

The Love of the Two Great Educators: Socrates and Confucius

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Abstract: Socrates and Confucius are two great men whose philosophy or doctrines respectively shaped Western and Eastern civilizations. As educators, they share similarities and at the same time differ in significant ways. Both of them love knowledge, believing the starting point of learning is to have correct self-knowledge, and having faith in the attainability of knowledge, but their belief on the location of the source of knowledge and the ways to get it differ. Both of them value virtue, and made themselves examples of virtue before exhorting others to love and practice it, but their conceptions of the relations between virtue and knowledge differ. Both of them have concern for others and are willing to shoulder their missions to improve the societies they live, but their ways to love others and their missions differ. However, all these differences cannot eclipse and obscure the two great educator's major similarities: their genuine love and concern for the fate of the humanity. Knowledge and virtue hold the promise to improve human condition, and love for others and dedication to the society could further improve the wellbeing of human beings.

1. Introduction

Socrates and Confucius are two great men whose philosophy or doctrines respectively shaped Western and Eastern civilizations. As educators, they share similarities and at the same time differ in significant ways. Take the content of their education, their pedagogy, and their goals of education for example. They both value virtue, but while Socrates would like to explore with his interlocutors the definition of virtue through rational thinking. Confucius put more emphasis on the practice of virtue; they both applied the means of question and answer to enlighten their students or friends, but while Confucian heuristic approach implies that a teacher who is relatively more knowledgeable has the final say on the correctness of the answer, Socratic midwifery approach treats students as the center in the process of the pursuit of knowledge, where teacher's role is no more than a facilitator. Both Socrates and Confucius hoped that through their efforts, people would lead better lives and their society would become better places, but while Socrates' goal was more individualistic --- he repeatedly exhorted people to examine their lives because he believed that unexamined life was not worth living, Confucius' goal of education was more collective, and he expected that everybody would take their share of obligations so that the society would function well in harmony.

When comparing Socrates with Confucius in education, the above-mentioned aspects are frequently discussed and debated by scholars. However, very few existing literature mentions that the two great educators' LOVE matters, for whatever they taught, how they taught, what they aimed for, how themselves behaved and why all derive from their great or even saintly love --- their love of knowledge and virtue, their love for others and the society. In the following part, I will elaborate (first Socrates, then Confucius) on these aspects of love[1-5].

2. The Love of the Two Great Educators

2.1. Socrates

2.1.1. Love of Knowledge and Virtue

1) Love of Knowledge

For Socrates, love of knowledge is synonymous with love of wisdom. He professed himself not as a teacher but a philosopher (lover of wisdom). The starting point for loving wisdom, according to Socrates, was to know one's ignorance. Socrates, though announced by Delphi oracle to be the wisest man, humbly acknowledged that his wisdom lay in his knowing his own ignorance. He repeatedly told others that he did "not suppose that [he] [knew]". (*Apology*, 29b) As an educator, Socrates was compelled by his sense of mission that not only he himself should know his not knowing, but also should help others to recognize and acknowledge their ignorance, otherwise true wisdom would never be obtained. Accordingly, he went out and met people from all walks of life, questioning and cross-examining them.

The very approach of his is later known as "Socratic method", with *elenchus* and *aporia* lay at the heart of it. (Reich, 69) *Elenchus* is to refute or cross-examine people. Through it, the logic and consistency of an interlocutor's responses are tested, and the interlocutor is often awakened to the fact that his former knowledge are false and what he believes previously cannot hold. For example, in Plato's dialogue *Meno*, Socrates asked Meno what virtue was. At the beginning, the interlocutor was quite confident that he knew, and talked about different virtues for men, women, child, and old men. Socrates pointed out that what Meno gave him was a swamp of bees, not the common characteristics of the bee. What he wanted was one virtue covering all these cases, instead of "ending up with a multitude." (*Meno*, 74d) Then Meno made other tries, but was still unsuccessful. But the effect of the questioning was invaluable, because Meno was forced to realize his ignorance: "I have made lots of statements about virtue on countless occasions to many people, and extremely well too, or so I thought. But now I don't have anything at all to say even about what it is." (*Meno*, 80b) The natural outcome of the *elenchus* is *aporia*, or confusion. Upon being refuted, the interlocutor can no longer maintain what he originally believed and is left, typically, in a state of utter perplexity. (Reich, 69) Meno's puzzlement can easily be observed from the above quotes. From *elenchus* to *aporia*, Socrates would help his interlocutors to clear away their false believes and prepare themselves for the new journey of searching for the truth.

However, one more question needs to be answered before one could affirmatively claim his love of wisdom or knowledge --- Is knowledge attainable? Negative answer would quench enthusiasm, for few would like their efforts end up nowhere. Socrates was by no means an agnostic. In Platonic dialogues, he developed a whole theory of recollection to prove that knowledge is within us and that proper guidance would help us to regain what we already have. He believes that "the soul exists when the human being has died, and has some power and wisdom" (*Phaedo*, 70b), and that "our learning is in fact nothing but recollection" (*Phaedo*, 72e). Since we got knowledge "before birth" and "lost it in the course of being born", to regain knowledge "which at an earlier time we had in our grasp" is possible by "recollecting". (*Phaedo*, 75e)

In *Meno*, the episode of Socrates' questioning the slave boy of Meno on geometry best illustrates "Socratic method", and the process of recollection. Socrates questioned the boy on how to double the size of a square. First the boy thought he knew but then discovered that he did not know, and became perplexed but still curious. After the stages of *elenchus* and *aporia*, Socrates said to Meno, "Watch then what he will actually discover as a result of this puzzlement, by searching with me, while I merely ask questions and don't teach him." (*Meno*, 84d) Finally the slave boy did come up with the correct answer to Socrates' geometric problem without being taught anything about it before or during the questioning. Thus Socrates proved to Meno that learning is nothing but recollection.

The "Socratic method" is later inherited by Socrates' successors in practicing philosophy and teaching, and the theory of recollection could reinforce the learners' confidence on attainability of knowledge. Had it not been Socrates' love of knowledge and wisdom, the method and the theory would not have been developed and applied.

2) *Love of Virtue*

Socrates was wise, but he would not have ignited the admiration of his students and later generations without his genuine love and practice of virtue. His student Phaedo affectionately remembered him as "a man who was, ..., the best of those whom we came to know in those days, and also the wisest and most just." (*Phaedo*, 118a)

The most valued virtues by Socrates were justice, courage and temperance (*Phaedo*, 114e). Not only did Socrates discuss about these virtues with his friends, but he also put them into practice even when his life was at stake. Socrates was just. After he was decided by Athenians to be guilty, he would not, by "weeping and wailing and lamenting", nor by bringing any of his sons to petition them for an acquittal. He was reluctant to do so because he thought it was wrong and would put others in danger of committing something unjust. His logic was that since he had been convicted according to the process of law, and the judge was supposed to "judge according to the laws, and not according to his own good pleasure" (*Apology*, 35c), trying to alter it would be unjust. Socrates was courageous. When meeting his death in his last trial, he said, "I cared not a straw for death, and that my only fear was the fear of doing an unrighteous or unholy thing." (*Apology*, 32d) And his courageous demeanor was testified by his student Phaedo, "The man (Socrates) seemed to me to be happy, both in his behavior and in what he said, so fearlessly and nobly did he meet his end." (*Phaedo*, 58e) For Socrates, death is desired by a philosopher (*Phaedo*, 64a), for body is "an impediment" in one's acquisition of wisdom (*Phaedo*, 65b), and only by getting rid of it could one pursue wisdom more freely. (*Phaedo*, 82e) This is the main source of Socrates' courage and temperance too. While ordinary people's temperance is caused by desire for pleasure, ("They overcome some pleasures because they are overcome by other pleasures. (*Phaedo*, 69a)), Socrates' temperance is by no means a pretense, for he truly distained bodily pleasure. For him, bodily desires are undesirable distractions for a philosopher in their pursuit of wisdom.

The last moment of Socrates was farcical but moving because of Socrates' manifestation of virtue (wisdom, courage and temperance). After seeing Socrates drinking poison and growing feeble, his friends around him were all in tears, some were in such a grief that they began to cry loudly. Socrates was annoyed and said, "You astonish me – what a way for you all to behave! I've heard that one should meet one's end in a reverent silence. No, keep quiet and show some resolve." (*Phaedo*, 117d, 117e)

Socrates' love of virtue is not only exemplified in his last trial, but in his earnest pursuit during his life. Not only he said that "the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue" (*Apology*, 38), he also tried his best to extend the greatest good to others. Plato's dialogues could serve as witnesses. In *Phaedo*, apart from the main theme of recollection and the relations between body and soul, he discussed with his friend a philosopher's attitudes towards virtue; In *Meno*, Socrates

explored with the youth on what virtue is and whether virtue can be taught; In *Apology*, Socrates was an example of virtue and strenuously tried to exhort his fellow Athenians to lead a virtuous life. And in Plato's other dialogues like *Republic*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, different aspects of virtues --- justice, temperance, courage are discussed with earnest and enthusiasm.

Because of his love of virtue, Socrates unwearingly explored it during his life and stubbornly defended it at the last moment of his life. His example would forever be the lighthouse for those who would like follow his trail to love wisdom and virtue[6-10].

2.1.2. Love for Others and the Society

1) Love for Others

Socrates' enthusiasm to engage others in the exploration of wisdom and virtue was not out of his whimsical thinking, but was derived from his love for others, which he interpreted as a mission trusted on him by god. He was concerned that the Athenians "care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul" (*Apology*, 29e); he believed that he was helping them to examine their lives, for unexamined life "is not worth living" (*Apology*, 38). Socrates was so dedicated to his "devotion to the god" that he had "no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of [his] own", and was reduced to "utter poverty". Had it not been his piety and genuine love for others, he wouldn't have made such a sacrifice.

In *Theaetetus*, he compared himself to midwives. Midwives "can tell whether a woman is pregnant or not" (*Theaetetus*, 149c5), "relieve 'birth-pains'" (149d1), "bring about the birth when women are in difficulties" (149d1), "cause a miscarriage in the early stages, if it seems right" (149d1). For Socrates, as he remarked:

My own art of midwifery has all the same features as theirs, but with the difference that I act as midwife to men, not women, and it's their souls I oversee giving birth and not their bodies. And the greatest aspect of my skill is that it enables me to test this way and that whether the mind of a young person is giving birth to a phantom and a falsehood or something fruitful and true. Yet I do have this much in common with midwives, that I am unproductive myself – unproductive, that is, of wisdom. (150b5,c1,b5)

To help his fellow citizens to get their brainchild, Socrates would take pains to judge whether they were empty-headed or "pregnant", helped them getting rid of "phantom" and false beliefs, and relieved birth-pains by words of assurance and encouragement. He did all these willingly for the good of others instead of for profit, for he had never charge fees from those who conversed with him.

Despite of his goodwill, Socrates was wronged by some of those whom he had served. Misunderstandings and enmity mounted and brought the old man his final destruction. Had it not been his love for his fellow Athenians, he would have regretted all he had done, but he didn't.

2) Love for the Society

The self-sacrifice and martyrdom of Socrates reveals Socrates' nobler concern ---his love for the society. Socrates' death might have been avoided if he made a compromise to hold his tongue and stop practicing philosophy. But he wouldn't "yield to injustice from any fear of death" and remarked that:

While I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet after my manner, and convincing him, saying: O my friend, why do you who are a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? (*Apology*, 29d-e)

He regarded himself as "a sort of gadfly, given to the state by the god; and the state is like a great

and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life.” (*Apology*, 30e)

Though Socrates didn't do politics, he did have a blueprint for a better society where the philosopher rules. The allegory of Cave in *Republic* best illustrates what a qualified philosopher-ruler should experience. The philosopher would initially be one among the prisoners locked in chains in a dark cave where shadows were taken for reality. Being released and “dragged out of there by force” (*Republic*, 515e), he had the chance to experience the realm of truth where sun shines. The ideal guardian/ruler of the city, according to Socrates, should be the one who has “ma[d]e that ascent, and view the good” in the upper world, and then comes back to the cave to “share in their(his fellow prisoner's) hardships and rewards”.(519d) For he who has been “more fully educated than the rest”, after getting used to seeing in the dark, would “see a thousand times better than the people there do”, since he has seen “the truth of what is beautiful and just and good.”(520c) The philosopher-ruler would be reluctant to rule, for he has already seen a better world than the cave, but it is this reluctance that makes him harder to be corrupted and thus a better ruler[11-15].

Out of his love for the society he lived, Socrates was willing to be the “gadfly” of the city, and out of his wisdom, virtue, concern for others and the whole society, Socrates came up with a blueprint of the Republic where a philosopher-ruler could lead his people to live wisely and happily.

2.2. Confucius

2.2.1. Love of Knowledge and Virtue

1) Love of Knowledge

Like Socrates, Confucius harbors genuine love for knowledge and learning. He once remarked, “If I were told of the truth in the morning, I would die willingly even in the evening.” (*Analects*, 4.8) And he believed himself a man “who in his eager pursuit of knowledge forgets his food, who in the joy of its attainment forgets his sorrows, and who does not perceive that old age is coming on.” (*Analects*, 7.19)

Different from Socrates who claims himself neither knows nor teaches, The *Analects* compiled by the disciples of Confucius shows that the Master is the source of knowledge for his students and Confucius does profess that he teaches. Once he taught one of his students what knowledge was, “You, shall I teach you what knowledge is? 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—this is knowledge.”(*Analects*, 2.17) However, Confucius would honestly admit his ignorance about something when he really didn't know: “Do I have much knowledge? No. When a rustic made an inquiry of me, I knew nothing.” (*Analects*, 9.8) Being self-aware of his role as a teacher, Confucius tried to meet his principle of “teaching without weariness”. (*Analects*, 7.2)

Like Socrates, Confucius believes that knowledge is attainable, but instead of residing within oneself, it is out there. According to him, the major source of knowledge is from the past. Since he was “not one who was born in the possession of knowledge”, “being fond of antiquity”, he was “earnest in seeking it there.” (*Analects*, 7.20) As a teacher, Confucius asserted his “belief and love in ancient things”, and emphasized his role as “a transmitter rather than a creator”. (*Analects*, 7.1)

Since knowledge is out there, to obtain it, students should work diligently. The approach provided by the Master are mainly fivefold: First, “hearing much and selecting what is good and following it; seeing much and keeping it in memory”. (*Analects*, 7.28) Second, learning and thinking should reinforce each other, for “learning without thinking leads to puzzlement; thinking without learning is perilous.” (*Analects*, 2.15) Third, don't be ashamed of asking questions. Kong Wenzhi was given by Confucius as an example of being “bright and fond of learning”, and feeling

“no shame in consulting his inferiors”. (*Analects*, 5.15) Fourth, to master what one have learnt, practice is important: “to learn and unceasingly practice, does that not give satisfaction?” (*Analects*, 1.1) Fifth, our fellow learners could also give us some inspirations, for that “in a party of three there must be one whom I can learn from”, and that “I will pick his merits to emulate them, and find his demerits to ament mine.” (*Analects*, 7. 22)

Confucius encourages students to develop a true love of learning, and he tends to further instruct those who take the initiative to learn. The following remarks are frequently quoted as Confucius way of heuristic education, “I would not give him enlightenment unless he has racked his brains and yet fails to understand, or unless he has tried hard to express himself but fails to open his mouth. Never teach him more if he cannot draw inferences about three cases from one instance.”(*Analects*, 7.8)

2) *Love of Virtue*

For Socrates, if one gains true wisdom, one will be virtuous. That’s why Socrates believes that philosopher, who has been enlightened in the realm of truth, would be the best candidate to act as a virtuous guardian of a city-state. However, for Confucius, virtue is more than knowledge. First, to be virtuous is more important than to be knowledgeable. Confucius said, “Young people should have filial piety at home and show fraternal love when out. They should be cautious and truthful, have love for all, and develop closer relationship with virtuous people. Then when there is energy to spare, they may set out to learn the classics.” (*Analects*, 1.6) In other words, if a man loves virtue and behaves properly and accordingly, he is praiseworthy, even though he cannot spare his time on learning. Second, having knowledge only paves the way but is not a guarantee to make a virtuous man. Actions speak louder than words. Practicing virtue is easier said than done, and even Confucius himself find it hard: “In academic studies, I might be as good as it as others; as for practicing myself to be a man of perfect virtue, I still haven’t hit the target.” (*Analects*, 7.33) Confucius has a deep abhorrence for those who have glib tongues. He once complained: “Artful words and flattering countenance have little to do with human goodness.” (*Analects*, 1.3) For him, “Words are to communicate ideas and that’s all.” (*Analects*, 15.41) And “a superior man considers it a shame to have more words than deeds.”(*Analects*, 14.27) When Confucius gave his disciple Zigong advice on how a superior man should conduct himself, he said, “First put words into practice; then say what has been done accordingly.” (*Analects*, 2.13)

To cultivate his students’ love of virtue and help them to distinguish right from wrong, Confucius usually makes contrast between superior man and petty man, showing his approval for the former and his detest for the latter. While “a superior man holds to morality”, “a petty man clings to his benefits”(*Analects*, 4.11) ; while “a man of virtue is penetrable to reason”, “a base man can only be persuaded with benefits”. (*Analects*, 4.16) According to Confucius, a man who cares more on morality and less on material comforts is virtuous. He speaks highly of those who “does not seek to eat to his heart’s content, or dwell in coziness” but “is diligent in work and cautious in word” and “keeps company with men of principle so as to rectify himself.”(*Analects*, 1.14) And he set himself as an example by putting righteousness above worldly gains: “riches and honors acquired by unrighteous means are to me like passing clouds.”(*Analects*, 7.16)

In a word, according to Confucianism, if one really loves virtue, he would put virtue above everything, match his words with deeds, be able to distinguish right from wrong and care for morality rather than material comforts and benefits.

2.2.2. Love for Others and the Society

1) *Love for Others*

Like Socrates, Confucius bears genuine love for others. When his student Fan Chi asked him what benevolence was, the Master replied, “loving people.” (*Analects*, 12.22) And what’s special

about Confucianism is that, it has a whole system of teachings on how to love others. “Filial piety and fraternal love” which are “the foundation of benevolence”, (*Analects*, 1.2) teach one to love his parents and family members; be “faithful among friends” (*Analects*, 1.7) is the major principle on how to love friends; the admonition that “a prince should employ his ministers according to the rules of propriety”, “ministers should serve their prince with loyalty” (*Analects*, 3.19) stipulate how the prince and his ministers should take their respective responsibilities and love each other. And there are general principles which could be applied to love others regardless of interpersonal relationship: Be “strict with himself and lenient with others”(Analecets, 15.15); and “never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself.” (*Analects*, 15.24)

The noblest way for a virtuous man to love others is to “help others to fulfill their nice wishes”. (*Analects*, 12.16) Confucius speaks highly of the man who “while striving to seek his own accomplishment”, “helps others to seek theirs”; “while striving to gain his own enlightenment”, “also helps others to gain theirs.” (*Analects*, 6.30) And Confucius himself as a teacher and a learner, best exemplified the saintly behavior. Not only did he teach his students knowledge and how to acquire knowledge, he also urged them to practice virtue and endeavor to be a noble and virtuous men. Motivated by his altruistic love, and through self-cultivating and cultivating others, Confucius made himself and made others. His students and followers, having been equipped with knowledge and virtue, also inherit Confucius’ capacity to love others and passed on the goodwill and tradition.

2) Love for the Society

Both Confucius and Socrates would like to do something for society to make it a better place. Confucius harbors no less love for his land than Socrates. Living in a period of historical transition, Confucius saw his world sinking into violence and barbarity. The Zhou tradition of 500 years ago was no longer operative, and the Zhou world was falling apart. Acutely sensing the crisis, Confucius’ love for his country endowed him with an unshakable sense of mission. Dedicated to restore the order, he recruited and trained his disciples in the hope of preparing talents who could help with governing. He urged his students to learn, and encouraged those who excelled in learning to take office. (*Analects*, 19.13) Once his student Zi Gong asked him that if there was a beautiful jade, should they keep it in a casket or sell it to someone who could offer a good price. Confucius responded, “Sell it! Oh, sell it! I am expecting such a buyer.” (*Analects*, 9.13)

Despite the fact that Confucius’ political ideal was constantly frustrated, his love for the society made him a great transmitter of knowledge, virtue and tradition. History witnesses how the systematic doctrines derived from the love of THE great teacher stabilized the social order and shaped Chinese people’s character. Confucian education has become the major way to prepare for officials and, even for those who avoid politics, being better educated, they would have better chances to be more self-disciplined and responsible. Filial piety, trustworthiness, and loyalty are intricately integrated into Chinese national fabric, so even for those who haven’t being educated in a school, they would consciously behave according to Confucian doctrine which has already become part of our customs. Confucius’ ideal has been realized, for the tradition has become entrenched and social order maintained.

3. Conclusion

The comparison between Socrates and Confucius could be very tricky, one usually begins with similarities but ends with differences, for even though there is something in common in their intentions and goodwill, their practices prove different in different social contexts. Both of them love knowledge, believing the starting point of learning is to have correct self-knowledge, and having faith in the attainability of knowledge, but their belief on the location of the source of knowledge and the ways to get it differ: Socrates believes that knowledge is within oneself and

therefore recollection by the help of an intellectual “midwife” is the best way to obtain it; Confucius believes that knowledge is out there, so learning diligently by hearing, seeing, thinking, asking questions and frequently practice what one has learnt is indispensable in one’s pursuit of it. Both of them value virtue, and made themselves examples of virtue before exhorting others to love and practice it, but their conceptions of the relations between virtue and knowledge differ: Socrates holds that once one obtains true knowledge, one will be virtuous, but Confucius maintains that a man’s virtue is manifested by his action, that knowledge can help but cannot guarantee one to become virtuous. Both of them have concern for others and are willing to shoulder their missions to improve the societies they live, but their ways to love others and their missions differ: Socrates’ tried to be a gadfly--- by challenging what his fellow citizens had taken for granted, he wished to awake them to enlightenment; Confucius aimed to be a restorer--- by establishing a whole system of how to love others, he hoped to restore the tradition and social order.

However, all these differences cannot eclipse and obscure the two great educator’s major similarities: their genuine love and concern for the fate of the humanity. Knowledge and virtue hold the promise to improve human condition, and love for others and dedication to the society could further improve the wellbeing of human beings.

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