

# EASTERN THOUGHT, WITH MORE PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO CONFUCIUS



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## *Second Morrison Lecture*

The Second Morrison Lecture on “Eastern Thought, with special reference to Confucius” was delivered in the Lecture Theatre of the Australian Institute of Anatomy, Canberra, on Wednesday evening, 3rd May, 1933, by Mr. William Ah Ket.

The Chair was occupied by the Honorable the Postmaster-General, Mr. Archdale Parkhill, M.P., and on the platform were Dr. W.P. Chen, Consul-General for China in Australia; Dr. M.J. Holmes, Acting Director-General of Health; Mr. C.S. Daley, O.B.E., Civic Representative; Dr. B.T. Dickson, Chief of the Division of Plant Industry; and Sir Colin MacKenzie, K.B., M.D., Director of the Australian Institute of Anatomy, Canberra. Mr. F.J. Quinlan, Chief Electoral Officer, was unable to be present. The Chinese community was represented by Mr. A. Hing, President of the New South Wales Chinese Chamber of Commerce; Mr. W. Gock Young, Chairman of the Society of Chinese Residents in Australia (Sydney); and Mr. Wm. J.L. Liu. Apologies for absence were received from Mr. Mar Leong Wah, Chairman of Kuomintang, and Mr. J.A. Chuey, Grand Master of the Chinese Masonic Society. Letters of appreciation of the foundation of the Lectureship in memory of a great son of Australia and an acknowledged friend of China, were received from a number of distinguished Chinese scholars from China and other centres.

The Lecture Theatre was crowded and many were unable to gain admission. After the address, Lady MacKenzie held a reception in honour of the distinguished Lecturer in the Northern Museum of the Institute.

*Address*

A recent European writer has published what he calls a record of an inner experience of a peculiar kind, a new spiritual phase of which he says he first became conscious when asked to give a lecture on Occidental and Oriental ways of thinking. He was previously familiar with both, but it was only when he endeavoured to contrast and compare them that he realized the true inwardness of each.

“East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”.

In these words Rudyard Kipling sets out a more or less superficial but hitherto all-sufficient statement of a mental attitude typical of the West. It is only fair to say that this attitude has been not entirely without its counterpart in the East.

Assuming, for the moment, that there is an actual difference between the culture of the East and that of the West, let us shortly examine the nature of that difference and ascertain, if we can, whether it is capable of being reconciled.

“It is not”, says the author, “the contents which distinguish one culture from another. It is merely the different adjustment assumed in each case by the same physical and spiritual material”. The different form which this material acquires in each case is not due to any elementary differences. Chemical contents are all ultimately composed of electrons, and, similarly, the elementary forms of life hardly ever change. Human nature, as such, never changes. In this sense the Christianisation of the Western world did not mean fundamentally so much the victory of a new definite faith as a radical change of the psychological adjustment—the adoption as it were of a new perspective. The antique man had his centre within him. The Christian located the centre of his being in a sphere beyond himself, towards which he assumed an attitude of devotion and submission. The determining centre of the man of antiquity was mind, that of the Christian is soul. It follows that different values ruled life in each case though the elementary facts of life remained unchanged.

Whether there is an Occident capable of being defined and similar in all essential points, depends on the angle of view. Asiatics affirm that there is such a Being, and they attribute the immense power of the West to the essential similarity of all Europeans; although the experience of the world war proved how impossible it is under given circumstances even for nations closely related to each other to do mutual justice to their respective mentalities. But from the Occidental point of view there certainly is no homogeneous Orient. The world of Islam is not difficult for an Occidental to understand, for it has, at least, its spiritual foundation in Judaism, and this has been substantially understood and at least in

part adopted by Europe. It is possible to understand the Hindoo attitude with some difficulty up to a certain point, but what of the Chinese way of thinking?

The writer I have referred to says that with educated Chinese, thought normally starts from a plane of consciousness with which Occidentals are, in the main, unfamiliar. They have not only a faculty of outward combination, but also an inner faculty of settling and finishing the mental process in the subconscious, and this makes the more circumstantial means of communication of the West seem unnecessary to them.

A student will not have great difficulty in finding examples illustrating this; and the same habit of mind will be found in many of the social amenities.

That instinctive and direct perception, more common among Occidental women than men, is a faculty said to be natural to educated Chinese of the old school, for without it the higher degrees of writing and reading could not be practised in China. A marked characteristic of the Chinese language is its shortness of expression. Explanations are not given. This method at once demands and promotes concentration of thought and helps understanding; while the Occidental way tends in the opposite direction. In the Chinese way the mind must always be present and subconsciously, if you like, filling in the blanks according to the capacity and intelligence of the listener; otherwise in the words of the Chinese Philosopher to whom I shall refer "they see but they do not perceive; they hear but they do not understand". It is, therefore, in normal cases difficult to establish immediate and complete understanding with Chinese by the accustomed western methods of communication, for the reason that the Chinese thought moves, as it were, on a different plane.

If one can for the moment discard the differences indicated, Eastern and Western ways of thinking appear to be identical. Both are human ways of thinking, and thinking is, of course, a peculiar expression of life common to all human beings and capable of the same biological interpretation in all cases.

I agree with the writer in his view that there is, however, one important fact which makes it possible to contrast Oriental and Occidental ways of thinking, taking each unit as a whole. It is well known that every Oriental, even the most worldly, seems fundamentally more indifferent to the externals of life than are Occidentals, and this characteristic is common to all philosophic thought of the East. While, in the case of an Occidental, thought clearly figures as a means to an end, it appears in the Orient, generally speaking, as an end in itself. It follows that the results of thinking done in the East and in the West are different, and cannot, in principle, be compared; but this fact discloses them as two mental co-ordinates, which more than suggests the existence of

some other and deeper centre, the finding of which should lead to a more complete understanding of both. If mankind wishes to attain a higher state of insight, it must get behind and beyond both the East and the West. A mere superficial fusion of the present forms is not practicable because Eastern and Western ways of thought have reached their respective limits; they are each last resorts within their own spheres; and they are both one-sided. Their difference in quality can be measured by the way in which each particular activity is adjusted in relation to the universal whole. Every one must eat, but whoever makes eating his aim in life is inferior to a spiritual person, because emphasis is laid on the wrong spot. To strive for gain and profit is necessary, but whoever looks upon material advantage as the true meaning of life misunderstands it, and his misunderstanding leads to the growth of an inferior personality. Western thought, taken as a whole, is not altogether what it should be, because thought, as a means to an end, is employed where it should not be. In short, it is too material. Certainly it leads to great scientific achievement, but it results in an undue mechanization. Neither is the Eastern way of thinking completely satisfactory, as it knows only symbolical expressions of fact, which prevents it from mastering the details of the outer world, which is a necessary, proper and legitimate scope of thought; but both ways are organically connected and inter-related. There is an ultimate synthesis of life. The understanding man has the possibility of both ways within himself. Each from a certain point of view does justice to reality, and a knowledge of both is necessary in order to comprehend the totality of the world. The task of getting beyond the East and the West appears to involve this, namely, to ascertain what is the exact connexion between the two attitudes, and, then to make this connexion the new starting point of thought; which, with its better understanding, shall transcend, and yet embrace, both.

Many of you have more than a passing knowledge of the wisdom of Plato and Socrates and Aristotle; of Spinoza and Voltaire, and Kant and Hegel, and all the rest of the great thinkers of the West down to the present day. I must take for granted the actual or potential existence in the minds of my hearers of a knowledge and appreciation of the systems of thought of the West, and I shall now proceed to draw attention in outline to one of the most outstanding ancient philosophies of the East, that of Kung-fu-tze (usually written Confucius).

Confucius, the greatest sage China has ever known, was born in the year 551 B.C. He was the son of a distinguished soldier, the grandson of a scholar, and the descendant of a wise emperor, to whom his ancestry could be traced back to the year 2637 B.C. His birthplace was in the State of Lu, which is now part of Shantung, in the northeast of China. Legend has it that his birth was heralded by strange portents and miraculous appearances.

Where he received his primary education is unknown, but he appears at an early age to have attained a knowledge of a variety of subjects, and he attributes this to the fact that when he was young he was in poor circumstances and had to seek his livelihood in more or less menial offices. Possibly, too, this tended to develop the great human sympathy which became abundantly manifest during his life.

At the time of the Sage's birth, China was already old. It had an extensive literature, and was well skilled in the arts and sciences. Confucius frequently referred to the wisdom of the ancients, and recommended the study of poetry and history. Nevertheless, men had strayed from the paths of virtue.

Mencius says the world had fallen into decay and right principles had disappeared. Perverse discourses and oppressive deeds were rife. Ministers murdered their rulers, and sons their fathers. Confucius, apprehensive of what he saw, undertook the work of reformation.

He claimed to be a transmitter, and not an originator, of new truths. He sought the truth in what had gone before. Like all great historical characters he felt that he had a special mission in life. He was to preserve what was already known, to examine it earnestly and eagerly, and by a right understanding to draw from it those ethical and moral lessons which would conduce to the happiness of mankind.

Confucius claimed no divine origin. He was merely a man among men. Neither did he pride himself upon his great and distinguished lineage.

"The good old gardener and his wife smile at the claims of long descent"

might easily have expressed the sentiments of the Sage.

His teachings have been commented upon for centuries. They have been, in turn, extravagantly eulogized and just as severely criticized, but have yielded not to either process. For approximately one-third of the human race they still remain the sheet anchor of moral conduct, and constitute a great bond of unity, which, at heart, joins and holds together a great people; and has enabled it to survive all the temporary inroads of races and peoples not actuated by principles based upon the same eternal truths.

He was not irreligious, but rather non-religious. He was, therefore, in all respects religiously tolerant. His teachings were outside and practically independent of religious doctrine, and, therefore, capable of surviving any change of theological dogma. His was not the zeal of the religious fanatic, but that of the earnest teacher. Those good people who denounce him as anti-Christian, utterly fail to appreciate the sphere of his work. There is nothing anti-Christian in ethical and moral philosophy. It

is difficult to understand why a man should be blamed because he admits ignorance of a subject which he feels is beyond him. On being asked, "What of the hereafter?" his answer was, "While we know not this life, how can we hope to know the hereafter?" And when a disciple desired to know whether the dead could still see and hear, his answer was, "There is no present urgency about that point".

Confucius did not assert that these things were unknowable or that the man who felt that he had acquired a sufficient knowledge of this life should refrain from inquiring further. His answers are really two-fold. They confess his inability to enlighten the inquirer on the particular subject as being beyond the Teacher's province, and simultaneously they suggest to the pupil that he is placing the emphasis in the wrong place, putting things in their wrong order, so to speak. The Sage was speaking as man to man, dealing with earthly things and dealing first with those things which seemed nearest at hand.

The philosophy of Confucius is not to be found in any book written by himself, but is gathered from records of his sayings from time to time collected by his disciples or the disciples of his disciples, in much the same way as were the Gospels. The collection was incomplete. The sayings are sometimes cryptic and often symbolical and are not always easy of interpretation. Translation becomes difficult because it is not always possible to render in a foreign language the exact sense in which particular words are understood by people who speak the original tongue.

May I recall to your mind the story of an incident which happened during the Great War? An Australian, on leave, was visiting some French people. During the evening he was asked if he would have a cup of tea; and he, thinking in English and speaking in French answered "Merci, Madame", but although he stayed for several hours no cup of tea arrived. On complaining to a friend he was told that to the French "Thank you" in such circumstances meant "No, thank you" and if he wished to accept he should have said "S'il vous plaît".

Confucius visualized mankind as consisting of three classes: firstly, there is the sage, who has innate wisdom, who treads the right path naturally and inevitably, who is the ideal man. In the sixth century before Christ this class was, apparently, rare, and Confucius himself disclaimed any right to membership of it. With the march of civilization there are not wanting people who believe that in this regard at least

"The old order changeth yielding place to new".

I apprehend that there are now many sages who would gladly testify to their own innate wisdom! At the other end of the human scale are those who are dull and stupid. Confucius did not think it was his mission to say anything to these people, and doubtless to them he will continue to be inarticulate till the end of time. Between these two grades there

is the great bulk of mankind, and this constitutes the extensive field which Confucius hoped to cultivate. His teachings will be found to be fundamentally democratic. Differences of rank and fortune matter nothing. Rulers have a divine right to rule only so long as they act upon right principles. The humblest in the land is entitled to rule if he be possessed of the proper character and the requisite knowledge.

He starts with the hypothesis that man's nature is naturally good, though this may become tainted by evil associations; just like the river which is pure at its source but may become polluted before it reaches the sea. On the other hand, by cultivating the good that is in him and by rejecting the evil that is found by the way, he will acquire the ideal nature, and that should be his objective. This starting point has been criticized by an eminent divine as being contrary to the scriptures, and disproved by common experience, and, therefore, of course, totally wrong. I do not find myself in agreement with this criticism. The story of the Creation found in the Bible proceeds upon a very similar basis. It was temptation which brought Adam from his high estate; and Christianity itself seeks to reinstate him. Moreover, the sure and certain belief that deep down in human nature there is always some good that will respond to sympathetic treatment seems to me to be the only justification for all that is reformatory in our social system. And the suggested test of "common experience" is to my mind too closely related to the familiar test of "commonsense", which, after all, is only a comforting way of expressing the sense of the speaker, and this in fact may be far from common.

According to Confucius, the chief duty of man is to build his own character, and to toil at this task without flagging. Endowed with a nature which, though naturally good, is liable to err unless carefully watched, man must be incessantly on guard over his own thoughts and actions. If he fail in any endeavour he must seek the cause of his failure, and in that quest must first examine his own shortcomings. Particularly must he watch over his thoughts when he is alone, for it is then that his weaknesses will become most apparent and his temptations be the greatest.

Man must acquire knowledge for, as Confucius said, "by extensive study of all learning and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety one may likewise not err from what is right".

A man must think of what he learns, for, as again Confucius says, "learning without thought is labour lost: thought without learning is perilous". He also says "I have been the whole day without eating and the whole night without sleeping occupied only with thinking, but it was useless. The better plan is to learn".

The supreme object of learning should be truth. Man should love the truth as well as know it. He should delight in it as well as love it. Confucius says "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who find great pleasure

in it". Learning combined with thought results in knowledge, and true knowledge implies and demands this. "When you know a thing to hold that you know it, and when you do not know a thing to allow that you do not know it". There is here the implication of sincerity and truthfulness, and the necessity for a moral courage which is, perhaps, not sufficiently common. To assert knowledge of a thing does not need great courage, but to admit want of knowledge often does.

Knowledge should enable a man to distinguish between truth and falsehood, to assimilate what is good and to discard what is evil. His progress depends upon the exercise of his will. The intentions of man must be firmly fixed: if they are unsettled he is like a ship without a compass or a horse without a bridle; and they must be fixed on what is right. Confucius says "If the will be set on virtue there will be no practice of wickedness". A man's will is his own and if it be fixed upon what is good nothing can lead him astray. And again, "The commander of a large city may be carried off but the will of even a common man cannot be taken from him".

It is in this sense that man is master of his own destiny. He should, says Confucius, "let the will be set on the path of duty and let perfect virtue be accorded with". Duty and virtue are to him practically synonymous terms. The superior man will set his heart upon virtue. He will love righteousness, propriety and good faith, and those ends he will pursue with perfect sincerity. A man's conduct must agree with his words. His words must be sincere and carefully weighed and suited to the occasion. The same idea is, I think, expressed in English in this way:—

If wisdom's ways you wisely seek  
 These things observe with care:  
 Of whom you speak, to whom you speak,  
 And how, and when, and where.

Confucius, not without some sense of humour, recounts how, when he began life, he judged men's characters by their words; but after some experience he weighed their words by the light of their conduct. Many years before St. Paul he anticipated that Apostle who said "By their works ye shall know them".

In dealings with his fellow men a man should be gentle, forbearing and reciprocal. "Is there one word", asked a disciple, "which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?" to which the Master replied "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not wish done to yourself do not unto others".

This is none other than the Golden Rule—a rule, by the way, which is so well known and so rarely followed. It has been said that it is expressed in negative form, but the other sayings of Confucius and the whole tenor of his life clearly demonstrate that he did not mean to command a policy



of inaction where doing a good deed is concerned.

In the cultivation of one's character, Confucius speaks of fixing the will on virtue. Virtue implies knowledge, humanity, valour as distinguished from rashness, faithfulness, sincerity and benevolence, and benevolence embraces reciprocity, loyalty and reverence. In addition, Confucius says that dignity is one of the qualities of a cultivated man. But first, last and always there is the necessity for introspection. Beginning with that and carefully cultivating his character, Confucius says that the superior man will carefully guard his words and actions.

He will take Benevolence as his dwelling place,  
 Righteousness as his robe,  
 Propriety as his garment,  
 Wisdom as his lamp,  
 Faithfulness as his charm.

It is not possible, says Confucius, for a man to teach others who cannot teach his own family therefore, a ruler, without going beyond his own family, can and does complete the lessons for the whole State. There is filial piety; therewith the sovereign should be served: there is fraternal submission; with which elders and superiors should be served: there is kindness and consideration, with which the people should be treated.

"Of all things which derive their natures from heaven and earth, man is the most noble. Of all the duties which are incumbent upon him there is none greater than filial obedience, nor, in performing this, is there anything so essential as to reverence one's father, and as a mark of reverence there is nothing more important than to place him on an equality with heaven". This passage is quoted with approval by Confucius, and from it is learnt the lessons of filial duty and ancestral worship. To his mind, sacrifices to the dead were not idolatrous. They were not based upon any assumption that the dead could see and hear, but were enjoined as the continuing outward symbol of that attitude of mind which a child should at all times bear to its parent. I have already referred to the incident wherein Confucius told a disciple that the question whether the dead could see and hear and thus be aware of the sacrifices was not a matter of present urgency; whether they could or could not, was a matter of no real importance.

It is written in the Scriptures "Honour thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long in the land the Lord thy God giveth thee". Whether or not this is a statement of cause and effect, the fact remains that the Chinese have occupied their lands for many ages. Great encroachments have from time to time been made upon them, but the history of previous invasions has been that the invaders themselves have ultimately become merged. Who knows but what history will repeat itself? That depends, perhaps, on whether the great lessons of Cufucianism can be completely eradicated from the Chinese mind.

From the foregoing inadequate outline it may be thought that Confucius was an austere man whose chief concern was to enjoin study and stern discipline, but that was only one side of his nature, for he says that recreation and enjoyment should be had in the exercise of the polite arts. He practised archery as an exercise, was passionately fond of poetry and music, and exhibited no little skill with the lute. Music had for him a peculiar charm, as many of the incidents of his life will show. Had he lived to-day it is quite likely that he would have found in the music of the bagpipes something particularly stirring and satisfying to the soul. While he undoubtedly possessed a rare insight into human character he appears to me to have had a quaint and subtle humour. For example, on one occasion while insisting on the great importance of benevolence he said: "Benevolence is more to man than either water or fire"; and then he added "though I have seen men die from walking on water or fire I have never observed a man die from treading the paths of benevolence". Again, he was a man of very deep sympathy. During his lifetime he paid the funeral expenses of any of his friends who could not afford a decent burial. On one occasion, when on a journey, he happened to visit the house of a man with whom he had formerly lodged. He found that the man had just died and the house was in mourning. He immediately ordered that one of his carriage horses should be sold to provide the necessary funeral expenses. One of his disciples ventured to demur, when Confucius answered "My tears have just been mingled with those of the chief mourner. I cannot bear that nothing should follow my tears".

The great impelling force of Confucius' life was his desire to serve humanity. Towards the end of his life he said "In four things have I failed to realize my ideal: how to serve my prince as I would have my minister serve me: how to serve my father as I would have my son serve me: how to serve my elder brother as I would have my younger brother serve me: and how to serve my friends as I would have them behave towards me". The keynote of his life was service, and the whole preparation was directed to that end.

Confucius did not teach that the cultivation of one's character would bring any reward in the hereafter; what, then, was the reason of his teaching and what was its object? It proceeded on the basis that whoever wishes to improve external conditions must begin by improving his inner self and that all ideals must be realized internally. Having carefully improved himself, a man may bend his mind to improving others and by the force of example as well as precept help to make the world a better and happier place.



*Morrison with servants, 1898*