

Maturing through Learning: A Study of the Concept of “Learning” in the Analects

Zhengtong Zhang, Danhong Zhao

Jilin Normal University, Changchun City, Jilin Province 136000

Abstract: Human beings, as historically developing entities, exhibit a development that aligns with societal progress. Achieving the essence of humanity requires attention to both self-development and the establishment of reasonable social norms. As a classic Confucian work, The Analects constructs an ideal of human character and social ethics. It not only envisions the realization of personal ideal values but also proposes a vision for the actual order of society. For the former, The Analects delineates the “Junzi” personality as an ideal for individuals to strive for. For the latter, it embodies the concept of governing the world with the principles outlined in “half of the Analects.” In the context of the era, The Analects provides valuable insights into unifying the ideal and the actual aspects of human existence through the path of “learning”. Only through continuous self-overcoming in the process of learning can one become a constantly evolving historical being, achieving the ideal of the “Junzi” personality and the unity of “inner sage” and “outer king”. Therefore, this paper begins with the concept of “learning” to examine Confucius’s philosophy of learning. Specifically, “learning” arises through the objectification of the individual and society, and through analyzing these relationships, it generates valuable thoughts applicable to today’s context.

Keywords: “Learning to be Benevolent”; “Learning Rituals”; “Learning Governance”

1. “Learning”: The Convergence of Questions and Practice

1.1 “Learning”: The Presentation of the Issue

When we open The Analects, we find that the text begins with the chapter “Xue Er”, and the first sentence starts with the word “learning”. But why start with “learning”? What is the basis and significance of beginning with “learning”? These questions lead us to ponder the issue of “learning.”

In the Annotations on the Meanings of The Analects, it is stated: “Even sages must learn to become accomplished... This confirms that people must learn to achieve.”^[1] This affirmation of the status of “Xue Er” and “learning” is also the first indication of the Confucian view on the purpose of human existence—it is through continuous learning that one can achieve full personhood. Additionally, the Doctrine of the Mean states: “What Heaven decrees is called nature; following nature is called the Way; cultivating the Way is called teaching.”^[2] This highlights the foundation of “learning.” In Confucius’s view, the mandate of Heaven is ubiquitous, integrating with humanity and giving people the utmost affirmation, fully displaying human morality. Confucius elevates human focus from the natural world of religious times to self-reflection on humanity itself. He explains human relationships using the concept of the “Way”, which is the shared path for all people. By following this path, people can coexist peacefully and advance together; otherwise, they would struggle and perish.^[3]

1.2 “Learning”: The Orientation towards Practice

Confucius’s concept of “learning” is not an abstract idea but is grounded in practical life. For individuals, it encompasses oneself, others, and society.

True learning of book knowledge comes after mastering life ethics. Confucius stated, “The noble person focuses on the fundamentals. When the fundamentals are established, the Way naturally arises. Filial piety and fraternal respect are the roots of benevolence.” One must first be filial to one’s parents to be considered benevolent. In dealing with siblings and friends, one must “be respectful at home, be earnest and trustworthy, love all people broadly, and be close to those who are benevolent. If there is energy left after these, study the classics.” Cultural education strengthens these ethics further.

To regulate these relationships, Confucius advocated for the norms of “rites and music”: “Lead the people with virtue, regulate them with rites, and they will have a sense of shame and become upright.” Qian Mu pointed out, “Virtue is the character and heart of the ruler, leading through mutual feelings and understanding, rather than through coercion. Rites are rules and standards. When everyone follows these stand-

ards, uniformity is achieved, but this uniformity is based on mutual feelings, not fear."^[4]

"The use of rites is for harmony. This was the beauty of the way of the former kings. If great and small matters follow this, they will be effective. But simply knowing harmony without regulating it with rites cannot lead to proper conduct." "If the ruler loves rites, the people will not dare to be disrespectful. If the ruler loves righteousness, the people will not dare to be insincere. If the ruler loves trustworthiness, the people will not dare to be dishonest."

2. "Learning": The Social Survival Rule

2.1 Learning Benevolence: Love for Others — The Moral Prerequisite

"Learning" and "love of learning" are both the historical and logical starting points of Confucius's thought and form an important foundation of his philosophy.^[6] So, what should be learned? In Confucius's view, the individual must start with "benevolence" as the foundation. This is not only the basis for becoming a person but also a prerequisite for social interaction.

According to Professor Chen Lai, the most prominent feature in *The Analects* and the greatest difference from the times before Confucius is the emphasis on "benevolence".^[5] What is "benevolence"? The phrase "preferring the good and changing the color" indicates the scope of "benevolence," which involves "human relationships."^[7] This includes values like "virtue, filial piety, loyalty, and trust." For example, in the chapter *Xue Er*, Youzi said, "The noble person focuses on the fundamentals. When the fundamentals are established, the Way naturally arises. Filial piety and fraternal respect are the roots of benevolence." Here, the first essential of benevolence is "filial piety," which is the basic virtue that maintains the feudal patriarchal system of primogeniture.

2.2 Learning Rites: Rites Aligning with Human Sentiments — The Expression of Values

For Confucius, the "rites" of the Western Zhou period were highly revered. However, he criticized the erosion of rites in his time, stating, "When the eight rows of dancers perform in the court, what can be tolerated if this cannot?" Confucius inherited the normative function of rites, an external regulation, and imbued them with internal moral factors, an internal discipline.

Confucius believed, "Without learning the rites, one cannot stand." But what should one learn about the rites? In describing his inheritance of rites, Confucius said, "I can talk about the rites of the Xia dynasty, but there is insufficient evidence. I can talk about the rites of the Yin dynasty, but there is insufficient evidence. The records are insufficient. If there were enough evidence, I could support them." Confucius continued, "The Zhou dynasty looked back at the two previous dynasties. How splendid is its culture! I follow the Zhou." This shows that Confucius's inheritance of rites was based on the Xia and Shang dynasties, considering the Zhou dynasty's system superior. He described the relationship between "cultural refinement" and "substance": "

Confucius's view of rites extends beyond this. In a dialogue with Yan Yuan, he said, "To subdue oneself and return to propriety is benevolence. If one can subdue oneself and return to propriety for one day, the world will return to benevolence. Practicing benevolence depends on oneself, not on others." Here, Confucius explained that one needs internal moral norms, which must be expressed through external forms. This is termed "moral rites." This relationship is evident in all aspects of social life. Individually, Confucius said, "Respect without propriety becomes laborious; caution without propriety becomes timidity; bravery without propriety becomes chaos; straightforwardness without propriety becomes recklessness. When the noble person is sincerely affectionate, the people are aroused to benevolence."

2.3 Learning Governance: Harmonious Governance — The Ideal Manifestation

Confucius's lifelong dream was to realize his ideal of benevolent governance, achieving national prosperity and people's stability. His political philosophy integrates "benevolence" and "rites," presenting a governance model of "governing with virtue." This can be detailed in terms of "political virtue" and "political theory."

From the perspective of political virtue, governance means rectification, implying correction and doing the right thing. Virtue means obtaining or gaining. Therefore, political virtue means doing the right things to gain outcomes, where everyone performs their appropriate roles. This involves both rulers and the people. For rulers, Zilu asked, "When the Duke of Wei awaits you to govern, what will you prioritize?" Confucius replied, "It must be the rectification of names." Confucius explained, "To govern means to rectify. If you lead with correctness, who will dare not to be correct?" For Confucius, political actions must have a legitimate basis, as reasonable legitimacy is a prerequisite for actions.

Confucius also explained what is "correct." Duke Ai asked, "What must be done to make the people submit?" Confucius replied, "Raise the upright and set them above the crooked, and the people will submit. Raise the crooked and set them above the upright, and the people will not submit." He believed in setting a virtuous example for the people. Additionally, rulers must cherish the people's labor, "Be sparing in expenditures and loving towards the people, employ them in proper seasons." Leading people to a better life ensures their allegiance.

3. "Learning": Reproduction of "Meaning"

3.1 Practicing Family Virtues of Filial Piety

Self-identity begins within the family lineage. As the smallest unit of social organization, the family is the starting point of personal life education. This form of "learning" is intertwined with one's emotional connection to parents, manifesting specifically through the act of filial piety. Achieving self-identity within the family signifies maturation, while simultaneously fostering a positive family atmosphere and promoting societal virtues.

"Among all virtues, filial piety comes first" is a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation. However, with the evolution of time, its content and scope must be updated. In the chapter Wei Zheng, Ziyou asked about filial piety, contrasting "raising dogs and horses" with "supporting parents" and questioning the essence of the latter. Confucius defined filial piety as sincere, wholehearted support for one's parents, with the concern of parents focusing on their children's health.

3.2 Adhering to Social Morals of "Propriety"

"Rites and music," as essential parts of Chinese traditional culture, have deeply influenced societal values. They must evolve with the times to contribute to national governance and social stability. The envisioned ideal society of "rites and music in harmony" aligns with today's societal goals, reflecting individual social obligations.

In Confucianism, social stability and harmony are regulated by propriety, underpinned by a moral consciousness of propriety. Modern social values, such as the concept of "integrity," align with propriety's ethical norms. Integrity encompasses honesty and trustworthiness, core Confucian values, urging individuals to positively influence and serve others through their actions and words. In today's society, integrity has become a fundamental moral quality and behavioral norm for every citizen.

4. Conclusion

"Learning" as a continuous process in Confucianism is the study of becoming a person. It imparts not only epistemological significance but also life value and purpose. In *The Great Learning*, Confucianism summarizes the path of human cultivation as "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world." This journey remains relevant today, encouraging us to practice these universal principles to achieve our ideal personal virtues.

References

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