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Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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A Sentence from *The Doctrine of the Mean* Teaches Us How to Maintain Inner Harmony

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Respected provost and Miss Deng, my name is Guan Wenyuan, the topic of my presentation is, ‘A Sentence from *The Doctrine of the Mean* Teaches Us How to Maintain Inner Harmony’.

The presentation will be divided into three parts. Firstly, I will talk about my motivation for choosing this topic. Secondly, I will explain a sentence selected from *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Thirdly, I will talk about my feelings about learning this sentence.

Motivation

Now, I will tell you my motivation for choosing this topic.

I am an emotional person myself. Especially when dealing with people who are very close to me, such as my parents, sometimes I do not hesitate to speak, and therefore I may easily hurt them with words. When I was a child, I can’t remember exactly what happened, but once when I got emotional, I said to my mother: I would rather never be born. For a mother who has worked so hard to raise her child, how much harm this sentence can cause. I still feel a pain in my heart when I think about it now. The same is true for modern people. Once emotions come up, our reason ceases to exist. We impulsively finish speaking bad things, and we can't take into account what the consequences will be. These often hurt our relatives or friends who have been with us for many years. Once the injury is caused, it is difficult to make up for it.

Therefore, I want to study how to keep myself in a calm mood and not lose rationality.

This sentence in *The Doctrine of the Mean* can give us the answer, it says:

While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of equilibrium. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of harmony.

喜怒哀樂之未發，謂之中，發而皆中節，謂之和。¹

Meaning of a Sentence from *The Doctrine of the Mean*

In the following, I will explain the meaning of this sentence.

Pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy, in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, these four are selected to represent all the feelings of a person. In addition, in the *Book of Rites*, it is also said that people have seven emotions. In fact, we human beings have too many emotions, and we can't calculate them clearly. This sentence uses these four types of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy to represent all our emotions.

Why do we talk about emotions? Because we must understand our emotions before we can understand our nature. The ancient Chinese used water as a metaphor. Water is a metaphor for human nature, and the wave of water is a metaphor for human emotions. The nature of water is flat. Then the waves generated by the water are not flat, they have high and low. Confucian teachings advocate that our human nature is equilibrium. And when we have emotions, our minds are unbalanced. Maybe we haven't felt it yet, but if we get along with others emotionally, discordant situations will immediately

¹ Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, *Thirteen Classics Explanatory Notes and Commentaries: Liji Zhengyi* 十三經註疏:禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1661

show up. Once a person has excessive emotions, reason is concealed and no longer works.

In terms of our daily behaviour, as long as we are very calm, whether we are alone or with anyone, this is our reason at work. If this is not the case, we are not harmonious inside. We either feel that others are wrong, or we feel that we have a certain strength, or have a kind of arrogance, these are inner inequalities. When we treat people with this unequal mind, all kinds of problems will occur.

Therefore, emotions such as pleasure, anger, sorrow and joy will bring us trouble. How to solve this problem? Confucian teachings tell us that the state where our emotions have not occurred is called equilibrium. However, it is impossible for any of us not to generate emotions. This is the realm that sages can reach. It is of course inevitable that we are emotional when we get along with others. Even if we are alone, we can also recall the past or imagine the future. When we think of happy things, we may laugh out loud; when we think of things that were painful in the past, we will be sad again. Once these emotions arise, they interfere with us and make us unable to calm down. These are bad phenomena. When our feelings reach a certain degree, we must be able to control them. Don't let them continue to develop, and this is called reaching the state of harmony.

Personal Thoughts

Now in the last part, I will talk about my personal thoughts about this sentence.

When we get along with people, our normal speaking voice is very peaceful, with high and low pitches, and the colour of our face is normal as well. However, when we get angry, a puff of breath rushes up in our body, the colour of our face changes, and the

pitch of our voice also becomes abnormal. These conditions are relatively easy to be perceived by ourselves. Then, once we are aware of it, we can immediately suppress these emotions. As long as we calm down again, our personal state will return to normal.

Moreover, not only the emotions of anger or sorrow, the emotions of joy should also be tempered. The ancient Chinese taught us that misfortune and blessings transform and depend on each other. When we encounter pleasant things, our minds will have ups and downs, and it is inevitable that we may lose our rationality when dealing with others or doing things. For example, we may have promised something that is difficult to fulfil because of a whim, or we may say something wrong when we are pleasant. Therefore, all our feelings should act in their due degree. This is called being in a state of harmony.

This cannot be accomplished overnight. When we are alone, we should always remind ourselves and maintain righteous thoughts. In this way, when we interact with other people, we can also remain alert and positive in accordance with our inertia. And the key reason why we still lose control of our emotions is that we are centred on ourselves. If we are considerate of other people, our hearts will be peaceful and we will naturally reach the state of harmony. Therefore, we should maintain mindfulness when we are alone, and keep others in mind when we interact with them. If we can form such a habit, we will gradually approach the realm of sages.

That is all for my presentation today. Thank you for listening. Any feedback and suggestions would be appreciated.

Bibliography

Books (Chinese)

Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Thirteen Classics Explanatory Notes and Commentaries: Liji Zhengyi 十三經註疏:禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000)