



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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Be careful how we behave when we're alone

character count:1,574

Respected provost and Miss Deng, my name is Xue Chunyuan. The topic of my oral presentation today is 'Be careful how we behave when we're alone'. This is my outline.

1. Introduction
2. The sentence parsing
3. Self-Reflection
4. Conclusion

Introduction

I will try to paraphrase a sentence from *The great learning* and from this sentence to elaborate on this concept and share some personal feelings. Let us take a look at this sentence first. The translation of this sentence is,

What is meant by 'making the thoughts sincere.' is the allowing no self-deception, as when we hate a bad smell, and as when we love what is beautiful. This is called self-enjoyment. Therefore, the superior man must be watchful over himself when he is alone. There is no evil to which the mean man, dwelling retired, will not proceed, but when he sees a superior man, he instantly tries to disguise himself, concealing his evil, and displaying what is good. The other beholds him, as if he saw his heart and reins;-of what use is his disguise? This is an instance of the saying -'What truly is within will be manifested without.' Therefore, the superior man must be watchful over himself when he is alone.¹

The sentence parsing

The above is the original translation of the sentence, let us look at this sentence.

¹ James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics* (Taipei: SMC Publishing inc,2016) , vol I, 366.

The character sincere is very important in this paragraph. The disciple Zeng explained here that the meaning of this character sincere means not self-deception. That is true in our lives, we may successfully lie to others but never to ourselves. For example, we all learned the Chinese classics and understood a lot about how to behave and do things. Therefore, when we are tempted to do something bad, we get a little uncomfortable inside and that means we know we are going to do something that is going to deceive us. The author also gives an example below ‘as when we hate a bad smell, and as when we love what is beautiful’.² The bad smell here refers to some foul smell, that we smell such a smell the first reaction is to quickly avoid, for fear of smelling the second time. In the same way, when we see something beautiful, we always want to take a second look at it. These reactions are the most direct manifestation of our inner workings and we are not fooling ourselves. We will not pretend not to respond when we encounter unpleasant smells. The desire to see more beautiful things is also the most direct reaction. There is no falsehood or deception in this. The author uses such an example to express our sincere performance. And then he said, ‘This is called self-enjoyment’.³ This means that we have been sincere and have not deceived ourselves, so we are satisfied with our actions.

The next point is that ‘Therefore, the superior man must be watchful over himself when he is alone’.⁴ It is also a reminder that we need to be careful when we are alone, because that is when we are most relaxed. Under normal circumstances, we care about our face in front of others. Therefore, we will pretend to do well and avoid to do some bad things, for fear that others will see and lose face. However, when no one else is around we may be tempted to do something bad, which is a common mistake for us. Therefore, if we want to make the thoughts sincere, we have to be careful when we are alone. The ancients in China often said that one should have a clear conscience even in the face of one's own shadow and quilt. Because in the daytime when no one will also have our shadow to accompany us, and lying in bed at night even when no one is around and the quilt are with us. This means to act as if there are people around,

² James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol I, 366.

³ James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol I, 366.

⁴ James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol I, 366.

even when no one else is. This is also the ancients did not think of themselves as alone, so when walking have a shadow to see, sleep have a quilt to accompany. Then we often say that lifting the head three feet has a god. Therefore, even if it is a person alone also dare not indulge their own behavior or even thought. In fact, we deceive ourselves when we think that no one sees us, because objects and invisible gods are all watching us. Therefore, when the superior man getting along with others, he will pay attention to his words and deeds. When there is no supervision from others, he will supervise himself and not do bad things.

The author then said, ‘There is no evil to which the mean man, dwelling retired, will not proceed.’⁵ The mean man here refer to ordinary people not bad people. On the contrary, ordinary people may do some bad things according to their habits when there is no one. Some people will even deliberately find some places where no one is around, to avoid the vision and supervision of others, so as to facilitate doing some bad things. Therefore, when they are alone, will probably follow their habits, and sometimes do things for the sake of fame and fortune at the expense of others. However, later on, the article mentioned ‘but when he sees a superior man, he instantly tries to disguise himself’.⁶ This means that when he sees the superior man, it will immediately go to cover up his own bad things. Then he will ‘concealing his evil, and displaying what is good.’⁷ Here the mean man to cover up the bad things he has done and to publicize the good things he has. This is his way of letting others know that he is a good person. However, in fact, this is already self-deception. And then the sentence said, ‘The other beholds him, as if he saw his heart and reins;-of what use is his disguise?’⁸ We all know that the lungs and liver are inside our bodies, and usually cannot be seen directly. So by visible, we mean that we are already seen through. In fact, what we do on a daily basis can reveal our true thoughts. In the eyes of the wise, we are known by the way we conduct ourselves. Therefore, The disguise of the mean man has no effect. but makes people feel that he is double-faced. Then it is also a

⁵ James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol I, 366.

⁶ James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol I, 366.

⁷ James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol I, 367.

⁸ James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol I, 367.

reminder that the only person we can deceive is ourselves and that there is no benefit to such behavior. We just need to try to do good inside and out instead of trying to cover up our mistakes. Then the last paragraph concludes, ‘Therefore, the superior man must be watchful over himself when he is alone.’⁹ This is also a reminder that we need to be careful what we think and do when we are alone. The above is the interpretation of this sentence, and then I have some personal experience.

Self-Reflection

After I finished this chapter, I realized that my previous behavior was very similar to that of the mean man mentioned in the article. I remember when I was just learning the classics, because I had recited many classics and understood some literal meanings, I could always perform well in front of others. In the company of others, I always pay attention to my image and try my best to get praise from others. However, when I was alone, I would become very relaxed, not pay attention to my image, and do things according to my will. This situation lasted for a long time, and I gradually found myself very hypocritical and tired of learning, at the same time it was difficult to feel the slightest progress. Although I do better and better on the surface, but in fact, my heart knows that is false, so I feel that I have not made any progress. Fortunately, I have a teacher around me who reminds me in time, and also tells me that it is useless to pretend. Everyone can see your true thoughts, and you are the only one who lies to you in the end. At that time, the teacher used this sentence to remind me, which made me realize that learning is to improve oneself from the inside rather than to get praise. Whenever I have the ability to do a good job but cannot do it because of laziness or lack of supervision, I know it but I still make excuses to avoid it. Reflect that learning has not always been an easy thing, if we can not ruthlessly ask ourselves, continue to deceive will not bring any benefits to us, and finally just a waste of time. Therefore, it is really hard to make any progress without overcoming the problem of self-deception and being cautious about being alone. Until now I am still trying to overcome these problems, I hope I can persist and succeed.

⁹ James Legge (trans. & intro.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol I, 367.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if we want to make progress in our study, the first thing we need to overcome is not to deceive ourselves. And the way to do that is to be aware of how we behave when we are alone. We have to do what we have to do, whether there is someone watching us or not. That is all for today. Thank you for listening.

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