

RESEARCH OF NOTE

Philosophical Reflections from a Chinese Mirror

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George Orwell may have had the date wrong, but the frightening world he described in 1984 could yet become a reality if current geopolitical trends at home and abroad continue unchecked. Here in the U.S. the misnamed Patriot Act, tortured legal arguments for torture, warrantless surveillance, military adventurism fueled by a defense budget that is out of control, being labeled a terrorist sympathizer if you challenge the government—all of this and more can only make Big Brother smile.

Internationally, more states are failing and/or are engulfed in civil wars, resources are growing more scarce and environments more harsh; ideologies have become more strident and absolutist, and—most important of all—the disparity between the haves and the have-nots grows ever wider, both within and between nation states (especially the United States, in both cases).

The economic activities definitive of globalization are arguably responsible for many of the problems currently casting shadows over America and destabilizing the world, and their potential for improving the lot of humankind will remain unrealized until and unless those activities are regulated by an international authority with many of the trappings of a world government. Only in such circumstances, I believe, can poverty be overcome, a more equitable distribution of wealth be undertaken, wars ended, and environmental protection laws be enforced around the globe. Just as the U.S. would quickly degenerate if each of the 50 member states developed their

own economic, legal and foreign policies with respect to the other 49, so, too, may we expect most nation-states to degenerate henceforward unless there is an international organization with sufficient authority to bring harmony out of the present growing discord.

It is clear, to me at least, that the United States cannot wield the needed baton with its invisible hand of unbridled capitalism. Cooperation must replace competition, distributive justice must check purely procedural justice, the good must be seen to take priority over the right.

One may, of course, come to see all of these issues and problems without knowing anything at all about Asia. But studying and teaching Asia—more specifically China, most specifically Chinese philosophy and religion—has helped me see them with greater clarity, and helped me think about them in different ways, a few of which I want to share with you this morning.

All of my remarks that follow are going to be made from more or less the perspective of the classical Confucians, focusing on a critique of the ideological orientation that is shared by both liberal and conservative U.S. elites, which Confucius would insist is much more responsible for the continuing growth of poverty today than economic factors. One of his simpler, but profound statements is that “It is a disgrace to be well fed while the people are hungry.” (8.13), and consequently the question he would have us address is this: given that more than enough food is being produced to adequately feed the 6+ billion people alive now, and that none of that food is more than a two hour plane trip from an area of hunger and malnutrition, why are tens of millions of people going to bed hungry tonight? Why, more concretely, are 30,000 children dying every day from hunger and preventable disease (Medicine, too, is never more than two hours away).

Wealth and Poverty—Abroad and at Home

Let us examine some of the details of poverty more closely. Consider the following from a *Wall Street Journal* article:

Forty years ago the world's 20 richest countries had a per capita GDP 18 times greater than that in the world's 20 poorest countries. The most recent statistics indicate the rich countries' GDP is now 37 times higher. Over 1.2 billion people around the world live on less than \$1.00 a day.

These figures are now almost five years old. With China's dramatic economic growth the number of people living on less than \$1 dollar a day has shrunk by about 70 million, but the number of people living on less than \$2 a day is now well over 2 billion. Moreover, that \$2 does not mean what U.S. dollars will buy in the object country, but what it will buy here; a loaf of day-old bread perhaps, or a large can of dog food; the morning paper and a small cup of non-upscale coffee.

On the other hand, there are 1,125 billionaires in the world, and their combined wealth is approximately \$4.4 trillion dollars.

And at the peak of the wealth pinnacle, the wealthiest 20 individuals have combined assets that exceed the combined GDP of the 90 least developed countries in 2005.

As awful as these contrasting figures are to contemplate, they are made much more awful by considering just how relatively little it would take to begin seriously redressing the imbalance between those who have, and those who have not. A 2002 United Nations Development Report, for example, said that:

For an additional \$45 billion a year, basic health, basic nutrition, basic education, reproductive health and family planning services, and water sanitation facilities could be extended to the entire world's population.

How much is \$45 billion? It is 10% less than what President Bush requested last August as a *supplementary* budget to the \$167 billion he requested for 2008 just for Iraq and Afghanistan—and received from the Congress—earlier in the year. It represents less than 1/100 of 1% of the world's income in 2005. Or, to quote from the UN Report once again:

A yearly contribution of 1% of the wealth of the 225 richest people could provide universal access to primary education for all, and a 5% contribution would suffice to provide all of the services listed above.

Closer to home, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that 37 million Americans are living at the poverty level, with 15 million of them living at least 50% below that level, which in 2006 was determined to be \$20,600 annually for a family of 4, a low figure. Almost twice that number of people (57 million) have incomes no more than twice the poverty level, and if they lose their jobs, will almost certainly fall below it. Working for minimum wage, which the Congress has just raised to the un-princely sum of \$5.85 an hour, a full-time worker will earn \$11,700 a year, barely half of the poverty level for a family of four and only slightly above the poverty line for an individual (\$10,300). For contrast, the CEOs of the 350 largest U.S. corporations will make approximately that sum in less than two hours.

To see how these figures compare with those of other developed countries, we may take the internationally accepted definition of poverty to be the percentage of the population whose annual income is less than half of the median for the country. By this measure, the U.S. ranked 24 out of 25 developed countries in 2001—the last year for which we have full figures—and the anecdotal evidence suggests strongly that things have not improved since: using this definition of poverty, for instance, and applying it to children—and here I quote from a recent analysis of a UNICEF study in 2006: “The U.S. ranked dead last among 24 nations studied ... 22nd out of 24 on rates of infant mortality and low birth-weight, and the share of children with less than ten books in the home.”

There is much more of moral import in current statistics dealing with poverty. Seventeen million young children in the U.S. live in families whose income is below the poverty line—even though two-thirds of them have at least one working parent. 47 million Americans have no health insurance, a figure that

has gone up every year since 1998. Our prison population is now at 2.4 million (2006), giving the U.S. the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world. And even by conservative estimates, at least that many Americans are homeless—many of them with jobs. In New Orleans alone, 12,000 people are homeless, two and a half years after the post-Katrina clean-up was supposed to begin.

Meanwhile, the 469 richest Americans have assets totaling 1.6 trillion dollars, more than the bottom 92% combined. While many Americans are sick and/or undernourished, others are equipping the toilets in their private jets with alligator skin seats. Some of them pay cash for \$25 million homes, furnishing them with \$60 thousand mattresses, parking \$1 million automobiles in \$225 thousand parking spaces in New York City, checking the time with \$600 thousand wristwatches and drinking \$2 thousand glasses of scotch in the bar at a hotel which charges \$28 thousand a night for some of its rooms.

At the same time, these 469 Americans, augmented by mere multi-millionaires, have been given substantial tax cuts by the Bush administration beginning in 2001, which have amounted to roughly \$93,000 for millionaires, up to \$18 million for those in the top tenth of 1%. Meanwhile, the average middle-class wage earner has received \$215 dollars, and those below the average, of course, have received nothing at all in the way of a tax cut, even though their taxes contribute to making a United States defense budget which is greater than those of every other nation in the world *combined, without* adding in the budgets that have been squandered in Iraq.

How can this happen? To be sure, a part of the reason is structural. For many people, the Democrats and Republicans together form only one party, with two right wings. Our choices at the ballot box are increasingly determined by the very rich who endorse candidates dedicated to protecting their interests, so that we have only to decide whether to pull the lever for tweedledee or tweedledum. There is a strong element of truth in the old anarchist saying that “If voting could really change things, the government would make it illegal.”

The Central Role of Ideology

But I want to suggest that the structures remain in place because of ideology. It is not just the greedy rich and super rich alone who maintain and strengthen the structures standing in the way of peace, social justice, and the alleviation of poverty. If the facts that I have just narrated strike you as highly immoral, I can nevertheless give moral reasons for keeping the structures as they are. A great many lawyers, doctors, engineers and other professionals, too, demand the status quo; the media enable it; politicians and pundits defend it; and not a few members of the professoriate accept enough of this ideology to help keep it in place. None of these people are going to say they are moral monsters, and indeed they are not. But the reasons that can be given for maintaining the structures are no longer good or solid reasons, in my opinion, because as we have seen, the situation is worsening, not improving. Let me turn, then, to a brief consideration of that ideology, followed by its Confucian alternative.

I believe that if poverty alleviation efforts and the establishment of peace within and between communities, ethnic or religious groupings, or nation states are to be more efficacious in the future than they have tended to be in the past, it is necessary to fundamentally alter the conception of what it is to be a human being that currently undergirds legal, political, economic, and moral thinking, and equally dominates the discourse on human rights shaped largely by successive governments of the United States.

For most of the past two-plus centuries—in a process of evolution that stretches back to Greek and early Christian antiquity—the basic conception of what it is to be a human being in Western civilization has been *individualism*. That we are social creatures, strongly influenced by the others with whom we interact, has always been acknowledged on all sides, but has not been seen as of the essence of our humanity at the philosophical level, nor of compelling worth. The reason for this is that our social situations are in an important sense accidental, in that we have exercised no control over a great

many of them—i.e., who our parents are, the native language(s) we acquire, our citizenship, and so forth. As a consequence, what gives human beings their primary worth, their dignity, integrity, and value on this account—and what must command the respect of all—is their ability to act purposively, to have a capacity for self-governance, i.e., autonomy.

We can flesh out this bare sketch of human beings by considering what other qualities must inhere in them in order for the concept of the autonomous individual to become morally robust and not barren. Individuals must be rational if they are to be autonomous; that is to say, they must be capable of going against instinct, emotion, or conditioning; for creatures that cannot so act are surely not autonomous. Further, human beings must *have freedom* as another defining characteristic; if they were not free to rationally choose between alternative courses of action, and then act on the choices made, how could they be said to be autonomous? We see these linked qualities clearly when we ask, “Why did you do that?” as a moral question. Clearly, it assumes the individual was free to have done otherwise, and that the person can give reasons for his or her choice, i.e., the individual behaved rationally.

In addition, although the quality of being self-interested is not strictly entailed by this basic view of human beings, it has been standard in most of philosophy (and virtually all of economics) since before the Enlightenment and the rise of industrial capitalism in the West.

Further, these qualities of individual human beings as most fundamentally autonomous, rational, and free (self-interest has been less enthusiastically applauded by some) are taken as unalloyed *goods* in the ethical sense. Who, for example would want to speak out against freedom?

If we define human beings in this individualistic manner, it would seem to follow that, in thinking about how we ought to deal morally with our fellows, we should seek as abstract and general a viewpoint as possible. If *everyone* has the (highly valued) qualities associated with individualism, and it is just these qualities we must respect at all times, then their gender, age, ethnic background, religion, skin color, and so on, should play

no significant role in our decisions about how to interact with them morally (apart from concern for ethically irrelevant details). Thus, on this orientation it is incumbent upon us to seek universal principles and values—applicable to all peoples at all times—or else the hope of a world at peace, devoid of group conflicts, racism, sexism, homophobia, and ethnocentrism, could never be realized.

This emphasis on reason, on objectivity, impartiality, and abstraction has provided strong support for arguments in favor of universalism in ethics. Many people, and most Western philosophers, have been persuaded by it, not unreasonably; it is a strong argument, complete with a vision of peace, freedom, and equality, which makes the rare challenges to this position seem either hopelessly relativistic, authoritarian, or both. John Locke basically proffered this definition to argue for a number of universal human rights, which he employed as a conceptual check on the divine right of kings as articulated by defenders of monarchical power.

In sum, then, much good has come from this individualistic view of persons, and it is an understatement to say that the many gains in human dignity it has brought about are to be celebrated, and not lost.

The Dark Side of Individualism: Passive vs. Active Rights

There is a dark side to this view, however, which is coming increasingly to the fore as the growing maldistribution of wealth both within and between nations becomes starker, and as the policies and actions of the United States, adamant in pressing an unfettered capitalism on the rest of the world, are doing more to exacerbate than alleviate the gross inequalities that contribute so much to the violence in so much of the contemporary world, and to the growth of poverty. This dark side of the ethics of the abstract individual is that when freedom is weighted far more heavily than social justice, the political, legal, and moral instruments employed in defending and enhancing that freedom virtually insure that social justice will not be achieved, and hence poverty not alleviated.

To see how and why this is so, consider the U.S. Bill of Rights, enshrining many of Locke's views as amended by Thomas Jefferson and focusing on freedom: of speech, of association, of worship, and to freely own and freely dispose of property legally acquired. (In law, corporations are also individuals.) Clearly these civil and political rights—"first generation" rights—are linked to the individualistic view of persons: if I am essentially free, and rational, self-interested, and autonomous, then certainly no one else, especially a government, should interfere with my speaking my mind, worshipping as I choose, or associating with whomever I wish, as I pursue the projects I have chosen for myself.

It must be noted, however, that these civil and political rights are passive, in that they are solely focused on freedom *from*, which can be seen from the fact that I can fully respect all of your civil and political rights simply by ignoring you; of course you have a right to speak, but not to have me listen.

To appreciate the significance of this passivity, or "negative liberty" as Isaiah Berlin defended it, we must look to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which in addition to the civil and political, also lists a number of social and cultural rights, such as the right to a job, education, health care, decent housing, and much more (Articles 22-27). These "second generation" rights were adopted into the Universal Declaration after World War II as a way to get national governments to commit themselves to ending poverty within their borders. They are active rather than passive rights, concerned as much with freedom *to* as freedom *from*. They are active in the sense that there are certain things I must do if you are to secure the benefits of these rights (pay more taxes, at the least).

By simply listing all rights *seriatim*, the Universal Declaration implies that they are compatible with each other; but unfortunately they are not, for if I acknowledge your rights claims to basic food and food security, housing, health care, a job, and so on, then I must actively help you obtain them so that you may pursue your own projects. But then I would no longer be fully free to self-interestedly pursue my own projects as an

individual, and consequently I am strongly inclined to deny that you have legitimate social, economic and cultural rights at all. As an individual first and foremost, I am not my brother's keeper, nor my sister's either. That I, too, could secure the material benefits accompanying second generation rights is no counter to this argument if I believe I can secure these material benefits on my own, or in some freely chosen contractual form in conjunction with a few others. Nor can it be replied that I may freely choose to assist you on my own, for this would be an act of charity, not an acknowledgement of your right to these goods. Worse, if we are well-off individuals, we do not need to demand any second generation rights for ourselves. If the maximum Social Security check persons can receive after 68 is \$3000 a month, they will receive about three-quarters of a million dollars if they live to be 89. But if they make a million dollars a year now, and all of it was subject to the Social Security tax, they would pay that three-quarters of a million dollars themselves in just 12 years. If they made \$10 million that was subject to the tax, they would pay that sum in 12 months. Hence we should not be surprised that the rich and the super rich strongly support Social Security "reform" —which means gutting it and, at the very least, working hard to insure that the income subject to the tax remains as low as possible (currently \$97, 500).

Such "persons"—individual, family, or corporate—pay lobbyists very large sums of money to influence legislation that affects them, and they can give the commercial media large sums of money—through giving or withholding advertising dollars—to "spin" the legislation so that it misleadingly appears to be to everyone's benefit, from giving away public lands and resources to lumber and other extraction corporations; to subsidizing the oil companies, defense contractors, and other major capitalist enterprises; to giving huge tax cuts to the already wealthiest 1% of Americans, as we have already noted.

Consequently, if I am personally well-off, and/or hold a managerial position in a large corporation, I will be strongly disinclined to see second generation rights truly as rights, for I will surely be less "free" and not as well off if they were. Rather, I will want to elect officials who will see second

generation social, economic, and cultural rights not as rights, but as “hopes” or aspirations,” as the U.S. Senate has done in its consistent refusal to ratify the U.N. International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (as all other developed countries have done). Former US Ambassador to the UN Jeanne Kirkpatrick was more explicit, referring to social, economic, and cultural rights as a “letter to Santa Claus,” while her successor Morris Abrams described the International Covenant as “little more than an empty vessel into which vague hopes and inchoate expectations can be poured.”

It is in this presuppositional sense that I place American liberals and conservatives in the same ideological camp. Individualistic moral theories supporting a capitalist view of economics and the world more generally *allow* governmental intervention in overcoming societal ills, but do not *require* it, and in its laissez-faire incarnation, pretty well exclude it. These theories advocate strongly the morality that flows from an outlook of the distinctiveness of ourselves from all others, and hence tend to especially champion those dimensions of governmental intervention in the market that are necessary for supposedly strict competition between individuals to insure the supposed best outcome for all.

Liberals might be more inclined to advocate greater governmental intervention in curing societal ills caused by the runaway greed that can drive individualistic tendencies toward monopoly, and champion as well legislation that would entail at least a minimal redistribution of wealth toward the poor, but they are not, in my opinion, at all willing to employ most of the means that will very probably be necessary to secure that admirable end, beginning with curbs on freedom of expression based on money. Why, for instance, is there not a great uproar when we all see clearly the truth of Joseph Liebling’s observation that “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” “Money is speech,” declare the courts, and where are the liberal protests against such abuses of the First Amendment?

But only if human beings are defined as most fundamentally free, rational, self-interested, and autonomous individuals is it

possible to feel morally justified in doing nothing with respect to alleviating the unemployment, inadequate housing, lack of health care, disease, food insecurity and much else that make for wretched lives on the part of far too many of our fellow citizens (i.e., the miseries second-generation rights are intended to address), a moral stance taken by not a few U.S. governments, and virtually every national and transnational capitalist corporation—which, again, are legally construed as individuals with regard to first generation rights. It must also be noted that it is only on the conceptual foundation of individualism that we may close our eyes to poverty and suffering by invoking a “blame the victim” argument, which continues to be persuasive in many circles today despite its absurdity.

This, then, all too sketchily, is the dark side conceptually of viewing human beings most basically as autonomous individuals: liberty is purchased at the expense of social justice. In such an intellectual climate—reinforced by international legal and other institutions dominated by the U.S. —there is little reason to hope that a more equitable distribution of the world’s goods will ever take place, or attendant racial, religious or ethnic violence to diminish—or poverty, alleviation efforts to be successful.

Now it might seem that by challenging the concept of individual freedom I am at least implicitly championing a collectivism of some sort, Stalinist or Fascist. But individualism and collectivism do not exhaust our social and political possibilities any more than selfishness and altruism exhaust our moral possibilities. These Manichean splits are modern Western conceits, and basically serve as rhetorical support for maintaining the individualistic status quo in some parts of the world and the collectivistic in others. If all challenges to individuals making individual choices in their own self-interest can be made to appear as subtle endorsements for the gulags, killing fields, and labor reeducation camps, then obviously we must give three cheers for individualism, drowning out all dissent. But the status quo in the United States is clearly unjust, and to the extent the status quo is defended by appeals to individualism, to just that

extent do we need a broader view of what it is to be a human being.

An Alternative Ideology: Confucianism

One candidate for such a view, suitably modified for the contemporary world, is that of the classical Confucians, whose texts provide significant conceptual resources for forging new pathways to social justice and the alleviation of poverty. Here now is the other side of the mirror.

The texts gathered under the heading of “classical Confucianism” are by no means in full agreement on all points, and there are several tensions within each text itself; moreover, many passages in those texts have an ambiguity about them that makes reading them an act of creation. They nevertheless present an overall coherent view of the good life for human beings, and the good society in which those lives may be led. This life is an altogether social one, and central to understanding it is to see that Confucian sociality has aesthetic, moral, and spiritual, no less than political and economic dimensions—all of which are to be integrated.

None of the early texts address the question of the meaning of life, but they do put forward a vision of being human, and a discipline in which everyone can find meaning in life. This meaning will become increasingly apparent to us as we pursue our ultimate goal, namely, developing ourselves most fully as human beings to become *junzi*, “exemplary persons,” or, at the pinnacle of development, *sheng*, or sages. And for Confucians, we can only do this through our interactions with other human beings. Treading this human path (*ren dao*) must be ultimately understood basically as a religious quest, even though the canon speaks not of God, nor of creation, salvation, an immortal soul, or a transcendental realm of being; and no prophecies will be found in its pages either. It is nevertheless a truly religious path, yet at the same time a humanistically oriented one; for Confucius, we are irreducibly social, as he makes clear in the *Analects*: “I cannot run with the birds and beasts. Am I not one among the people of their world? If not them, with whom can I associate?” (18:6)¹

Thus the Confucian self is not a free, autonomous individual, but is to be seen relationally: I am a son, husband, father, grandfather, teacher, student, friend, colleague, neighbor, and more. I live, rather than “play” these roles, and when all of them have been specified, and their interrelationships made manifest, then I have been fairly thoroughly individuated, but with nothing left over with which to piece together an autonomous individual self, free to conclude mutually advantageous contracts with other rational individuals. Rather, to put the case strongly, I am constituted by the roles I live in consonance with others. The free, autonomous, individual self is not a fact, but an ideological fiction underpinning the ethos of a capitalist economic system.

While this view may seem initially strange, it is actually straightforward: in order to *be* a friend, neighbor, or lover, for example, I must *have* a friend, neighbor, or lover. Other persons are not merely accidental or incidental to my goal of fully developing as a human being, they are essential to it; indeed they confer unique personhood on me, for to the extent that I define myself as a teacher, students are necessary to my life, not incidental to it. Note in this regard also, that, again, while Confucianism should be seen as fundamentally religious, there are no solitary monks or nuns, anchorites or anchoresses, or hermits to be found in the tradition.

Our first and most basic role, one that significantly defines us in part throughout our lives, is as children; familial reverence (*xiao*) is one of the highest excellences in Confucianism. From our beginning roles as children—and as siblings, playmates, and pupils—we mature to become parents ourselves, and assume many other roles and responsibilities as well—all of which are reciprocal relationships, best generalized as holding between *benefactors* and *beneficiaries*. Each of us moves regularly from benefactor to beneficiary and back again, depending on the other(s) with whom we are interacting, when, and under what conditions. When young, I was largely beneficiary of my parents; when they were aged and infirm, I became their benefactor, and the converse holds for my children. I am benefactor to my friend when she needs my help, beneficiary

when I need hers. I am a student of my teachers, teacher of my students, colleague of my colleagues. Taken together, the manifold roles we live define us as persons. And the ways in which we meet the obligations attendant on these relational roles, and the ways others meet similar obligations toward us, are both the ways whereby we achieve dignity, satisfaction, and meaning in life. Although there is no word for “freedom” in the classical language in which the Confucian texts were written, I believe the Master would say that it is not a stative, but an achievement term. We cannot be born free, for we are bound inexorably to others from the moment we leave the womb, and we are surely not “free” even as adults if we only do our moral duty because we feel consciously obligated to do so; it is only when we truly enjoy helping others as benefactors, and being helped by them in return as beneficiaries, that we could meaningfully be said to be free.

With such an emphasis on familial reverence it should be clear that at the heart of Confucian society is indeed the family, the locus of where, how, and why we develop into full human beings. A central government is also important to the good society, because there are necessary ingredients of human flourishing—especially economic—which the family (and local community) cannot secure on their own. The early Confucians saw the state not as in any way in opposition to the family, but rather saw both as complementary; stated in contemporary democratic terms, if we wish to live in a state that insists I meet my fatherly responsibilities, it should insure that I have the wherewithal—i.e., an education, job, good health, etc.—to do so. Similarly, this state must assume responsibility for the well-being of those who have no family networks for support. Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi all insisted that it was the responsibility of the state to provide functional equivalents of universal health insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, workers’ compensation, food stamps, and social security plus employment, and insisted as well on a meritocracy rather than wealth or bloodline in recruiting for officialdom; and they began doing this 500 years before the time of Christ. Mencius and Xunzi also had the keen insight to insist that the government had an

obligation to provide jobs for the poor. The problem with most welfare programs is that they consist mainly of handouts, and no person with any degree of self-respect would want to be only a beneficiary; dignity, pleasure and happiness can only come when we have the wherewithal to be benefactors as well.

The ideal Confucian society is thus basically communally oriented, with customs, tradition, rituals, ceremonies and manners serving as the binding force of and between our many relationships to one another. Above all, it is not a laissez-faire capitalist society. “Exemplary persons never compete” said Confucius. (3.7) In another place he said that the major work of exemplary persons was to help the poor, not make the rich richer. (6.4) Mencius said that if you want to be wealthy you cannot become an exemplary person, and if you want to be an exemplary person you cannot be wealthy. (3A3)

This, then, in woefully brief compass, is Confucian humanism in action: interacting with others as benefactors and beneficiaries in an intergenerational context. Confucius himself was absolutely clear on this point, for when a disciple asked him what he would most like to do, he said:

I would like to bring peace and contentment to the aged,
share relationships of trust and confidence with friends,
and love and protect the young (5:26)

Modified Confucianism for Today’s World

Much more, of course, needs to be said about the early Confucian view of what it is to be a human being, but I believe much more can be said with respect to the contemporary world. The concept of the family can be retained, for example, while making women equals to men, and it can be enhanced by allowing two (or more) nurturers of the same sex to be responsible for child-rearing and care of the elderly—both with state help. Neither sexism nor homophobia are logical implications of Confucian familial communitarianism and its larger philosophical and religious dimensions.

Returning now more directly to poverty alleviation again, It is clear that such role-bearing persons will take second generation social, economic, and cultural rights very seriously, while necessarily remaining sensitive to the civil and political. If you and I can only flourish as we help each other realize our full humanity as benefactors and beneficiaries, why would I want to silence you, not let you choose your other friends, or follow whichever faith tradition inspires you? That is to say, with role-bearing persons as our philosophical foundation, moving from second to first generation rights is conceptually and attitudinally straightforward.

But the converse does not hold. It requires a major cognitive (and affective) shift to move from respecting civil and political rights passively to actively helping others obtain the benefits attendant on respecting social, economic and cultural rights and committing the country to the elimination of poverty. The history of the U.S. provides little grounds for expecting the shifts to take place: it is now 216 years since civil and political rights became the law of the land, yet we have all those nauseating figures I narrated at the beginning of my talk, and they are worsening even as we are discussing them here.

It is time to conclude these remarks, and I want to do so by offering some reasons to believe the struggle for a better future than our present is possible, and worth the effort. And I want to do that by simultaneously replying to an objection to my analyses of why poverty continues to grow both at home and abroad.

“Look here,” someone might reasonably object, “It is all well and good that you have been beating up on the rich and the super rich, the politicians, pundits, corporations and the media while lamenting the gross inequalities that define the country today, but they are only a relatively small part of the problem. It is the overweight, TV-addicted, consumptive anti-intellectual *average* American that is largely responsible for the country’s plight. Americans don’t study the issues, tend to be self-centered, and indeed often celebrate the rugged individualism you have been challenging. Don’t you know anything about the pro-life movement? Have you never heard of the National Rifle Association?”

This objection is not without force. We all know someone pretty much like what was just described. While this view of the American public is unfortunately fairly widespread, there is one major problem with it: the evidence strongly suggests that it is false. Let me return to some statistics, this time from non-partisan polls. First, when asked if it is the responsibility of government to care for those who cannot take care of themselves, 57% answered affirmatively in 1994—the year Newt Gingrich and the conservative Republicans gained control of the House. In 2006, 69% of Americans answered the question affirmatively, according to the Pew Research Center, after completing a 20-year roundup of public opinion. Exactly the same percentage of Americans—69%—believes that the government should guarantee every citizen enough to eat and a place to sleep—even *if it can only be done by raising their taxes*. 75% of small business owners believe the minimum wage should be raised by at least another \$2 per hour. For every citizen who wants the government to reduce services in order to reduce spending, two citizens want more services even if it means increases in spending.

In another recent poll taken by the Wall Street Journal—certainly not a socialist-leaning part of the media—53% of those polled said the Bush tax cuts were “not worth it because they have increased the deficit and caused cuts in government programs.” There is much more, some of it surprising to some. CNN reported that in their latest poll, only 25% of the people polled wanted to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned. 67% would prefer diplomatic and economic efforts over military efforts in fighting terrorism. A Zogby poll found 89% of the population much preferred rehabilitation over incarceration for youthful offenders. Immigration? 62% told a CBS/NYTimes poll that undocumented workers should be allowed to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status. And oh, yes, the NRA: another Wall Street Journal study found 10% of the American public wanted gun controls to be less strict; 58% wanted much stronger controls.

These figures are, to my mind, of great significance, yet they receive no coverage in the news. They show a decent

American people who can keep their decency even when they think they are almost alone, and when they are bombarded instead with such trivia as Barack Obama's middle name, Hilary Clinton's cleavage, and the cost of a John Edwards haircut—none of which is of any significance to their lives, or ours.

I trust these figures, because the responses are just what I personally find when I leave a college or university campus to lecture at churches and union halls. The American peoples no less than college students have always been a source of hope for me, and I hope they may be the same for you.

These, then, are the ways my Chinese mirror has reflected the ways in which I reflect on my own culture, my own country.