

The Concept of Man in Confucius' Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper attempts to prove why Confucius accepts the idea of *jen* in concept of man. The solution to the problem is that Confucius' concept of *jen* (human heartedness) is a necessary factor for human society. Man must look to his own nature to practise the principle of *jen*. This paper will contribute towards the realization that the concept of *jen*, peace and harmony will improve not only an individual but also the society.

Key words: Man, *Jen*, individual, society

Introduction

It can be said that philosophical interest has shifted, from material thing and science to man. Man has become the spectator of man. Man cannot be ignored by any thought or any philosophy. Man and his values are primary; this primacy has to be acknowledged by any philosophy.

In the history of philosophy in East and West, man has searched for the meaning of life, his stand point and destination of life. Man, with all the differences in cultural achievements, man's basic urges, instincts, aspirations and ideals remain the same. It is not wrong to say that man, Eastern or Western, is man. However, 'right concept' is very important to focus on man's real existence and man's everyday practice.

In the world today one has pledged oneself to international cooperation and peace. One should know cultural traditions and one has to emphasize dignity of man. Confucius' philosophy is a humanistic philosophy. Its focus is on the creation of harmony between man and the society. Confucius makes *jen* as the centerpiece of his concept of man. It can be said that it is a fundamental virtue of his teaching. '*Jen* is the nearest equivalent to "social virtue". All those virtues which help to maintain social harmony and peace like benevolence, charity, magnanimity, sincerity, respectfulness, altruism, diligence, loving kindness and goodness, are included in *jen*.' (<http://www.religion-cults.com/confucianism>). By studying the social virtues of societies one helps to improve to have a better society.

Man in Confucius' philosophy

A Chinese scholar had written that whether a Chinese is a Confucianist or a Taoist, a conservative or a radical, a scholar or an illiterate, he can be designated that he is a humanist. To know the nature of man is a significant character of Chinese Culture. Confucius observes that it is man that makes truth great but not truth that makes man great. To fulfill the law of human nature is what we call the moral law. The cultivation of the moral law is what we call culture. To learn to be true to oneself is the law of man. There is in it the great humanistic dictum said by Confucius. He said that truth does not depart from human nature. If what is regarded as truth departs from human nature, it may not be regarded as truth. His follower Mencius believes that, 'good man can make good laws but laws alone cannot operate themselves' (Radhakrishnan & Raju, 1960).

In the Chinese concepts of government, to obtain peoples' confidence is very significant. Confucius said that a nation without the people's confidence in the ruler will collapse. To obtain peoples' confidence, what a man ought to do? Peoples' confidence

depends on man's moral character and moral deed. The importance of man is to be virtuous. Man must be virtuous to obtain people's confidence. Similarly, the importance of man can be seen in the doctrine of his follower Mencius. Mencius said that 'in a nation the people are the most important element; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is the slightest' (Radhakrishnan & Raju, 1960).

The importance of man is found not only in Confucianism but also in the early history of China long before Confucius had appeared. In the Shang Dynasty (i.e. the time between 1751 and 1112 BC) there was the belief in the existence of spirits. There are spirits of nature or the spirits of ancestors and they believe that these spirits control the human affairs. The succeeding dynasty serves the spirits and respects them. But Confucianism told the students to honor the spirits but keep them at a distance. They no more trusted the Heaven and also the ancestors. Some of the poets at that time had said; 'never mind your ancestors. Cultivate your virtue' (Radhakrishnan & Raju, 1960).

Confucianists now emphasized man and his virtue. The destiny of man or that of a dynasty no longer depended on the mind of the spirits but on man himself, especially his virtue. In the Confucian system, a divine being does not have a significant role; his philosophy is man-centered and relies on self-effort. From Confucius' teaching, it was learned that the standard of man is not to be sought in Heaven. Man is sufficient to attain the ideal character through education, self-effort, and self-reflection. The goal of life is to live a good moral life. Confucius focused on life here on this earth. A poet said that the calamities are simply caused by man. Whether the mandate of heaven was given to or taken away from a ruler depends on his moral character. The words of rewards or punishments depended on whether man obeyed or violated moral principles. Through his moral deed man could control his own destiny. What here to especially observe is that Confucius stressed more on man's virtue rather than worldly achievements.

Confucius was a great believer that things should be based on virtue, and not on blood. He stated that the ideal person was one of good moral character. The ideal person was also truly reverent in worship and sincerely respected his father and his ruler. He was expected to think for himself, guided by definite rules of conduct. Confucius believed that it has greater effect on the people than enforcement of laws or codes of punishment. So when these types of people were rulers, their moral example would inspire the people to good lives.

The teaching of Confucius has to do with correct behavior in relationship with oneself and others and one's responsibility towards the world as a whole and to the nation in particular. Confucius' teaching is concerned with the relationship between man and man, not between man and spirit as a belief in religion. Confucius therefore wanted to form harmony between man and man, that is, man and society. According to Confucius, the nature of man is fundamentally good inclined towards goodness. Perfection of goodness can be found in sages and saints. Every man should attempt to reach the ideal by leading a virtuous life, by possessing a very noble character, and by doing his duty unselfishly with sincerity and truthfulness. He who is endowed with a good character and divine virtue is a princely type of man. He also pointed out that the princely man sticks to virtue, and the inferior man clings to material comfort. The princely man is just while the inferior man expects rewards and favours. The princely man is dignified, noble, magnanimous, and humble while the inferior man is mean, proud, crooked, and arrogant. Confucius here analyzed characteristics belonging to a man of virtue and a man of inferior.

Confucius set ancient people as an example of the past model or reigning considered being the best one. He specialized not only in the orderly arrangement of society and relationship between people but also in self-perfection and self-development, humanism and

moral rectitude as the ultimate goals of every person. Confucius proposed procedures to cultivate self-development. They are investigation of phenomena, learning, sincerity, rectitude of purpose, self-development, family-discipline, local self-government and universal self-government.

Confucius cannot imagine right attitude to others without the right attitude to oneself. He maintained that 'respect yourself and others will respect you'. (<http://www.chinatownconnection.com/confucianism.htm>). For Confucius, man must have mind of a human being, treating each other with respect and justice as well. Thus things required by him are working for a high moral standard, living in harmony with his fellow men and living in harmony with his nature so that he does not come into disagreement with others in a community. Finally, it is of great importance that man is conscious of his duties, rather than his rights.

Confucius' model leader is to let him honour with the five excellence and banish away the four bad. The five excellent being are when the person in authority is beneficent without great expenditure, when he lays tasks on the people without their repining, when he pursues what he desires without being covetous, when he maintains a dignified ease without being proud, when he is majestic without being fierce and the four bad being are cruelty, oppression, injury and acting the part of a mere official (Zukeran, 2002). Studying these qualities of the ideal leader, one can see similarities between Confucius' ideal leader and his ideal man of *jen*. Both must be fair, generous and selfless people. From the previous quote, however, one can also see an example of the concept of moderation which was prominent in many of Confucius teachings. The ideal leader must lay tasks on people, without their repining. He must pursue what he desires without being covetous. Confucius also goes on to say that wealth and honour are the things desired by every man. But he shall not have them if he has to obtain them in an improper way. The concept of moderation emerges again as long as not acquired using cruelty, deceit or wrong methods. Confucius sees no harm in wealth or material possessions. He sees that it is only human that we desire such things. This reminds us that Confucius is well aware of human nature and what man ought to do.

Confucius held that society was made up of five great relationships: namely,

1. Kindness in the father and obedient devotion in the son
2. Gentility in the eldest brother and humility and respect in the younger
3. Righteous behavior in the husband and obedience in the wife
4. Humane consideration in elders and deference in juniors
5. Benevolence in rulers and loyalty of ministers and subjects

(<http://www.leaderu.com/confucius.html>)

According to Confucius, if these attitudes are practiced there will be harmony among all. A country would be well-governed when all the parties performed their parts aright in these relationships. Confucius said that there was *Tao* (a way or road of righteousness) only when fathers were fathers, when sons were sons, when rulers were rulers and when ministers were ministers. The most important relationship is the family, the basic unit of all humanity. One's roles and relationships define that person. The goal of living is to achieve harmony through acting appropriately in those roles and relationships. Our family relationship is projected into the life of the community and the world. Confucius highlighted far-reaching role of a family in the community of man.

In the family position, the father is the key figure. He must be a good example to his sons. It is the son's duty to obey without questioning and honour his father, even after death. When the father dies, obedience is given to the oldest brother. That means that each family member is obliged to abide by his duties.

The concept of *jen*

It is impossible to discuss Chinese concept of human nature, in particular or of man in general, without taking into consideration the Chinese concept of *jen* and if one is to achieve a state of orderliness and peace, one needs to return to traditional values of virtue. These values are based entirely on the concept *jen*. The fundamental meaning of *jen* is people, human beings, or common people. So the concept is rooted primarily in the social and the political. When combined with the concept of *t'ien ming*, the "mandate of Heaven", the moral order of the universe as encompassed by the imperative that the emperor concerns himself overwhelmingly with the welfare of the people. It's natural that *jen* as meaning common people eventually would come to include the moral obligations of the emperor to the well being of the common people.

As a crucial concept, the word is immensely complex and so cannot be translated easily into English. Traditionally it is translated either as "humaneness" or "humanity" or "benevolence" (Confucius, 1979). The word *jen* is not found in the Shang Dynasty oracle inscriptions. It denotes the general meaning of moral life at its best. *Jen* is considered as the highest good in the Chinese view of values. *Jen*, very seldom mentioned in the literature before or during the time of Confucius, is translated as goodness, man to man-ness, benevolence, humanity and love. It includes filial piety, wisdom, propriety, courage and loyalty to government. It requires the practice of earnestness, liberality, truthfulness, diligence, and generosity. These are the qualities of the personality which define the level of its development and differentiate it from non-human beings. For Confucius these qualities make the basis of moral rectitude.

Confucius made the five modes of ethics. They were *jen* (human-heartedness), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety), *zhi* (wisdom) and *xin* (trustworthiness). Each of these concepts has a lot of shades of meaning and covers almost all the teaching. Among these virtues he emphasized *jen* as the highest esteem. Confucius held that *jen* is not only a special kind of virtue, but also all virtues combined. *Jen* as a cultural value originates with Confucius. Confucius makes *jen* the centerpiece of his philosophy which is always and rigorously ethical and political in its concerns. By Confucius' time, the concept of *t'ien ming* had to encompass more than just the Emperor's moral obligations to his people, but had begun to include more or less all the obligations people had to those that were near to them, such as family. In this sense, *jen* as "benevolence" is a fairly good translation, since the imperative of *jen* is to be concerned for the well-being of others.

Confucius did have a set of principles that he would structure the ideal man. Confucius said that a person who possesses five virtues may be said to have possessed *jen*. They are reverence, kindness, sincerity, sagacity and generosity. From this, one can say that Confucius was in favor of a more peaceful, simple lifestyle. Confucius explained the way to practice *jen* as follow:

'The man of *jen* is one who, desiring to sustain himself, sustains others, and desiring to develop himself, develops others. To be able from one's own self to draw a parallel for the treatment of others; that may be called the way to practice *jen*' (Fung Yu-Lan, 1948).

The practice of *jen* consists of consideration for others with sympathy. That is “reciprocity or self-analogy” and “doing one’s best.” In the first instance one should use oneself as an analogy in dealing with others or what is beneficial to others. In *jen* it also comprises *chung* and *shu*. *Chung* is positive aspect of the practice of *jen*. Do to others what one wishes oneself. It is conscientiousness to others. But knowing this is not enough; one should exert oneself to the best of one’s abilities (*Chung*) to accomplish what one owes to others. *Shu* is the negative aspect of the practice *jen*. Do not do to others what one does not wish oneself. It is also called altruism by Confucius. The practice as a whole is called the principle of *chung* and *shu*. The meaning of *chung* and *shu* and the principle is: “*Chung* and *shu* are not far from the way. What you do not like done to yourself, do not to others.... Serve your father as you would require your son to serve you.... Serve your elder brother as you would require your younger brother to serve you.... Set the example in behaving to your friends as you would require them to behave to you....” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1948).

Some of the later Confucianists accepted this principle as principle of applying a measuring square. That is to say, it is a principle by which one uses oneself as a standard to regulate one’s conduct. It can be regarded as do not do what one dislikes in one’s superiors and in the employment of one’s inferiors. Do not use what one dislikes in one’s inferiors in the service of one’s superiors. Do not use what one dislikes in those who are before, to precede those who are behind. Do not use what one dislikes in those who are behind, to follow those who are before. Do not use what one dislikes on the right, to display toward the left. Do not use what one dislikes on the left, to display toward the right. The practice of *chung* and *shu* means the practice of *jen*. And this practice leads to the carrying out of one’s responsibilities and duties in society. It is comprised the quality of *yi* or righteousness. Hence the principle of *chung* and *shu* becomes the alpha and omega of one’s moral life. Everyone has within himself the measuring square for conduct, and can use it at any time. It is the method of *jen*.

The Concept of Superior Man

In Confucianism, it is found that it talks about man as 'superior man'. The superior man in everything considers righteousness to be essential. He performs it according to the rules of propriety (*li*). He brings it forth in humility. He completes it with sincerity. This is indeed a superior man. Confucius also said that riches and honours are what men desire. If they cannot be obtained in their proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and baseness are what men dislike. If they cannot be avoided in the proper way, they should not be avoided. The superior man does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to virtue. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it. Confucius had said the following:

‘There are three things about the superior man that I have not been able to attain. The true man has no worries; the wise man has no perplexities; and the brave man has no fear’ (Creel, 1953).

One can see that superior man is the same as true man in Confucius philosophy. If one studies the concept of man from Confucius' point of view, it will be found that the character of a man was the main point he discussed or he put emphasis upon. This view on man was mainly concerned with the training of a man's character. He used to say that a man, who has committed a mistake and yet does not want to correct it, is committing another mistake.

He continued to say, ‘a man who has a beautiful soul always has some beautiful things to say, but a man who says beautiful things does not usually have a beautiful soul. A

true man (or truly great man) until always be found to have courage, but a courageous man will not always be found to have true manhood' (Creel,1953).

Confucius used to teach that to repay evil with kindness is the sign of a generous character. To repay kindness with evil is the sign of a criminal. From his concept of man and the character forming of man one will see the doctrine of humanism and superior man by characterizing so many good points. In this way he had taught the people to be a superior man. Confucius regards a superior man as a man of knowledge or a wise man. Confucius' superior man is required to possess or embrace respective dispositions.

Confucius said that whoever wants to become a man of knowledge or a wise man needs to abide by or follow the rules and regulations set down by the Heaven. If one fails to do so he will never be a man of knowledge. A man of knowledge or wise man is just and honest and is a man of principles. He practices right things at right places. He also said that a man of knowledge is humble and humane. Whatever he does, he does it with honesty and image of a wise man (Confucius, 1979).

Confucius regarded that truth is what a wise man always seeks. He has only one worry: it is not for food, but for truth. He is always worried that he would not get his object-truth. And virtue or goodness belongs to the mind of wise man. But the mind of the wicked man is familiar with ill-gains. Moreover everyman wants wealth and reputation. Some ready to use all means, just or unjust, in order to get them. Man hates to be in poverty and to be infamous. But a wise man hates them all. A wise man will perform no acts contrary to his virtue.

Especially, a wise man tries to know more of himself but a base man looks for in others. And then a wise man speaks less and acts much. A wise man who wants more ability only worries. He does not care whether others acknowledge him or not. Confucius continued to say that a man of knowledge is impressive but he challenges no one. He is warm and friendly but is unbiased. A wise man has three appearances. From afar he seems to be hard, but when closer, gentle and when he speaks, solid and strong.

The Concept of Gentleman

One of the most prominent terms in Confucius's philosophy is *junzi*. *Junzi* is a very important idea in Chinese culture. It can be roughly translated into 'gentleman' or 'man of honour'. It is the man who lives according to the highest ethical standards. Generally, the Chinese gentleman, like the English gentleman, or at least the perfect one, is an indescribable and indefinable nonentity whom you will not recognize if you pass him on the street. The essence of English gentleman is the ability to pass into unrecognizability from one's fellow men, and the essence of Confucian culture is the moral effort to aspire to achieve the commonplace. According to Confucius, the gentleman displays five virtues: self-respect, generosity, sincerity, persistence and benevolence. Some essential points to become a gentleman are: as a son, he is always loyal; as a father, he is just and kind; as an official, he is loyal and faithful; as a husband, he is righteous and just; and as a friend, he is faithful and tactful. If all men would live by the principles of *li* and *jen* and strive to the character of the true gentleman, justice and harmony would rule the empire.

How and what to do to become a gentleman? The answers Confucius gave are: a gentleman needs to have three basic characters. Be benevolent with no worry; be wise with no puzzlement; be courageous with no fear. Confucius said to Tsehsia that you must be a

gentleman-scholar and not a petty scholar. The following is what Confucius said about a gentleman.

“When a man has more solid worth than polish, he appears uncouth, and when a man has more polish than solid worth, he appears urbane. The proper combination of solid worth and polish alone makes a gentleman” (Lin Yutang, 1948).

This is to say if one has a heart with virtue and lenience, he will have peace in his heart and no worry. If one has wisdom and knowledge, he will be decisive. If one has courage, he will have no fear. Keep in mind that the three things are an integrated part for a gentleman. Confucius also said that a gentleman is unlike an implement. This implies that an implement can only be used to do one thing and does not make any changes with situations. A gentleman should be versatile and improve oneself with time. Confucius maintained that a gentleman should be harmonious, but can have different opinions and should not just follow blindly. For a gentleman, action takes precedence over words. A gentleman should speak carefully, but act quickly. A gentleman is ashamed if his words outshine his actions.

Confucius also described the other characters of gentleman as follows:

- A gentleman encompasses all and is not partial.
- A gentleman is at peace and ease, but not arrogant.
- A gentleman helps others to fulfill good, not vice.
- With righteousness as the essence, a gentleman should act according to the rites, express himself with modesty, and achieve it with faithfulness.
- A gentleman should be dignified, but not disputative; should be social, but not form a clique.

According to Confucius, the universal virtues are wisdom, benevolence and fortitude. He said that benevolence means to love all men and knowledge means to know all men. The perfect virtue is gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness. He also said that a virtuous man has three awes:

- 1 - Awe for Heaven’s decree,
- 2 - Awe for great men,
- 3 - Awe for saints’ words.

These are the codes of Confucius for the human society in order to live in peace and harmony.

Conclusion

The world we live in is full of conflicts and contradictions as well as natural disasters. Man constantly faces to settle all sorts of problems. Man can make the world to be harmonious as well as to make wars. Man shall have to make the world less trouble. Man shall have to make efforts for all-round development of man. Is the man today going towards this direction? Does he possess the ability to do so? The purpose of this paper is to provide answers to these questions, the significance of man, human nature or the concept of man as viewed by the Confucianism.

The concept of man as conceived by the Confucius’ thoughts have greatly influenced over the Chinese society. The ancient Chinese thoughts have been handed down by generation to generation until today in order to improve great Chinese society.

The concept of *jen* is Confucius' fundamental teaching for everyone to observe and practically follow them. All men should lead and struggle their lives in accordance with the concept of *jen*. Right moral attitudes are essential for each individual. Thus, Confucius' '*jen*' aimed not only at Chinese society but also at whole of human society as universal norms or codes to abide by. It is thought that the concept of *jen* according to Confucius is very much related with his views on superior man and small man or superior man and mean man. This superior man is in turn very much closer to gentleman. The qualities of being a superior man are very much the same as being a gentleman. It seems that the sage has the highest level in human morality in Confucius system of ethics. Confucius had once uttered; 'I have no hopes of meeting a sage. I would be content if I meet someone who is a gentleman' (Lin Yutang, 1948). It is said that Confucius instructs under four heads: 'culture, moral conduct, doing one's best and being trustworthy in what one says' (Creel, 1953).

The very concept *jen* has been translated as human-heartedness or benevolence. Both of the translations seem to describe the good character of a human. But which translation is nearest to the exact meaning can be known only when one is the expert in Chinese language and the one who had stayed for long in that country.

Confucius had never described the character of man as good or evil or both. He had all his life tried to mould the character of a man to have the highest value such as benevolence, charity, magnanimity, loving kindness, etc.

To improve human society, one needs not only material development but also mental development. In fact, to fulfill merely the material need is going to one extreme, which is the extremity of pride. To fulfil merely the mental need is going the other extreme, which is the extremity of wrong view. Therefore, only by avoiding the two extremes, will there be happiness and peace in the world.

If each and every individual is capable of fulfilling their moral conduct contained in Confucius' philosophy, welfare for humanity is just around the corner for further improvements.

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