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Roland Reichenbach
Duck-Joo Kwak *Editors*

Confucian Perspectives on Learning and Self-Transformation

International and Cross-Disciplinary Approaches

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Confucian Perspectives on Learning and Self-Transformation

International and Cross-Disciplinary Approaches

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Introductory Remarks

The cultural traditions of East Asian – most importantly Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism – are not well known among Western philosophers of education. The key notions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophy directly concern ideals, processes, and challenges of learning, education, and self-transformation. This very elaborated and differentiated cultural context offers great opportunities for today's understanding of personal and institutional education in a global context.

The issue gathers perspectives from educational philosophers and East Asian specialists from China, Germany, Hong Kong, Korea, Switzerland, Taiwan, the USA, and Vietnam and offers a manifold discussion on educational practice and culture in the East Asian world and its relevance to other regions in the world. The contributions enrich the vocabularies in educational discourse, which have been "West-centered" for a long time, by providing alternative resources and perspectives in educational thinking, offering opportunities for the due recognition of educational thought across a global world.

The retrieval and re-examination of a long-standing tradition of humanism in East Asia, such as Confucianism, does not mean to set East Asian philosophy of education against its Western equivalence. The book rather invites to an intercultural conversation by reflecting modern sensibility and creating a common space for critical philosophical reflection on educational thought and practice.

Contents

1 The Confucian Ethos of Learning: An Introduction 1
Roland Reichenbach and Duck-Joo Kwak

2 Knowledge and Virtues: Confucian Education as Life Education and Its Modern Relevance 27
Chung-yi Cheng

3 Educational Relationship in the *Analects* of Confucius 45
Jeong-Gil Woo

4 Ritual, Virtue, and Education: An Interpretation of Xunzi's Philosophy of Ritual 63
Morimichi Kato

5 Ogyū Sorai on the Content and Intent of Learning 79
Paulus Kaufmann

6 Enlightenment and Freedom in a Confucian Way 91
Niklaus Schefer

7 "When the Heart-Mind Is Lost…" Remarks on the Metaphysics of Educational Theory 105
Roland Reichenbach

8 A Vietnamese Reading of the Master's Classic: Phạm Nguyễn Du's *Humble Comments on the Analects* – As an Example of Transformative Learning 125
Nam Nguyen

9 Self-Cultivation with Brushes: From the Perspective of Graphocentrism 157
Ruyu Hung

10 Zhu Xi's Ethics of Reading: For the Recovery of Humanistic Pedagogies of Learning 171
Duck-Joo Kwak

Glossary 191

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Chapter 2
Knowledge and Virtues: Confucian Education as Life Education and Its Modern Relevance

Chung-yi Cheng

Introductory Remarks
By Roland Reichenbach

The first chapter draws a broad picture of Confucian philosophy and its relevance to educational thought in our time. Professor Chung-yi Cheng, specialist on Confucian philosophy, is contrasting core assumptions of Confucian perspectives with modern and/or Western ideas of education, being fully aware that Confucian philosophy, similar to ancient Greek philosophy (but unlike most modern philosophical conceptions) that presupposes and advocates a tight connection (even inseparability) between knowledge and virtue, as shown in that to Plato virtue *is* a kind of knowledge. By referring to the works and insights of classical Chinese Confucian philosophers – predominantly Confucius (551–479 BC), Mencius (327–289 BC), Xunzi (298–220 BC) – and neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200) as well as Western sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky (born 1928) and philosophers such as Bernard Williams (1929–2003), Thomas Nagel (born 1937) and Robert Nozick (1938–2002), Chung-yi Cheng emphasizes the problem of "value subjectivism" which he sees as an accurate description of modern times. The author's request is to (re-)examine Confucian philosophy as a way of challenging and confronting the problematic impacts of a disenchanted world and of highly subjectivized world views by means of a broader understanding of education, called life education. According to this Confucian perspective there is a proper way to achieve "objective values", a journey which has to start with the *self-inquiry* of the learner. This view can be regarded as a *topos* of Confucian educational philosophy. It is not necessarily in contradiction with other insights into the development of individuality and humanity from other

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cultural backgrounds – such as the Greek antiquity or German idealism – but it is a very original, elaborated and differentiated perspective. In order to understand the way of education, it is crucial to have a sense for different types of knowledge and how they are perceived to be acquired and helpful for the ongoing development of the person. The first kind of knowledge comes from *seeing* and *hearing*! This type of perceptual knowledge has almost been forgotten in modern discourses of educational philosophy and in educational research, as it seems, even though the educational (and philosophical) relevance of the eye and the ear are fundamental and has been studied during many centuries.[1] The second kind of knowledge refers to the understanding of *words*; one may also say or state that this second type of knowledge acquisition concerns the ability of the learner to move in the world of symbolic orders (most elementarily: reading) which one will need to be able to master for critical inquiry, careful thinking and making clear distinctions. The third kind of knowledge means to understand the Way (*dao*) and the virtues of life, and the fourth kind is understanding the heavenly commands (*tian ming*). It is quite obvious that the third and fourth kind of knowledge are hard to understand from a perspective outside Confucian framework and metaphysics. However, Chung-yi Cheng is giving a great effort to make them understandable when it comes to the idealistic assumptions of Chinese and/or Confucian philosophy.

2.1 A Confucian critique of modern education

A stark increase in Hong Kong's student suicide rate recently has been generating hot discussions as well as ringing alarm bells in society, particularly in the education realm. By comparison with the average of 23 student suicides a year between 2010 and 2014, there were 30 student suicides in the first 9 months of the academic year 2015–2016, having four cases happened in 5 days, and 13 of them were tertiary students.[2] So far the situation has still been severe. There may have different causes for students to commit suicide, such as their learning pressure and their lack of emotional resilience to face difficulties. This paper concerns only the educational problem behind, wondering what is going wrong with our education for it cannot teach students to cherish their lives.

[1] The title of a quite recent book by Paul L. Harris, Professor at Harvard University, is called „*Trusting What You're Told. How Children Learn from Others*" (2012, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press by Harvard University Press).

[2] See Elizabeth Cheung and Peace Chiu, "Students at breaking point: Hong Kong announces emergency measures after 22 suicides since the start of the academic year", in *South China Morning Post* on March 14, 2016, http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/1923465/students-breaking-point-hong-kong-announces.

Admittedly, the rise of student suicide rate is a global phenomenon and is just the tip of the iceberg that reveals a fundamental problem of today's education.[3] This fundamental problem, from a Confucian point of view, is that today's education is moving towards a wrong direction because of holding a problematic conception of education as knowledge education, where knowledge is construed narrowly as conceptual and propositional knowledge, and accordingly the learning outcome of students can be precisely measured by the mechanism of examination. For the Confucians, education *per se* should be life education, which is to enable one to inquire, explore, cultivate, transform, and realize oneself through learning. Confucius states that learning should aim at improving oneself and thus is for oneself (*wei ji* 為己), but not to impress others nor is for others (*wei ren* 為人) (*Analects* 14.24). After laying out criticism of modern conception of education in this section, I will present the Confucian conception of knowledge, where knowledge is construed broadly as four interrelated kinds in Sect. 2.2. In Sect. 2.3, I will articulate how the learning of these four interrelated kinds of knowledge can turn out to be the cultivation of three cardinal virtues, namely, wisdom (*zhi* 智), benevolence (*ren* 仁) and courage (*yong* 勇), to constitute education as life education. Finally, I will reply to some possible questions to the Confucian view on education, especially how to realize it and show its modern relevance in Sect. 2.4. The Confucian view is, without doubt, a distinctive perspective set in a particular historical and cultural context, so it could not resolve all the education problems today, nor it should replace the modern education model. However, it embodies crucial insights that should be revisited and learned by Chinese people as a vital part of their cultural heritage and could be globally shared by foreign people as valuable intellectual resources.

Contemporary education has long been criticizing for moving in a wrong direction. For example, Noam Chomsky criticized one prevailing model of present-day education, which sees education as a vessel for containing water. "That's what we call these days 'teaching to test': you pour water into the vessel and then the vessel returns the water." However, "it's a pretty leaky vessel, as all of us who went through school experienced, since you could memorize something for an exam that you had no interest in to pass an exam and a week later you forgot what the course was about."[4] For Chomsky, the model of liberal education, which emphasizes the cultivation of students' intellect and active learning, as articulated by John Henry Newman should revive. In contrast, the most severe problem of contemporary education, from a Confucian standpoint, lies in a problematic conception of education

[3] As to having an upward trend in the suicide rate of tertiary students in the United States, see an recent report by Matt Rocheleau on "Suicide rate at MIT higher than national average", in *Boston Globe* on March 17, 2016, https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/03/16/suicide-rate-mit-higher-than-national-average/1aGWr7lRjiEyhoD1WIT78I/story.html.

[4] Noam Chomsky, "How America's great university system is getting destroyed", in *Alternet* on February 28, 2014, http://www.alternet.org/corporate-accountability-and-workplace/chomsky-how-americas-great-university-system-getting.

as knowledge education, where knowledge is construed narrowly as conceptual and propositional knowledge. This conceptualization of knowledge is taking natural science as a model; only those can be verified or falsified possess epistemic quality and thus are qualified to be called knowledge. Along with the explosion of knowledge in the twentieth century, especially scientific knowledge and its departmentalization and professionalization, education then being orientated towards teaching students different pieces of knowledge through different academic subjects. A corollary of this is that test or examination is widely adopted as a measurable mechanism to know whether students learned is 'true' or 'false.' Also, knowledge in this sense is objective, transmittable and thus teachable.

Conversely, values, meanings, morals, and even what sort of life one should be committed to are all subjective, non-transmittable and thus not teachable. Although educators, schools, and universities would not bluntly deny the importance of value, moral and life education, it is dubious that they are empty talk and already losing in actual practice. Here value subjectivism plays a vital role to foster knowledge education and to diminish, if not terminate, value, moral and life education. Max Weber characterized value subjectivism as one of the essential features of modernity, which is the result of "the disenchantment of the world."[5] That said, humans in modern times have given up a teleological view (or in religious terminology, a God's plan) of the universe, so that all beings are deprived of their *telos* as well as their intrinsic value and remained as mere facts. The split of fact and value (or the fact/value dichotomy) leaves value to be defined by humans on their own. So everyone can define her values, and human's rationality can no longer universally justify value. Using Weber's words again, humans have lost their value rationality; all values one valuing or choosing are non-rational, if not necessarily irrational, and what human rationality can do is only instrumental, to calculate or figure out how best to satisfy a set of things one wants and values.[6] If Weber portrayed modernity in a right way, it is equal to set up a difficult task for any attempt to restore or strengthen value, moral and life education, and this paper is of no exception. We will be back to this challenging task in the last section. Suffice here to say that value subjectivism is one of the culprits that consolidates knowledge education as the core of today's education and erodes value education as the peripheral.[7]

It is pretty clear that there will be a disaster if students are only taught with different pieces of knowledge but without the ability to reflect on life, to distinguish good from evil, and to address problems and difficulties of life. As a result, student

[5] See Max Weber, "Science as a vocation", in *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*, translated by H. H. Gerth and Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

[6] See Max Weber, *The Theory of social and economic organization*, translated by T. Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947), 155; 104–180.

[7] See Yuan-kang Shih (石元康), "Xiandai shehui zhong jiazhi jiaoyo wei he shiwei (Why value education decline in modern society?) 現代社會中價值教育為何式微?", in *Cong zongguowenhua dao xiandaixing: dianfan zhuanyi?* (*From Chinese culture to modernity: a paradigm shift?*) 從中國文化到現代性:典範轉移? (Taipei: Dong Dai Tushu 東大圖書, 1998), 151–169.

suicide is just the tip of the iceberg. Indeed some educators have already spotted the possible dangers lying in today's education, but it seems that they cannot find a way to reinstall value, moral and life education on the status quo. That is why almost all life education programs appeared are organized by non-school organizations. When we surf the web pages of these programs and look into their philosophies of life education, some commonalities can be easily found, namely, to develop student's skills and knowledge necessary for effective decision making or making healthy choices, and to develop student's strategies for communication, negotiation and building relationships with others.[8] Any quick comments on them without the details of implementation will be superficial and unjust, but the wording such as "skill", "knowledge", "strategy", "decision making", and "choice" looks somewhat strange to the Confucian perspective and seems still not getting rid of the problematic conception of education as knowledge education.

2.2 Four Interrelated Kinds of Knowledge

The modern Chinese term for "knowledge" is *zhi shi* 知識 but *zhi* 知 is a bit different from *shi* 識 in ancient Confucian texts. The character *zhi* 知 is ambiguous, refers to knowledge, perception, understanding, appreciation, and administration, while *shi* 識, meaning primarily "to retain what one has seen in one's mind," but both of them are often translated as "to know" and "knowledge" in this context. An integral part of the Confucian conceptualization of education as life education is its unique understanding of knowledge. Accordingly, it is hard to imagine a good life without knowledge, but knowledge itself should not be narrowly understood as knowing concepts and propositions, for one living merely in a world of concepts and propositions is hard to imagine as well. Therefore, knowledge should be construed broadly as four interrelated kinds, and their learning should be fully immersed in and thus beneficial to one's life, leading to the cultivation and transformation of oneself.

The first kind of knowledge is knowledge attained from what one saw (*jian* 見) and listened (*wen* 聞). In the *Analects*, Confucius comments those who possess much more knowledge by widening their seeing and listening are of secondary (*zhi zhi ci* 知之次) (*Analects* 7.28). The commentator Yang Bojun (楊伯峻) interprets "secondary" and "primary" as attributing to different learners, and even Confucius considers himself as a secondary learner who has to attain knowledge through widening his seeing and listening.[9] Yang made such an interpretation because there is another passage in the *Analects* states that "those who are born with knowledge are the highest" and that "next come those who attain knowledge through study"

[8] For example, see the official webpage of a life education program in New Zealand, http://www.lifeeducation.org.nz/schools.html; and another one in Australia, http://lifeducation.org.au/.

[9] See *Luyu yizhu* (*Translation and Commentary of the Analects*) 論語譯注, translated by Yang Bojun (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju中華書局, 1980, 2nd edition), 74.

(*Analects* 16.9).[10] However, it is also reasonable to apply "primary" and "secondary" not only to learner but also to what is known. The knowledge of what one saw and listened is of secondary, for it can merely enable one to be a knowledgeable person. By comparison, the knowledge of the way (*dao* 道) and virtues (*de* 德) of one's life is of primary, for it can enable one to explore one's way of life and cultivate one's virtues to live up to the way.

Knowledge attained from what one saw and listened first involves perceptual knowledge. In ancient Confucianism, Xunzi does have a particular interest in analyzing perceptual knowledge. According to him, sense organs such as eyes, ear, mouth, nose, and body are called "heavenly faculties" (*tian guan* 天官) that can differentiate between things or matters one encountered. For example, "form, color, and pattern are differentiated by the eyes," "notes, tones, high, low, tunings, pipes, and other strange sounds are differentiated by the ear" (*Xunzi* 22.81–83),[11] and so on. Each of these faculties operates separately; it is one's heart/mind (*xin* 心), the "heavenly master" (*tian jun* 天君), which serves to collate (*zheng zhi* 徵知) all that heavenly faculties perceived to form unified perception. Xunzi also discusses the conditions of making correct or wrong perceptual knowledge and concludes that to get correct knowledge one must keep one's heart/mind in excellent condition and that is to keep it in emptiness, single-mindedness and stillness (*xu yi er jing* 虛一而靜) (*Xunzi* 21.167–185). For Xunzi, however, the ultimate goal of heart/mind is not perception, as it is only the necessary level of knowledge, but is to know the Way (*Dao*) of humans and the universe that is the highest level of knowledge.

Besides perceptual knowledge, knowledge attained from what one saw and listened also involves all sorts of knowledge one learned from listening to the teaching of teachers and reading books. So, different academic subjects students learned in school nowadays can fall within it. What is crucial here is that how students can get a genuine understanding of what they have learned. Students usually take what they knew as secondhand, repeating at best what teachers have said, during the early stage of learning. For the Confucians, students should have to transform their knowledge from the state of secondhand into firsthand, through the process of active inquiry, so as not to fall short in getting genuine understanding. Firsthand knowledge, as Mencius puts it, is what one wishes "to find it in oneself" (*zi de* 自得), and "when one finds it in oneself, one will be at ease in it; when one is at ease in it, one can draw deeply upon it; when one can draw deeply upon it, one finds it source wherever one turns." (*Mencius* 4B.14)[12]

In the same vein, Confucius supplements that what we knew through visuals (*shi* 視) and audios (*ting* 聽) can lead us to a more profound observation (*guan* 觀) and investigation (*cha* 察) that can eventually enable us to penetrate phenomena and achieve a higher level of knowing—the underlying meaning of what we saw and

[10] I borrow the translation from D. C. Lau. *The Analects,* translated by D. C. Lau (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979), 165.

[11] I follow here the numbering of chapters and lines in *Xunzi: the complete text*, translated by Eric. L Hutton (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[12] I borrow the translation from D. C. Lau with slight modification. *Mencius*, translated by D. C. Lau (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979), 177.

listened.[13] Consider, for example, students A and B are good friends, and they always sit together in the classroom. One day when the teacher sees they sit separately, this visual in fact invites her to observe further and investigate whether there is something like a quarrel happened between them. Thereby what she sees in this visual will no longer be a mere fact but extending to the underlying meaning of it. Take Confucius watching the flowing water as another example, Mencius explains it as follows, "Flowing water is such that it does not go further forward until it has filled all the hollows. A noble person, in his pursuit of the Way, does not get there unless he achieves a beautiful pattern." (*Mencius* 7A.24)[14]

In sum, knowledge attained from seeing and listening can be not only mere facts we encountered or concepts and propositions we learned from teachers and books but also the underlying meaning of them if we adopt a more in-depth way to see, observe and investigate. This in-depth way later is called by Southern Song (1172–1279) Confucian Shao Yong and Cheng Hao as "observation of things" (*guan wu* 觀物) and developed by Zhu Xi as "investigation of things" (*ge wu* 格物) with the result of "acquisition of knowledge" (*zhi zhi* 致知).[15] Zhu Xi further elaborates the way as the personal embodiment of what has been learned (*ti yan* 體驗).[16] It is because when one can reveal the underlying meaning of what one saw and listened, a resonance is sure to occur between one and what one learned, fully awakening one to the meaning as if it becomes part of the one's self.

The personal embodiment of what one has learned is salient to the humanities generally, where we should and often do prioritize meaning as a higher level of knowledge. Works in the humanities, as Robert Nozick succinctly delineates, "respond to value as value, to meaning as meaning,"[17] and therefore "are intended to be vehicles whereby the audience does so, they have to be experienced directly."[18] In contrast, one may cast doubt on whether the personal embodiment of knowledge is also applicable to the learning of scientific knowledge, as meaning (or value) traditionally has not been the preserve of natural sciences, which concern only to discern and uncover the unifying principles underlying diverse phenomena. However, consider, for example, a student is fully engaged in doing her laboratory experiment, being careful and concentrated, it is very likely that she would embody the meaning of seeking the truth. Using the words of Bernard Williams, she would be able to apprehend the significance of "accuracy" and "sincerity," that said, "you

[13] In the *Analects*, Confucius said, "Look at the means one employs, observe the path one takes and examine where one feels at ease. In what way is one's true character hidden from view?" (*Analects* 2:10) I borrow the translation from D. C. Lau with slight modification. *The Analects*, 13.

[14] I borrow the translation from D. C. Lau with slight modification. *Mencius*, 297. An explanation of Confucius' art to looking at water can also be found in *Xunzi* (28. 122–142).

[15] See Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei* (*Conversations of master Zhu*) 朱子語類 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju中華書局, 1986), 286–293.

[16] Ibid, 284.

[17] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical explanations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 621.

[18] Ibid, 623.

do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe."[19] With this in mind, we shall fully understand why Confucius so emphasizes the importance of holding a sincere attitude to know, as he teaches Yan Yuan, "To say what you know when you know and to say what you do not when you do not, that is knowledge." (*Analects* 2.17)[20]

The second kind of knowledge in the Confucian conception of knowledge is the knowledge of understanding words (*zhi yan* 知言). The Chinese term *zhi yan* is issued from the *Mencius*, meaning literally "to know the underlying logic and reason of words," so likely refers to the knowledge (or the ability) of rational thinking and reasoning in this context. Mencius of his day is famous for refuting what he considered as distorted, immoderate, deviant and evasive words, and he believes that it is necessary to do so to safeguard righteousness (*Mencius* 2A.2). In the *Xunzi*, rational thinking is called "deliberation" (*lu* 慮), which is an ability of the heart/mind to reflect on and choose among different emotional dispositions (*Xunzi* 22.12–15). Moreover, it is also called "the knowing ability" (*zhi* 知 and *neng* 能) to draw proper connections (*tong* 通) and unifying categories (*tong lei* 統類) of things (*Xunzi* 8. 541–542). Xunzi claims that it is the rational ability the sage kings can categorize things, making inference among different categories, and finally string all categories and things together to invent a whole set of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) so as to guide people on how to behave appropriately to others, heaven, earth, and myriad things in the world in everyday life.

In the world of thought in ancient China, the knowledge of rational thinking was less discussed and studied in formal and abstract ways; later Mohist School and the School of Names were few exceptions, and most others addressed it in practical and concrete contexts. As noted, in the *Analects*, Confucius contends that if the coming hundred generations succeed the true spirit of Zhou's ritual propriety (*Zhou li* 周禮), although there would have additions and abridgments due to changing circumstances, one still can know them (by inference) (*Analects* 2.23). In another passage, it states that rational thinking is useful even to answer a question of which we do not know at all (by kept hammering at the two sides of the question). (*Analects* 9.8) Confucius also requires his students can come back with the other three corners of the square when he has pointed out one (*Analects* 7.8). Plus, when Duan Muci (Zi Gong) asked by Confucius to compare himself with his companion Yan Yuan, he confessed his inferior to Yan because he can only understand two when being told one thing but Yan can understand ten (*Analects* 5.9). All these clearly show that one has to nurture one's rational thinking in daily life, in particular in the learning of the first kind of knowledge. Indeed, if one can enhance one's knowledge attained from reading and listening to the higher state of firsthand knowledge and personal embodiment, as mentioned before, rational thinking is already implied.

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[19] Bernard Williams, *Truth and truthfulness* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11.

[20] I borrow the translation from D. C. Lau with slight modification. *The Analects*, 15. The emphasis of holding a sincere attitude to know can also be found in other passages, including 13.3, 19.25.

The knowledge or the ability of rational thinking can also help a student to organize, coordinate and integrate what she has learned. As to different sorts of knowledge, students should learn as many as possible; in other words, to expand the breadth of their learning (*bo xue* 博學). It is because only if one is knowledgeable can one cope with the complexities of life. However, the idea of the breadth of learning is not just a matter of getting many broken pieces of knowledge; it should also involve a process of integration; a process to sublimate our learning from the breadth to depth, where rational thinking will play a crucial role. Thereby Confucius is proud of himself as having a single thread to bind all those learned together (*yi yi guan zhi* 一以貫之)(*Analects*: 4.15, 15.3). In *the Doctrine of Mean*, it states that the process of integrating different pieces of knowledge requires rational thinking to exhibit critical inquiry (*shen wen* 審問), careful thinking (*shen si* 慎思) and clear distinction (*ming bian* 明辨). Through these exhibitions, one can significantly sharpen one's rational thinking.

Undoubtedly, the learning of the first and second kind of knowledge in a proper way as discussed are already beneficial to the formation of one's character. As a consequence, one will be educated to be knowledgeable, rational and sincere. In this sense, the learning of them is comparable to the conception of liberal education in the west. Still, it is indirect and not enough to achieving self-cultivation the very nature of education from a Confucian perspective, and what we need here is the third kind of knowledge that is the knowledge of the way (*dao* 道) and virtues (*de* 德) of life. To attain this kind of knowledge, one has to make a reflexive inquiry into oneself. That said, one has to ask oneself why one is fond of intellectual inquiry, wishing to be well-educated. It is not uncommon to get a practical answer that because knowledge can make life better. But what a "good" life is? For the Confucians, this question if asking sincerely and seriously is an existential worry (*you* 憂) about how to find one's way in learning to be fully human; it is also the key to start exploring the way of life, however. Confucius said, "A noble person worries about the way, not about poverty" (*Analects* 15.32).[21] To take a step further, one will be aware of the truth that this worry is in effect one's conscious and conscientious effort to achieve self-transcendence, transcending the non-ideal state of life, and that this effort is an awakening of self-love. Then one will be able to conceive one's self-love as the imperative that humans, in contrast to animals, should authentically comprehend that they have to live up to their ontological role or their nature (*xing* 性)—to be engaged in the process of learning to be fully human. So, self-love is not selfish or egoist love, instead it is a benevolent love and altruistic love. It is a benevolent love because once people awake to their self-love, they can no longer bear the suffering of a meaningless life. Also, it is an altruistic love because if one is sensitive to one's suffering from being unable to live a good life, this sensitivity should also extend to others. Here we reach the motif of Confucius' teaching—benevolence

[21] I borrow the translation from D. C. Lau with slight modification. *The Analects*, 157.

(*ren* 仁). In the *Analects*, we find Zengzi interprets his master's motif as a noble person (*jun zi* 君子 and *shi* 士) should take benevolence as his obligation (*Analects* 8.7).

To know to be benevolent as the way and the essential virtue of life is to know that being benevolent is right and not being that is evil, the knowledge of benevolence, therefore, is the knowledge of moral normativity, and it serves as the core moral judgment of Confucianism. It is worth noting that this moral knowledge is not merely rational; it is sentimental as well, for benevolence can serve as both moral reason and moral sentiment (for Confucianism, a reason/sentiment dichotomy is dubious). Also, the knowledge of benevolence is not mere epistemic; it is practical that warrants the unity of knowing and acting. When one "knows" being benevolent is right one is simultaneous "liking" (*hao* 好) that and "acting on" (*xing* 行) that. Hence, benevolence is a subject not only of knowledge but also of virtue. In the *Analects*, Confucius laments that rare are those who know virtue (*zhi de* 知德) (*Analects* 15.4) and he urges people to be fond of virtue (*hao de* 好德) as of beauty in women (*hao se* 好色) (*Analects* 9.18, 15.13). Yan Yuan, whom Confucius regards as the most talented student, is highly praised by Confucius for not lapsing from benevolence in his heart/mind (*Analects* 6.7).

There were many divergent interpretations of benevolence by Confucian followers, among them, Mencius and Xunzi are two different representatives. In short, Mencuis adopts an approach of practice from "inside out" while Xunzi adopts an approach of practice from "outside in." Mencius regards benevolence as the feeling of compassion (*ce yin* 惻隱) that is a sprout of human's heart/mind sparking off by the sufferings of others and emphasizes the necessity of extending it gradually from family to people and then to living creatures (Mencius 6A.45). Xunzi regards benevolence as a particular sort of meaning that a related sort of ritual propriety like filial piety embodied and through performing the related sort of ritual propriety one can gradually understand it. These two different interpretations both bear significant implications for the method of teaching students the knowledge of benevolence. On the one hand, teachers can teach students the knowledge of benevolence by arousing their compassionate feeling, using situations happened in daily life or mentioned in the Confucian classics like the Mencius's famous example that one seeing a small child on the verge of falling into a well. Also, teachers can teach students to observe the related sort of ritual proprieties, such as filial duty and reverence for the elderly, to know or embody benevolence as their underlying meaning on the other hand.

In comparison with the first and second kind of knowledge, the knowledge of the way and virtues of life (the knowledge of benevolence) is of the highest level, for it should subsume the other two kinds of knowledge under the true spirit and ultimate goal of education that is the self-understanding, self-cultivation, self-transformation, and self-realization of students. What is unfortunate is that this true spirit has been fading out of today's education.

Finally, the fourth kind of knowledge is the knowledge of the heavenly (*zhi tian* 知天), and it indeed is the extension of the third kind of knowledge. The Chinese term *tian* 天 is often translated as "Heaven" and 'heavenly," bearing three primary

meanings in this context. The first is the holistic name of all beings, including heaven, earth, humans, animals, and myriad things; in other words, it is the whole realm of beings. The second is the heavenly command (*tian ming* 天命) that imparts an ontological role or nature to all beings. The third is an explanatory source of something that could not be brought about by humans and what happens without anyone is causing it, and thus often related to the term *ming* 命, meaning "destiny" or "luck." These three meanings contribute differently to the content of the knowledge of the heavenly.

Why after learning the way and virtues of life, students still have to know the knowledge of the heavenly? Since all humans are born within the web of life, namely, family, community, state, culture, history, and the universe, no one is an atomic self. Therefore the self-realization of one necessarily involves an understanding of "the other." One's meaning of life has to be identified with and located in its relationship with the meaning of others. An inquiry into one's self and an inquiry into beings (or Being) are in effect two sides of the same coin. This point is well taken and pressed by Thomas Nagel as a human disposition termed "religious temperament": "A disposition to seek a view of the world that can play a certain role in the inner life."[22] Nagel also remarks, "It is important to distinguish this question from the pure desire for understanding of the universe and one's place in it. It is not an expression of curiosity, however large. And it is not the general intellectual problem of how to combine an objective conception of the universe with the local perspective of one creature within it. It is rather a question of attitude: Is there a way to live in harmony within the universe, and not just in it?"[23]

Confucians do have an answer to Nagel's question, and the key to that answer lies in one's reflexive inquiry into one's nature and heart/mind of benevolence, as Mencius puts it, "By fully developing one's heart/mind, one knows one's nature. Knowing one's nature, one knows Heaven. It is through preserving one's heart/mind and nourishing one's nature that one may serve Heaven." (*Mencius* 7A.1)[24] To fully develop one's heart/mind means to extend one's benevolent love gradually towards parents, people, living creatures, and even non-living creatures, and by doing so one can achieve a one-bodily experience with all what one loved (Mencius 7A.4),[25] as clearly articulated by Ming (1368–1644) Confucian Wang Yangming in his famous article "Inquiry on the great learning" (*Daixuewen* 大學問).[26] This one-bodily

[22] Thomas Nagel, "Secular philosophy and the religious temperament" in *Secular philosophy and the religious temperament: essays 2002–2008* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

[23] Ibid, 5.

[24] I borrow the translation from Irene Bloom with slight modification. *Mencius*, translated by Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 144.

[25] Mencius said, "All the ten thousand things are there in me. There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am authentic to myself. Try your best to treat others as you wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence."(*Mencius* 7A.4) I borrow the translation from D. C. Lau with slight modification. *Mencius*, 287.

[26] Wang Yangming said, "Forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things in not only true of the great person. Even the mind of the small person is no different. Only she herself makes

experience is often called "the unity of humans and Heaven" (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一). Having this experience, one will then comprehend that there exists endless creativity (*sheng sheng* 生生) as demonstrated by all beings in the world as a harmonious whole and that humans' nature and heart/mind of benevolence originated in it. It is not necessary to consider this comprehension as a kind of mystical experience. Rather, this is a transformation of one's worldview from viewing the world as an expression of things into viewing the world as an expression of the meaning or value of creativity. And such a transformation is of course not the product of merely rational argumentation and justification but an authentic belief predicated upon one's personal and practical experiences of being benevolent to "the other." The first sentence of the *Doctrine of the Mean* states, "What Heaven (*Tian*) imparts to humans is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way (*Dao*). Cultivating the Way is called education."[27] Accordingly, the knowledge of the heavenly, concerning the first and second meaning of the term *tian*, involves not only to know the interconnectedness lies between humans and the universe but also to know it is the human ontological role to reveal and appreciate this interconnectedness.[28]

Concerning the third meaning of the term *tian*, the knowledge of the heavenly involves further to know how to deal with the problem of destiny or luck, something that could not be brought about by humans and happened without anyone is causing it. To know destiny or luck conceptually is simple and straightforward but nothing more than an empty talk to us, for we all know there is always something entirely beyond our control. However, once something beyond our control happened to us,

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it small. Therefore when she sees a child about to fall into the well, she cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that her benevolence (*ren*) forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when she observes the pitiful cries and frightened appearance of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, she cannot help feeling an 'inability to bear' their suffering. This shows that her benevolence forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as she is. But when she sees plants broken and destroyed, she cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that her benevolence forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as she is. Yet even when she sees tiles and stones shattered and crushed, she cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that her benevolence forms one body with tiles and stones. This means that even the mind of the small person necessarily has the benevolence that forms one body with all. Such a heart/mind is rooted in her Heaven-endowed nature, and is naturally intelligent, clear, and not clouded." *Wang Yangming quan ji* (*Complete Works of Wang Yangming*) 王陽明全集 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1992), 968. I borrow the translation from Wing-tsit Chan with slight modification. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, translated and compiled by Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 660.

[27] I borrow the translated from Wing-tsit Chan with slight modification. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 98.

[28] In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, it states, "Only those who are absolutely authentic can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can then fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth." I borrow the translation from Wing-tsit Chan with slight modification. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 108–109.

we would unlikely accept that. Consider, for example, a car accident happened that took one's legs; one would certainly "complaint against Heaven and blame people" (*Analects* 14.35). So, how come one says one know what bad luck is. For the Confucians, only when one strives utmost efforts to do what one ought to be but experiencing something is not in control, can one "honestly know" (*zhen zhi* 真知) that no way one is immune to the impact of luck on the constitution of one's self and life. Moreover, this real understanding of luck is of great significance to the course of self-cultivation in two ways. First, it can enable us not to pass the buck when we fail to fulfill what we ought to do. When a person is not doing what she ought to be, it is herself to take up the responsibility but no luck; she should not blame luck for blocking her "to do" right things as "doing" right things is entirely in her hand, though whether or not she would succeed in doing the right things is subject to luck. Second, it can enable us to be at peace (*an zhi* 安之) with our contingent enemies, for luck whether good or back is not in our control but how should we deal with it is getting back to our control. Using the example of a car accident again, although one cannot change the fact that an accident happened to take one's legs, one can change what the fact meant to oneself. Here we see how the knowledge of the heavenly together with the knowledge of the way and virtues of life, constitute the Confucian philosophy of education as life education.

2.3 Three Cardinal Virtues

Similar to ancient Greek philosophy and unlike modern Western philosophy, Confucian philosophy advocates the inseparability of knowledge and virtue. The learning of the four kinds of knowledge indeed implies the cultivation of three Confucian cardinal virtues, namely, wisdom (*zhi* 智), benevolence (*ren* 仁) and courage (*yong* 勇). *Zhi* 智 often carries the meaning of wisdom while *zhi* 知 carries the meaning of knowledge, but they sometimes are interchangeable. To learn the first two kinds of knowledge is sure to enable one to be a "knowledgeable" person, but one will further to be a "wise" person only when learning the last two kinds of knowledge that can subsume all one learned into the course of self-cultivation and self-transformation. Furthermore, one can also nurture the virtue of benevolence through learning the last two kinds of knowledge. Finally, to enable one to hold steadfastly to live a good life, one needs to be courageous to remove obstacles in one's path. The virtue of courage in a fundamental sense is about the strength of our physical life, which can be trained somehow by physical education. Traditional Confucian education did include physical education in its six arts curriculum, such as archery and chariot driving. However, Mencius remind us that the great courage (*da yong* 大勇) that can enable one to go forward even against thousands and tens of thousands people is the companion of righteousness and the Way (*Mencius* 2A.2). In other words, we can nurture this great courage only through learning the last two kinds of knowledge.

Still, there is much to elaborate on the interrelationship among three cardinal virtues, just as the one lies among the four kinds of knowledge. As Confucius puts it, "A person of virtue is sure to be the author of reasonable sayings, but the author of reasonable sayings is not necessarily virtuous. A benevolent person is sure to possess courage, but a courageous person does not necessarily possess benevolence." (*Analects* 14.4)[29] That said, a knowledgeable person is not necessarily benevolent and courageous. It is not uncommon that a knowledgeable person would feel superior to the ignorant others and her arrogance would then obstruct her from being benevolent to others. It is also not uncommon that a knowledgeable person would escape from a difficult situation even that is a moral call if knowing the difficulty is dangerous or unlikely solvable. Similarly, a courageous person is not necessarily benevolent and knowledgeable. However, a benevolent person is necessarily knowledgeable and courageous because the virtue of benevolence warrants the virtues of intellect and courage to help its realization. Consider, for example, a benevolent person without knowledge would harm others because of her ignorance, and without courage, she might not offer help to others in a severe situation because of trembling with fear. What this means is that the virtue of benevolence is the all-in-one virtue, which not only warrants the nurture as well as the unification of other virtues but also brings them to advancement.

The Confucian scenario of an ideal life constituted by knowledge and virtues is "learning to be the sage and worthy" (*xue wei sheng xian* 學為聖賢). But this is not common to present-day people. If considering the Confucian notion of sage as similar to the notion of the moral saint in the western context, it will be particularly undesirable. Susan Wolf characterized the moral saint as one being completely committed to moral interests and skills and cannot "in general, encourage the discovery and development of significant non-moral interests and skills,"[30] and thus "will have to be dull-witted or humorless or bland."[31] Accordingly, the Confucian sage is not the moral saint, for the Confucian view on the way and virtues of life (*dao de* 道德) is richly construed of which morality in the modern sense is only a part of it. Take Confucius himself as an example, he is intellectually curious to learn all sorts of knowledge and can integrate them in depth; he is morally engaged in practicing ritual propriety so as to behave in a proper way; he is also aesthetically fond of music and poetry; and more importantly he can merge all these into his life. By doing so, Confucius claims that the study of the *Odes* (A Collection of poems) could have multiple achievements (*Analects* 17.9). Firstly, we can learn intellectually at the minimum "the names of birds and beast, plants and trees" used in poems, and can extend our learning to examine the real stories and sentiments of all walks of people represented in them. Secondly, we can stimulate our imagination aesthetically by an apt quotation from poems, not to say poems of Confucius' days were

[29] I borrow the translation from D. C. Lau with slight modification. *The Analects*, 133.

[30] Susan Wolf, "Moral saints", in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote ed., *Virtue ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81.

[31] Ibid, 82.

songs. Finally, we can cite poems to serve moral, social and political purposes, such as tactfully expressing our grievances against others and making political points for diplomacy.

Also, the Confucian sage is the perfection of a benevolent person. And to be benevolent is not merely to be moral as one extending one's benevolent love or concern to others is tantamount to build up a meaningful connection with others. As a result, those one loved will indeed constitute one's self. So, being benevolent to others is to cultivate oneself to be a "great person" (*da ren* 大人) with a "great self" (*da wo* 大我). In contrast, one who is egocentric and selfish is living like a "small person" (*xiao ren* 小人) with a "small self" (*xiao wo* 小我). On this point, Tu Wei-ming is true to define the Confucian quest for self-transformation as a communal act,[32] and that the self is an open system that realization "involves the establishment of an ever-expanding circle of human-relatedness."[33] However, his emphasis on the self as a center of relationships and thus the ever-expanding circle of human-relatedness is a concentric one may lead to unnecessary misunderstanding. It is because, for one's great self, its central or essential identity may no longer be oneself. One may value any part of one's great self as higher and vital than oneself, such as parents may consider their children as much more valuable than their own lives. All in all, the Confucian sage as Mencius puts it, is nothing to do with the moral saint but is good (*shan* 善), trustworthy (*xin* 信), beautiful (*mei* 美), great (*dai* 大), sagely (*sheng* 聖) and spiritual (*shen* 神) (Mencius 7B.25).

2.4 Concluding Remarks

To discuss the Confucian conception of education as life education is intended to offer a criticism of as well as an alternative to present-day education. Therefore, it is inevitably to face questions about how to realize the Confucian insights in our education model. Before suggesting some answers, I have to confess that I come up with them as a philosopher, not an educator, so whether they are viable is subject to scrutiny especially by specialists in education. Hopefully, they will not be proved as something merely idealistic and not practicable; otherwise, our education seems to be unavoidable to fall off the edge of a cliff.

First of all, we have to re-conceptualize education for life education, but not to offer a new academic subject called "life education" and define its learning outcomes in the school curriculum. The point is that life education should be the leading and regulative idea of education. No doubt we still have to teach various academic subjects at school and educate our students about the ability of independent thinking. However, all these goals need to become under the idea of education

[32] See Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian thought: selfhood as creative transformation* (Albany: SUNY, 1985), 113.

[33] Ibid, 14.

per se is life education. With this in mind, we should be aware that what is essential in education is not what curriculums, syllabi, and courses can cover but what students can discover in both the realms of knowledge and virtue. Here some existing modes of learning, such as research-based learning, are not necessarily opposed to the conception of life education, given that they are designed to get students engaged in the process of active inquiry so that students can demonstrate their capability of observation and investigation. But they fall short in fulfilling the nature of the life education enterprise that is the self-inquiry into the way of life.

How to spark off students' self-inquiry if we are not going to establish a new academic subject on it? Traditional Confucian education may give us a clue to the answer. Historically, Confucians are mainly educated to practice ritual propriety and study the Confucian classics to learn and develop their "efforts" (*gong fu* 工夫) for self-realization. Now it seems impossible to revive totally, if not partly, the practice of ritual propriety, so the learning of the Confucian classics remains particularly important. In Zhu Xi's "Method of reading" (*Dushufa* 讀書法), it states that the learning of the Confucian classics, if adequately adopting both the philosophical and existential approaches, is not only an intellectual exercise but also a spiritual one.[34] That said, students can find the teachings (about the meaning and value of life) stated in the Confucian classics are personally relevant to themselves, and what they have learned will gradually become something they can look for in themselves. In sum, studying the Confucian classics can generate and nurture the virtues of the learner.

Still, we have to consider some practicalities of how to put it in action. First, how to make the learning of the Confucian classics a compulsory study for students but being avoided it to be alienated as a "learning-to-test" subject. Second, it is necessary to have competent teachers to guide students in reading the texts not only intellectually but also existentially.[35] Admittedly, it is impossible and not necessary to requires teachers as competence as Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, what we need to require them is their familiarity with, embodied experiences of, and enthusiasm for the learning of the Confucian classics to inspire students. In this regard, we can invite reputable Confucian scholars to help train the trainers. Finally, one may cast doubt on whether the Confucian classics are useful in non-Chinese context as they are too culturally laden. To promote the study of the Confucian classics would be particularly helpful in the Chinese context that includes not only Mainland China but also those East Asian countries that have long been influencing by Confucianism,

[34] See Chung-yi Cheng, "Modern versus tradition: are there two different approaches to reading of the Confucian classics?", *Education Philosophy and Theory*, 2016, Vol. 48, no. 1, 106–118.

[35] Xunzi pressed this point as follows, "In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person, Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts. The *Odes* and *Documents* contain ancient stories but no explanation of their present application. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is terse and cannot be quickly understood. However, if you imitate the right person in her practice of the precepts of the noble person, then you will come to honor these things for their comprehensiveness, and see them as encompassing the whole world. Thus, in learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person." (*Xunzi* 1.159–167)

and maybe elsewhere too, as most of the texts already have English translations. Besides using translations, the teaching of the classics of other civilizations could also serve the goal of life education to a certain extent, for the Confucian insights into the way and virtues of life should be something commonly shared and covered though articulated distinctively.

Now let us turn to discuss the philosophical question as mentioned at the beginning to end this paper. That is whether any attempt to promote life education could respond effectively to the possible challenge posed by value subjectivism that Max Weber characterized as one the main features of modernity. Value subjectivism is in some ways an accurate description of our situation today as liberals hold true that one should be free to define what a good life is on one's own. However, it is hard to imagine that we can live in a world of many self-defined, different and even contradictory values. So, there has been a countervailing tendency to strive for seeking commonalities or consensus on value. How to explain this seemingly contradictory phenomenon? We may use Confucian philosophy again to argue that the objective values disenchanted by modern people as Weber puts it are the top down values (from God or a teleological worldview) that inevitably be the constraints of our liberty. For the Confucians, the right way to achieve objective values should be bottom up, first to discover and issue values from our subjective heart/mind, then to recognize them as our intersubjective nature, and then to believe them authentically as something objective in the universe. This way is also the underlying logic of the Confucian life education to emphasize the necessity of self-inquiry that is nothing to do with indoctrination.

Glossary

Classical Authors

Cheng Hao (程顥)
Cheng Yi (程頤)
Hu Hong (胡宏)
Kongzi (孔子, Confucius)
Laozi (老子)
Linji (臨濟, jp. Rinzai)
Lu Xiangshan (陸象山)
Mengzi (孟子, Mencius)
Seng Zhao (僧肇)
Shao Yong (邵雍)
Wang Yangming (王楊明)
Xu Heng (許衡) → Xu Luzhai (許魯齋)
Yan Hui (顏回) → Yan Yuan 顏淵
Yi Hwang (李滉) → Toegye (退溪)
Zengzi (曾子)
Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤)
Zhu Xi (朱熹)
Zhuangzi (莊子)
Zigong (子貢) → Duanmu Ci (端木賜)

Classical Texts

Chuanxilu (傳習錄, Instructions on the Practical Living)
Chunqiu (春秋, Spring and Autumn Annals)
Daodejing (道德經)
Daxue (大學, Great Learning)
Five Classics (五經)
Four Books (四書)

R. Reichenbach, D.-J. Kwak (eds.), *Confucian Perspectives on Learning and Self-Transformation*, Contemporary Philosophies and Theories in Education 14,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40078-1

Jinsilu (近思錄, Reflections on Things at Hand)
Liji (礼記, Book of Rites)
Lunyu (論語, Analects)
Mengzi (孟子, Mencius)
Shijing (詩經, Classic of Poetry, Book of Odes)
Shujing (書經, Book of Documents)
Xiaoxue (小學, Elementary Learning)
Xingli Daquan (性理大全, Great Compendia of Nature and Principle)
Xunzi (荀子)
Yijing (易經, Book of Changes, I Ching) → Zhouyi (周易)
Zhongyong (中庸, Doctrine of the Mean)
Zhouli (周禮, Rites of Zhou)
Zhuangzi (莊子)
Zhuzi Yulei (朱子語類, Conversations with Master Zhu)