



Trinity Saint David

An Inspiration of Putting Rightness Before

Word count: 1,540

Respected Provost, Miss Deng and my classmates, good afternoon. My name is Siyao Zeng. The topic I shall like to share with you today is ‘An Inspiration of Putting rightness Before’.

The presentation is separated into five parts: first I would give you a brief introduction. Second, I would read a paragraph from *Mencius* which could indicate Mencius point of view on the relationship between rightness and profit. After that I am going to talk about the impacts of putting rightness first. Then, my personal understanding. And finally, my conclusion.

Introduction

Rightness and profits have always been seen as something conflicting in a society where everyone considers their own profits is of paramount. People tend to choose gaining bigger return in a faster way as it possible. However, sometimes it could not be soon if we act in a righteous way, even sometimes it means to lose. At this time, shall we give priority to rightness? This is a problem that could hardly be clarified through a short report. I would try to sort out the relationship between rightness and profit from the teachings of Mencius, who was the most famous scholar of the Confucian School after Confucius.

Original Texts

This is dialog between Mencius and King Hui of Liang. It is recorded in the first page of the first chapter of the book *Mencius*.

Once, Mencius went to visit King Hui of Liang. ‘You, Sir,’ said the King, ‘have come all this distance, thinking nothing of a thousand li(Li is an ancient Chinese unit of measure, one li is equal to 500 meters). You must surely have some way of profiting my state?’ ‘Your Majesty,’ answered Mencius. ‘What is the point of mentioning the word “profit”? All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. A share of a thousand in ten thousand or a hundred in a thousand is by no means insignificant, yet if profit is put before rightness, there is no satisfaction short of total usurpation. No benevolent man ever abandons his parents, and no dutiful man ever puts his prince last. Perhaps you will now endorse what I have said— All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. What is the point of mentioning the word “profit”? ’¹

Impacts of Rightness First

From the perspective of Mencius, there are three main aspects of the conflict between rightness and profit. First is the state governance. When dealing with state affairs, it is necessary for the ruler to think about rightness before considering profit. Second, in terms of people’s livelihood, Mencius reckoned that people are the foundation of a state. Only when people get benefits can the state, the government have benefits. The third point is the conflict between life and death and rightness. Mencius had claimed that, ‘Life is what I want; dutifulness is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would choose dutifulness rather than life.’² This teaching shows that rightness could be higher than everything, including the state, profits, even life and death.

In fact, any era and any country need material and profits as the foundation support, but it does not mean that people’s values and social ethos should tend to utilitarianism. At present, the whole world attaches great importance to economic development. Although, positively, it has brought prosperity to the state, and maybe a better life to

¹ Meng Ke, 孟軻, *Mencius* 《孟子》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008) , p.1.

² Meng Ke, 孟軻, *Mencius* 《孟子》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008) , p.191.

people, it has also led to the prevalence of utilitarianism, which is very dangerous for national spirit and sustainable development.

For example, food safety is no longer a national problem, but a global problem. Junk food of high sugar and high salt content, harmful food additives, chemical fertilizer, intensive feeding, transgenic food, all these might help for a while, but in the long run, they are producing bigger crisis for human future.

More cruel reality is that these matters are not completely considered illegal. On the contrary, some of them are gradually legalised. It is clear that people who have lost their moral principle and sense of rightness would do something damaging the interests of the state and the people, for the sake of protecting their own profits. One day when they are really subject to legal sanctions, countless innocent people have been injured.

Food safety is only the tip of the iceberg, there are loads of negative consequences of paying excessive attention to profit. Although legal restraint has its effect, it is rather limited. Obviously, it neither means that if burglar alarm is installed, there would be no thieves, nor if you lock your money at home then you would not be robbed by marketing or diseases. Social stability is highly affected by the values of the people living in it. If most people could put rightness before profits, public order would be easier to remain stable. If everyone fights to protect his or her own profits by hook or crook in any situation, public order would be in a state of chaos. Therefore, in terms of the long-term solution, it is time to focus on moral education and cultivation of righteous ethos.

Personal Understanding

The dialog between Mencius and King Hui of Liang was concerned with politics. However, the values and attitudes that it revealed towards rightness and profit are meaningful to the leaders and the management. From the teaching of 'If profit is put

before rightness, there is no satisfaction short of total usurpation' we can see if a team wants to achieve stable and long-term development, it needs not only a common interest goal and profits sharing, but more important, a collective mission and vision of benefiting the general public, which must come from a selfless motivation. Once these inviolable mission and vision have been established, they would always be the guidance of the direction of the team, and the standard of judgment when disagreement occurred. From the perspective of team cooperation, it is a wise choice to put rightness before profits. Because it could help us find our true partners and achieve long-term development. Otherwise, although our partners or executives is enjoying much higher salaries than ordinary employees, they might be the first one who betray or do harm to the group.

Let us back to our question. Shall we give priority to rightness when it means to lose? One thing we should think further is that, what kind of thing do we actually lose when our words and deeds are complying with rightness? If you ask me whether being righteous and dutiful would lose things, I would say, 'Yes, we definitely would lose those people or wealth that are not worth getting involved.' In other words, if we gain something by immoral means, we are probably not far from disasters. Therefore, conversely, we are not losing, but winning. Now we might realise that the teaching of Confucius is rather reasonable, which stated, 'Wealth and rank attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds.'³

Nothing that I have been saying denies the great achievements of economy development. Personally, I think profit making and the wish of maintaining profitability are kind of a symbol that indicates this person is a positive, even a dutiful person. What Confucius and Mencius mean, as I understand it, is that all these actions and developments should be based on the principle of morality and rightness. Because as long as we take a long-term view, we are able to know this is a benevolence to others, a benevolence to ourselves, and of course, to the later generations.

³ Trans. by D. C. LAU, *The Analects* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), p.93.

Conclusion

Now we could see that rightness does not conflict with gain and profit, what we need to do is to set them in a right sequence. Whether we are making decisions for a team or for our own, we should take rightness as the premise, then we could carry out effective cooperation and create real wealth to our lives. In a word, when immoral intentions are competing with our conscience, please put rightness before.

That' all for my presentation today, thank you for your listening.

Bibliography

Books (English)

D. C. LAU, *The Analects* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979)

Books (Chinese)

Meng Ke 孟軻, *Mencius* 《孟子》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008)