themselves into alignment.

The problem here is that in today's technological society, moral knowledge and virtuous character, while necessary, are not sufficient for leadership in any sphere of life—especially in technical areas. Leadership demands flexible scientific and technical knowledge as well as moral judgement. Wise action requires open exchange between leaders and technicians: unequal statuses of wind and grass must be abandoned. The superior person in scientific or technical fields must be both a technical specialist and a wise moral judge, and must communicate with scientists and technologists on equal terms.

Paul Goodman, a great American philosopher and essayist profoundly influenced by Dewey, insisted “technology is a branch of moral philosophy, not of science. It aims at prudent goods for the commonweal.”<sup>41</sup> Traditionally, the education of technical specialists—makers or producers—was not a concern for Confucian scholars, and the devaluation of technical arts contributed to China's technical “backwardness.” Since the “Four Modernizations,” the Chinese have developed scientific and technical knowledge in the Western mode, but scrapped Confucian moral education. The task today is to bring Confucian moral insights to bear on science and technology education and development. Imagine the following:

Fan Chi requested that he be taught animal husbandry. The Master said, “I am not so good for that as an old husbandman.” He requested also to be taught gardening, and was answered, “I am not so good for that as an old gardener.” Fan Chi responded that

<sup>40</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 12.19.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Goodman, *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2010): p. 40.

old husbandmen no longer exist. Animals are now manufactured in factories like so many industrial parts. They suffer greatly. Old gardeners also no longer exist. Plant-based foods are now produced by factory methods using genetic engineering. People are greatly and deeply concerned about the safety and nutritional value of their food. The order of nature is being undermined. This is why I request that the Master teaches me animal husbandry and gardening. Fan Chi having gone out, the Master said, “A wise man (*junzǐ*), indeed, is Fan Chi!”

In this project of unifying moral and technical education, Confucian educators may thus have much to learn in a dialogue with Dewey.

## Dewey and Self Cultivation

The more difficult question is whether Deweyan experimentalists can embrace anything akin to Confucian moral self-cultivation as an element of education.

In the Confucian tradition, self-cultivation progresses through study of canonical Confucian texts. One opening for discussion is that neither Confucius nor Neo-Confucians in the traditions of Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming regarded textual study as valuable for its own sake, much less for enhanced social prestige or exam success. They saw the study of literary texts—rich with practical lessons—as only *one element* in a broad program of moral education that included reflection, dialogue, and fulfillment in action.

But what place can moral self-cultivation play in Dewey’s action-based learning? Dewey sees the growth of morality—empathy and practical efficacy—as *growing directly out of cooperative activity* through action and reflection. Periods of learning set aside for self-cultivation

through classical study would have no place in his educational framework.

The idea of self-cultivation through study is discussed only in one place in the Dewey corpus, where Dewey expresses a caution about literary education. He says that traditionalists urge classical studies as a means of strengthening moral and mental discipline merely to screen them from “intellectual criticism and needed revisions.” But he adds:

The past just as past is no longer our affair. If it were wholly gone and done with, there would be only one reasonable attitude toward it. Let the dead bury their dead. But knowledge of the past is the key to understanding the present. History deals with the past, but this past is the history of the present.<sup>42</sup>

In holding that “knowledge of the past is the key to understanding the present,” however, Dewey is in complete agreement with Confucian educators. Dewey, however, offers three qualifications.

First, he emphasizes economic and industrial history as more valuable for moral purposes than political and military history. The fundamental fact is that humans have to work—to coordinate their actions with forces of nature—to make their living. The historical texts that inform the present must be expanded to include documentary records of occupational life—from invention and architecture, to medicine and law. And we might well add agriculture—gardening and animal husbandry.

Second, humane historical studies must be connected in concrete ways to social action. As Dewey labors this point: “A topic becomes a matter of study—that is, of inquiry and reflection—when it figures as a factor to be reckoned

<sup>42</sup> Dewey, MW9:222.

with in the completion of a course of events in which one is engaged and by whose outcome one is affected.”<sup>43</sup> Humanities study in schools and colleges should not merely *investigate* social and technical action, but actually engage in real world *action*.

Third, Dewey draws back from the very *idea* of classical study in moral self-cultivation. “What is termed spiritual culture has usually been futile, with something rotten about it,” because spiritual culture is conceived as “a thing which a man might have internally—and therefore exclusively.”<sup>44</sup> This is problematic because the self-cultivation Dewey attacks is the *opposite* of Confucian self-cultivation, which is a social practice aimed at social action for a harmonious community: “this cultivation brings about continuity when people’s purposes are engaged with things and events, as they participate in the world together.”<sup>45</sup> This aim is one with Dewey’s ideal of the democratic community.

A Confucian-influenced conception of self-cultivation can enrich Dewey’s educational model. A period of moral self-cultivation grounded in canonical texts from ancient wisdom traditions, prior to specialist scientific and technical studies, has already been proposed by the Dewey-influenced psychologist Abraham Maslow. In his John Dewey Lectures, *The Psychology of Science*,<sup>46</sup> Maslow argued that scientists and technologists today require heightened moral self-awareness precisely because their knowledge grants them potentially limitless power over humanity.

## Conclusion

Despite their differences, Confucian and Deweyan scholars and educators can engage in fruitful dialogue regarding educational renewal.

New models emerging from such dialogues can include study of selected canonical texts from Confucian and other ancient wisdom traditions. Confucian educational classics have much to offer. What is wanted, however, is not mere study of these texts for cultural appreciation, but moral and spiritual guidance *in* social and technical practice. Here, the contributions of Dewey-oriented philosopher-educators may offer useful insight.

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<sup>43</sup> Dewey, MW9:142.

<sup>44</sup> Dewey, MW9:129-130.

<sup>45</sup> Haiming Wen, *Confucian Pragmatism as the Art of Contextualizing Personal Experience and World*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009): 64.

<sup>46</sup> Abraham Harold Maslow, *Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance*, (Chicago: Gateway Editions, 1969).