

A Symposium:

Forging a New Dawn

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“Come in, come in!” My servant, Eurycleia, opened the brown-oak palace doors, and I saw two colleagues of mine smiling at me. “Confucius! Thich Nhat Hanh! Come in and make yourself at home while I begin...”

TAO GINWHO

I’ve called you here to discuss a very important matter affecting my country. I do hope you’ll be able to offer some insights into the matter.

Over the last few weeks, a number of particularly disturbing events have happened. First, there was this three-year old boy who was crushed under a truck.¹ The driver was gone in no time. The pedestrians who witnessed the event did not help him either. Nobody did anything. Nobody! Help only arrived three hours later, when finally a man who saw the boy still lying in the street, in a pool of blood, called the authorities. As if that was not enough,

¹ Based on a report on a traffic accident in China. See Tania Branigan, “Toddler Left Dying after Hit and Run Prompts Soul Searching in China.”

I received reports about officials stealing from the treasury, involving billions of dollars.² Just two weeks ago, three workers committed suicide at my Wolfsoon factory (Wolfsoon is a state-owned company, Confucius).³ The workers said that they were lonely and burnt out from their work.⁴ So much disorder and chaos in my country! This must be urgently dealt with. Millions of people are affected. What can I do as a leader to help? What reforms should be undertaken to heal my country from this... malaise?

CONFUCIUS: There appears to be a lack of virtue amongst your citizens that is causing this terrible disorder. People are not pursuing what is right.⁵

NHAT HANH: Central to the entire disorder is the people; they do not see that everything is empty.⁶

TAO: Well, these seem to be contradictory. Shall we go through these opinions one by one? How about you begin, Confucius?

CONFUCIUS

I want first to articulate the structure of my speech, and then speak.⁷ First, it

2 Based on reports on corrupt officials in China. See “Rumors of 46 Mistresses, Huge Bribes Surround Sacked Chinese Official.”

3 Inspired by the case of multiple suicides at Foxconn. See “Foxconn Suicides: ‘Workers Feel Quite Lonely,’” *BBC News*. Web. 14 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10182824>>.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Paraphrase of selections from *The Analects of Confucius*, rearranged and collected under the topic of “Rightness as Ritual’s Foundation” in the Course Pack for “In Dialogue with Humanity.”

6 From Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*. See in particular the discussion in the section entitled “Empty of What?”, 7–10.

7 My paraphrase of the words of Agathon in Plato’s *Symposium*, 194e.

is important to discuss why there is the massive disorder in the country. Then I will introduce the “gentleman” as my prescription for the malaise.

I say that the disorder is caused by the people. You have corrupt officials and pedestrians who do not care about what is right, only what is beneficial to them. Similarly, the workers who committed suicide at Wolfsoon are not practicing filial piety as they selfishly take their lives without a care towards their parents. Your citizens must be taught the way of the gentleman.

My follower, Pang, was in my presence once. He asked: “What must I do to become a gentleman?” I replied: “A gentleman, above all, pursues righteousness and puts the pursuit of that in the highest esteem through ritual and action.⁸ He is respectful in serving his superiors,⁹ humane through love and understanding,¹⁰ and virtuous like the wind.¹¹ He delights in ritual and friends,¹² implants harmony, and is ethical in actions. Through his character, he cares for the people¹³ and befriends the virtuous,¹⁴ always concerned of filial piety and reverential to the elders.¹⁵ Above all, he is concerned with reciprocity—that is, ‘what you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others.’”¹⁶ Tao, you need gentleman in your country.

TAO: I have some questions about your ideas if you do not mind me asking.

8 Paraphrase of selections from, *The Analects of Confucius*, rearranged and collected in the Course Pack for “In Dialogue with Humanity” under the heading “Rightness as Ritual’s Foundation.”

9 *Ibid.*, “Rightness as Ritual’s Foundation.”

10 *Ibid.*, “Humaneness as Ritual’s Foundation.”

11 *Ibid.*, “The Way of Good Rulers and Ministers.”

12 *Ibid.*, “Maintaining Friendship.”

13 *Ibid.*, “Rightness as Ritual’s Foundation.”

14 *Ibid.*, “Maintaining Friendship.”

15 *Ibid.*, “The Nature of Filial Devotion.”

16 *Ibid.*, “Humaneness as Ritual’s Foundation.”

CONFUCIUS: “Asking is part of the ritual.”¹⁷

TAO: Let us presume that we do need more gentlemen. How would we mould the average citizen into such an ideal person like the gentleman?

CONFUCIUS: This is done through education, my dear friend. All citizens should find a good teacher, knowledgeable about the past dynasties and the Way of the Gentleman,¹⁸ and imitate him.¹⁹ Through the teacher, people in your country will learn how to conduct themselves with integrity and humanness.

TAO: Potentially, if all my citizens were gentlemen, it would definitely solve the problem. They would be respectful and cognisant of the needs around them. But the idea of a “gentleman” seems too ideal to me, something not achievable by the average person in my country. Not to say that humanity’s natural instinct is to preserve their self-interest. Would they all strive to be gentleman and help the man in the street?

CONFUCIUS: Surely, not everyone can become a gentleman. Some will always be “common people.”²⁰ However, it is important that *officials* in your country are gentleman, not petty men or crooked people. As I used to say:

17 *Ibid.*, “The Nature of Ritual.”

18 Phrase used by Confucius. *Ibid.* “Humaneness as Ritual’s Foundation.”

19 “Confucius.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Web. 18 Dec. 2011. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>>.

20 Paraphrase of selections from *The Analects of Confucius*, rearranged and collected in the Course Pack for “In Dialogue with Humanity” under the heading “Humaneness as Ritual’s Foundation”. Confucius mentions two classes of people: the gentleman and the common people.

“You must promote the straight and let them oversee the crooked.”²¹ Their virtue will make the petty man bend.²²

NHAT HANH: I believe your concept of the virtuous gentleman might solve the problem of the official stealing from the treasury. However, it does not make pedestrians care for the injured child or stop workers from committing suicide. As you’ve stated above, it will be hard to train everyone to become a gentleman. Moreover, I do not believe there are two classes of people. I think I have a solution that will tackle all the disorder.

THICH NHAT HANH

“All dharmas (this means ‘things’, Tao) are marked with emptiness. They are neither produced nor destroyed.”²³ What is emptiness? All are empty of a separate self means that all things co-exist with one another.²⁴ The co-existent nature of the universe can be described through the verb “inter-be”.²⁵ When a child is hurt, the pedestrians around him are hurt because they inter-are with each other.²⁶ If you want to seek peace from the disorder, pedestrians will have to learn to penetrate and be one with others; then, they will see that the sunshine, the rain, and the child are all empty. Everything co-exists.²⁷

21 *Ibid.*, “The Way of Good Rulers and Ministers.”

22 *Ibid.*, “The Way of Good Rulers and Ministers.”

23 A quotation from the *Heart Sutra*. See Thich Nhat Hanh 19.

24 The idea of emptiness meaning “empty of a separate self” comes from Thich Nhat Hanh 9.

25 See Thich Nhat Hanh 3–5.

26 Although the *Heart Sutra* makes it seem as if there is no suffering and pain, Thich Nhat Hanh points out that it really means that suffering exists. See Thich Nhat Hanh 41–45 (“Buddha is Made of Non-Buddha Elements”).

27 *Ibid.* 11–13 (“The Way of Understanding”).

Similarly, the official does not realize that money, property, and he himself inter-are.²⁸ There is no private property; everything belongs to all.²⁹ When the official learns that, he will understand that he cannot take anything. All things are empty.

In regards to your final problem, the *Heart Sutra* states that all humans are neither “produced nor destroyed.”³⁰ When you use the word “suicide”, this is wrong. The workers at the factory do not die; there is no birth and death, only continuation.³¹ A person from the dust returns to the dust—what an adventure!³² Tao, you must teach your citizens emptiness.

TAO: It is hard for people to give up the notion of private property. Indeed, I think your ideal order has left out practical concerns—the fact that people do need money not only to eat but to eat well and live a lavish life—the greed in mankind.

NHAT HANH: Although it seems revolutionary, the truth is that money, man, and property inter-are. Nobody can own or take something that belongs and co-exists with everybody. By understanding this, people can cease to be self-centered and overcome pain.

CONFUCIUS: I do not believe the country is ready to reject all notions of material wants, disregard the separation between individuals, and accept

28 *Ibid.* 7–10 (“Empty of What?”).

29 In the *Dhammapada Sutta* 5:75, Buddha dismisses the notion of private property. See Michael Garofalo, “Dhammapada Sutta: Chapters 5–8, Verses 60–115.”

30 Thich Nhat Hanh 19–29 (“Happy Continuation”).

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

death as an adventure. Better that we accept this world as it is and try to promote virtuous behaviour amongst people.

TAO: I think I have come up with a compromise solution that reflects both of your ideas. There seems to be limitations in both your ideologies. Confucius, your idea was to make everyone a gentleman. After discussing the feasibility of that, I'd say that we should at least make sure all officials are gentlemen, through education. Nhat Hanh, although your radical shift to the principle of emptiness might not be accepted, it is still important for everyone to realize that they inter-are with other members of this community. We all exist as whole. Citizens of my country would not exist without each other. We can make people realize that helping others is important. In fact, we can achieve both solutions through education. We can educate citizens on the principle that one's injury affects everyone because they are all inter-be; everyone co-exists with one another.

Now, gentlemen, factory workers may not be too accommodating to your theories on the lack of filial piety and the joyfulness of death. Perhaps we need to find another solu-

MARX: Alienation! Alienated labour!³³

EURYCLEIA: Sir, you have a guest.

TAO: Ah, welcome, Marx! Come have a seat.

33 The phrase is from a chapter title found in Tom Bottomore, *Karl Marx: Early Writings*.

MARX

I have just been to the factories in your country. The workers have become quite alienated with their mechanical jobs. Their wages make for a bestial existence.³⁴ They are alienated from their employment,³⁵ which has become increasing mechanical.³⁶ The monotonous factory work has estranged them from their own body, physically and intellectually;³⁷ they no longer know their fellow workers.³⁸ The result is, therefore, social misery.³⁹ This alienation is pervading your manufacturing workers here. Imagine you working on a factory line, twelve hours a day just doing a single motion. The breaks are short, wages are derisory. There is no opportunity to acquaint yourself with fellow workers.

TAO: But they have chosen to work at the factory on their own free will.

MARX: Against starvation, there is no choice.

TAO: But what solution is there to this alienation? My Finance Minister gave me a chapter to read from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.⁴⁰ It explains the need for division of labour to achieve wealth.⁴¹ It has worked. My country is growing economically. And, my workers do not have any skills that allow them to work in other fields. All they know is the simple jobs they can do at

34 *Ibid.*, "Wages of Labour" 69.

35 *Ibid.*, "Alienated Labour" 127.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.* 129.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 See Adam Smith, "Division of Labour," *The Wealth of Nations*.

41 *Ibid.* 9.

the factory. (*long pause*)

The solution, perhaps, lies in education again; we can *forge a new dawn* for our citizens through education. Workers should learn occupational abilities that cannot be reduced to a simple step—professional skills like medicine, accounting, and engineering. Skills that do not alienate the body and mind against its owner. We must make machines do machines' work. Men doing men's work.

MARX: Are professionals not alienated from their work?

TAO: Less so, since the labour cannot be divided into monotonous work that brings rise to alienation. I will make sure that all current manufacturing workers have an opportunity to learn skills that will allow them to work outside the factory. This will prevent alienation, and therefore suicide.

MARX: The issue of income disparity must still be dealt with.

TAO (*laughing*): My dear Marx, let us save that discussion for another day.

NHAT HANH: Congratulations then, Tao—you've found a way out of your disorder.

TAO: *Eurycleia, bring some wine around and send for my Minister of Education!*

CONFUCIUS: Incidentally, what is your country called?

TAO: Shyna.

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Teacher’s comment:

For those of us who have followed through the texts in the course, Eurycleia opening the doors to Confucius and Thich Nhat Hanh is an in-joke. And it is not any doors but palace doors made from oak wood. There is, of course, more to Adrian’s art of storytelling. Consider his wordplay—the palindrome in “Tao Ginwho” (“who” comes to mind when read in a reversed order?), the pun of Wolfsoon Factory (before too “soon” we recall Foxconn), and the sly allusion in “Shyna,” all three crying out that the dialogue’s central concern is a contemporary situation close to home. Consider the amusing mannerisms of the characters traceable to the texts—“I want first to articulate the structure of my speech, and then speak”; “Asking is part of the ritual,” etc. Consider, above all, the interactions between the characters, which are true *dialogues*, not a series of unrelated soliloquies. In the lively exchanges, Adrian weaves together a good number of key concepts in Confucius’s talk

of “gentlemen” and “virtue,” and through the mouth of Nhat Hanh raises objection to the class distinction implicit in Confucius’s proposal. Credibly, Marx jumps in with his talk of alienated labour and income disparity, while all along, Tao Ginwho, does his best to weigh, “correct,” or integrate the masters’ suggestions. At the conceptual level, we may find the Confucian perspective quite comprehensively incorporated, but may want to further scrutinize the Buddhist and Marxist positions represented: Would Nhat Hanh indeed brush aside a leader’s concern for suicide among the young with talk of “emptiness”? Would Marx indeed let one off with the claim that professionals are not alienated and see the solution in educating and transforming workers into professionals? (Julie Chiu)