

world, Confucius's perspective is more relevant, more timely, more urgent than it ever was in the later and all-too tradition-bound China which we see as its natural habitat. It is because it is so alien to our times that we need to penetrate the truth of Confucius's vision; it is because it is so alien to the times that we tend to be impatient with it and blind to its truth.

5

A Confucian Metaphor —the Holy Vessel

What is it that distinguishes man from the beasts and the inanimate? In what do man's peculiar dignity and power reside? Confucius offers an amazingly apt and generative image: Rite (*li*). But Rite and Ceremony would seem, off hand, to deemphasize the individual, whereas the tendency in much modern criticism is to stress the "discovery of the individual" by Confucius. It is true that Hughes, who uses this particular phrase, adds a qualifying clause "man's ability to look at himself in relation to his fellows and in that light to integrate himself."

Wing-tsit Chan summarizes in a similar formula "the entire Confucian philosophy: . . . the realization of the self and the creation of a social order."² Although Hughes and Chan bring out the two poles "individual"—"society," Liu Wu-chi emphasizes even more the "individual" pole: "No matter from which angle we view it, the individual man is, after all, the hub of the universe. . . . Master K'ung discovered by a happy stroke of genius the ethical individual. . . . Individual man was now exalted to his new position as a social entity. . . . Thus for the

1. Hughes, *Individual in East and West*, p. 94.

2. Wing-tsit Chan, "The Story of Chinese Philosophy," *Philosophy—East and West*, ed., C. A. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 27.

first time in the history of man, the dignity of the individual was asserted. . . . The flowering of the individual is to be one's ultimate aim."³ Creel, although he too elaborates on the social orientation of Confucius, nevertheless emphasizes in various contexts the "primacy and worth of the individual" in Confucius's thought.⁴ And Lin Yutang, while stressing the social, says " . . . the kingdom of God is truly within man himself."⁵

In short, in these passages from a representative sample of modern writers we see a broadly recurring pattern of interpretation. In citing such brief phrases, one wrenches the remarks from contexts in which there is essential qualification and amplification. My aim in quoting, however, is not to provide a rounded report of the commentaries, but rather to note that when a brief and summary formula is finally required, the formula often tends to be formulated in terms of "society" and the "individual," with relative emphasis on the "individual" as primary. Self-realization, self-integrity, "self-flowering," the "ultimate worth of the individual"—these are supposed to reflect the characteristic discovery of Confucius. It is the thesis of the present remarks that we would do better to think of Confucius as concerned with the nature of "humanity" rather than with

the polar terms "individual" and "society." The formulation in terms of individual and society reflects Western preoccupations and categories—and perhaps Taoist, Buddhist and neo-Confucian concerns.

Rather than arguing this point in the abstract, we cannot do better than to learn from Confucius himself, and more particularly from reflection on one of the illuminating images he presents to us.

Tzu-Kung asked: "What would you say about me as a person?"

The Master said: "You are a utensil."

"What sort of utensil?"

"A sacrificial vase of jade." (5:3)

This passage is usually read in the light of another passage in the *Analects* (2:11): "A noble man is not a utensil."

The general opinion among commentators, in the light of 2:11, seems to have been that Confucius is first putting Tzu-Kung in his place, and then, in his next response, softening the blow. These interpreters (whom I believe to be mistaken) might be supposed to read the cryptic passage along the lines of the following paraphrase.

"Master," we may suppose Tzu-Kung to be saying, "tell me where I stand with regard to the ideal." The Master replies, "You are still only a utensil, useful only for specific purposes. You are not the morally self-realized man, the man with broad (moral) capacities who is capable of governing or using the special (technical) capacities of others." Tzu-Kung, his eagerness and optimism shaken, does not give up. "But, Master, how do you mean that? Don't you have some qualifying or softening word with which you can give me more hope?" And the Master replies, in a paternalistic, encouraging tone: "Tzu-Kung, don't feel too bad about it. Even if you are still a man to be used and not yet one who is perfected and capable of using others, at least

3. Liu Wu-chi, *Confucius*, pp. 155-56

4. Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way*, pp. 136, 138. My own interpretation stress the inseparability of man from society and the role of *li*. Without wishing to minimize this similarity or to enter into detailed comparative commentary, I might simply say that I have attempted to draw the philosophical and psychological implications of this view more stringently and more fully. I think that doing this puts Confucius's position in a new light. For one thing it helps to bring out the close logical connection between this view of man and the magical-reverential dimension of Confucius's thought—a dimension that I believe is seriously understated by Creel and "rationalized" (in spite of his evident feeling for it). See also: H.G. Creel, *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung* (New York: New American Library, 1960), pp. 33-34.

5. Lin Yutang, *Wisdom of Confucius*, p. 17.

you are a very fine utensil of your kind. Indeed you are among the most handsome and valuable."

In my own opinion, as I have indicated, a reading along such lines is quite wrong. The only element of it that is acceptable is that Confucius does initially intend to dash cold water on Tzu-Kung's too-ready optimism. Confucius wants to bring him up short, to shake him, disturb him, puzzle him; Tzu-Kung must be made to feel the necessity to *think* his way through to a new insight. Confucius puts his answer in a manner best calculated to accomplish this end with a man of Tzu-Kung's character. It seems that this disciple was the most facetiously successful and worldly of Confucius's disciples. With his learning and his worldly success, he might well feel pride in his personal achievement, might well be surprised and shaken at Confucius's initial response. For Tzu-Kung is well aware of the metaphor of the utensil and of the saying that a noble man is *not* a utensil. Confucius's initial response, like others he makes, is the first element, then, in a pedagogically effective paradox.⁶

However, the second statement by Confucius—"You are a sacrificial vessel of jade"—is not a mere sentimental softening of the blow. It both completes and resolves the paradox. It contains in a highly condensed image the central teaching which Confucius wishes to get across to the glib and self-satisfied Tzu-Kung. What is this central teaching?

Consider the sacrificial vessel: in the original text Confucius merely names a certain type of jade sacrificial vessel used for holding grain in connection with ceremonies for a bounteous

6. For examples of Confucius's readiness to let an ironic comment stand without softening if irony is his intent and for his use of challenging, puzzling or paradoxical statements, see, for example, 3:8, 5:3, 6:1, 6:10, 6:22, 6:23, 7:10, 7:29, 10:26, 11:7, 11:21.

harvest. Such a vessel is holy, sacred. Its outer appearance—the bronze, the carving, the jade—is elegant. Its content, the rich grain, expresses abundance.

Yet the vessel's sacredness does not reside in the preciousness of its bronze, in the beauty of its ornamentation, in the rarity of its jade or in the edibility of the grain. Whence does its sacredness come? It is sacred not because it is useful or handsome but because it is a constitutive element in the ceremony. It is sacred by virtue of its participation in rite, in holy ceremony. In isolation from its role in the ceremony, the vessel is merely an expensive pot filled with grain.

It is therefore a paradox as utensil, for unlike utensils in general, this has no (utilitarian) use external to ceremony itself but only a ritual function. (Indeed some ceremonial pots had holes in them in order to emphasize their ritual rather than utilitarian value.)

By analogy, Confucius may be taken to imply that the individual human being, too, has ultimate dignity, sacred dignity by virtue of his role in rite, in ceremony, in *li*. We must recall that Confucius expanded the sense of the word *li*, originally referring to religious ceremonial, in such a way as to envision society itself on the model of *li*. If the teaching about *li* is thus generalized, it is reasonable to follow through and generalize the analogy between Tzu-Kung and the ceremonial vessel. We will then see how this image deepens our understanding of Confucius's teaching about man and human relations.

Social etiquette in general, the father-son relation, the brother-brother relation, the prince-subject relation, the friend-friend relation and the husband-wife relation—persons and their relationships are to be seen as ultimately sanctified by virtue of their place in *li*. Society, at least in-

sofar as regulated by human convention and moral obligations, becomes in the Confucian vision one great ceremonial performance, a ceremony with all the holy beauty of an elaborate religious ritual carried out with that combination of solemnity and lightness of heart that graces the inspired ritual performance. It is not individual existence *per se*, nor is it the existence of a group *per se* that is the condition sufficient to create and sustain the ultimate dignity of man. It is the ceremonial aspect of life that bestows sacredness upon persons, acts, and objects which have a role in the performance of ceremony.

Confucius does not see the individual as an ultimate atom nor society on the analogy of animal or mechanism, nor does he see society as a proving ground for immortal souls or a contractual or utilitarian arrangement designed to maximize individual pleasure. He does not talk in the *Analects* of society and the individual. He talks of what it is to be man, and he sees that man is a special being with a unique dignity and power deriving from and embedded in *li*.

Is it enough merely to be born, to eat, breathe, drink, excrete, enjoy sensual gratification and avoid physical pain and discomfort? Animals do this. To become civilized is to establish relationships that are not merely physical, biological or instinctive; it is to establish *human* relationships, relationships of an essentially symbolic kind, defined by tradition and convention and rooted in respect and obligation.

"Merely to feed one's parents well" . . . "even dogs and horses are fed." (2:7) To be devoted to one's parents is far more than to keep the parents alive physically. To serve and eat in the proper way, with the proper respect and appreciation, in the proper setting—this is to transform the act of mere nourishment into the human ceremony of dining. To obey the whip is to be not much more than a domestic animal; but to

be loyal and faithful to those who rightly govern, to serve them and thus to serve *in* the human community, to do this out of one's own heart and nature—this is to be a true citizen of one's community.

Man's dignity, as does the dignity of things, lies in the ceremony rather than in individual biological existence, and this is evident in the fact that we understand a man who sacrifices his biological existence, his "life" in the biological but not the spiritual sense, if the "rite" demands it. Confucius makes the point succinctly when he responds to his disciple's concern over killing a sheep as an element in a sacrificial rite: "You love the sheep, but I love the ceremony," says Confucius. (3:17)

"Virtue does not exist in isolation; there must be neighbors," says Confucius. (4:25) Man is transformed by participation with others in ceremony which is communal. Until he is so transformed he is not truly man but only potentially so—the new-born infant the wolf-boy of the forests or the "barbarian." Ceremony is justified when we see how it transforms the barbarian into what we know as man at his best. And, from the opposite direction, man at his best is justified when we see that his best is a life of holy ceremony rather than of appetite and mere animal existence. Whichever standpoint we take, we get a perspective on man and society which illuminates and deepens our vision of man's distinctive nature and dignity. When we see man as participant in communal rite rather than as individualistic ego, he takes on to our eyes a new and holy beauty just as does the sacrificial vessel.

Thus, in the *Analects*, man as individual is not sacred. However, he is not therefore to be thought of as a mere utensil to serve "society." For society is no more an independent entity than is ceremony independent of the participants, the holy vessels, the altar, the incantations. Society is men treating each other as men (*jen*), or to be more specific, according to the obligations and privileges of *li*, out of the love (*ai*) and loyalty

(*chung*) and respect (*shu*) called for by their human relationships to each other. The shapes of human relationships are not imposed on man, not physically inevitable, not an instinct or reflex. They are rites learned and voluntarily participated in. The rite is self-justifying. The beings, the gestures, the words are not subordinate to rite, nor is rite subordinate to them. To "be self-disciplined and ever turning to *li*" (12:1) is to be no longer at the mercy of animal needs and demoralizing passion, it is to achieve that freedom in which the human spirit flowers; it is not, as Waley's translation may lead one to think, a matter of "submission" but of the triumph of the human spirit.

Confucius's theme, then, is not the "discovery of the individual" or of his ultimate importance. The *mere* individual is a bauble, malleable and breakable, a utensil transformed into the resplendent and holy as it serves in the ceremony of life. But then this does not deny *ultimate* dignity to men and to each man; he is not a meaningless ant serving the greater whole. His participation in divinity is as real and clearly visible as is that of the sacrificial vessel, for it *is* holy. And unlike the way he appears in the Christian view, man is not holy by virtue of his absolute possession, within himself and independently of other men, of a "piece" of the divine, the immortal soul. Nor is the "flowering" of the individual the central theme; instead it is the flowering of humanity in the ceremonial acts of men.

Although the individual must cultivate himself, just as the temple vessel must be carved and chiseled and polished, this self-cultivation is no more *central* to man's dignity, in Confucius's views, than the preparation of the vessel is central. Preparation and training are essential, but it is the ceremony that is central, and *all* the elements and relationships and actions in it are sacred though each has its special characteristics.

Nor should we suppose that Nature is cast out unless shaped into artifact for ritual use. The raiment of holiness is cast upon

Nature as well as man, upon the river and the air as well as upon youth and song, when these are seen through the image of a ceremonial Rain Dance. (11:25)

The noble man is the man who most perfectly having given up self, ego, obstinacy and personal pride (9:4) follows not profit but the Way. Such a man has come to fruition as a person; he is the consummate Man. He is a Holy Vessel.

Note on Textual Matters

For the purposes of this book, I refer to the views of Confucius and mean thereby the teachings ascribed to him in the classic collection of his sayings, the *Analects*. More specifically, I have turned to those portions of the *Analects* that are thought likely to be earlier and closer to the authentic sayings of Confucius himself. Of course it has been doubted whether any of the sayings in the *Analects* were actually Confucius's, and there seems good reason to suppose that they are at least worked-over versions of his actual words. Nevertheless, the consensus seems to be that much of the *Analects* constitutes the largest single body of quotations or near-quotations from the historical Confucius. In any case, it is the doctrine to be found in this work that is central to my purpose, not the precise historical origin of it.

As to the identification of this "earliest core" itself, there are differences of opinion. So far as I know, there is a consensus among experts that Chapters 3 through 8 are to be included (certain particular passages excepted). With individual differences of opinion, there is broadly a consensus that if we go beyond this central core and take larger and larger segments of the work (2-9; 1-9; 1-15; 1-20), we get increasingly greater amounts of materials that are later in style and at times, but not always, foreign in content to Confucius's sayings and

ideas. I have consulted especially James Legge, "*Confucian Analects*" in *The Chinese Classics*; Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius*; H. G. Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way* and his *Literary Chinese by the Inductive Method II*; Daniel Leslie, *Confucius* and his article in *T'oung Pao*, "Notes on the Analects"; and S. Kaizuka, *Confucius*.

Quotations from the *Analects* are cited by Chapter and paragraph according to the traditional text. There are a number of English translations that follow this order, the two most useful being Legge's and Waley's (cited above). Legge's is the "classical" English source. Waley's is a modern one, outstanding both in style and scholarship. The quotations as given in this paper are basically Legge's and Waley's with occasional contributions by myself. Where I have modified or retranslated, my aim has been to reduce the interpretive element, and to reproduce or approximate the original imagery of the Chinese text in a way that would be intelligible in English.

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