

## Confucius and Plato: A Few Really Good People

*What is the best way to create a strong society? Can people be led by moral example because they are basically good—or do they need a philosopher-king to help them control the evil within themselves?*

What is the best way to create a strong society? History offers many answers. Hammurabi of Babylon, as we saw, believed in harsh laws, while Jesus of Nazareth saw love as the key. Most of us have ideas that fall somewhere in between. Given the many different answers to this basic question, it is striking how similar were many ideas of the ancient Chinese sage Confucius (Kung Fuzi or “Master Kung,” 551–479 B.C.E.) and famous Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 B.C.E.). Both believed that a good society or state had to be led by men of superior virtue and wisdom. Both generally distrusted laws because they made people devious and merchants because they fostered greed. Neither favored democratic self-government, but both believed in the existence of absolute moral truth and in the possibility that humans could live in peace and harmony. Both focused attention on the individual, but neither believed in “individual rights” in the way we use that phrase, but rather stressed individual duty.

Before we explain these similarities by saying that “great minds think alike,” we should note several important differences between these two philosophers. While both believed that only those who were already virtuous could create a well-ordered, peaceful political community or state, Confucius and his followers were convinced that all human beings were basically good, or could be nurtured to be so. Plato begged to differ; he thought most people were far too easily deceived by tyrants or greed. They needed to be controlled, either by their carefully educated “betters” or by laws.





Naturally, these differing views of human nature resulted in different versions of the ideal government. Confucius emphasized human behavior in general, while Plato stressed the importance of the behavior of a carefully educated ruling class. While Confucius was more interested in the relationship of individuals within a community, Plato was more interested in universal truths. Both believed that *education* was necessary to produce a wise ruling class—but Confucius believed education could do this in and of itself while Plato's system almost creates a closed ruling *caste* of leaders. This is something worth noting since caste is usually associated with the "East," "democracy" (broadly defined) with the "West." Their views have been widely studied and have affected the lives of millions over the centuries. Yet their insights, however universal in nature, also reflect the unique features of their respective civilizations.

Confucius was the son of a minor nobleman during the "Period of Warring States" in ancient Chinese history. From about 1050 to 770 B.C.E., the Zhou emperors held together the various Chinese states using a feudal system of government in which loyalty to the rulers was based on marriage alliances and other personal contracts between them and various noble families. This delicate system of mutual dependence and harmony had collapsed by Confucius' day, and he took it as his mission to show people how it—and political unity—could be restored. Confucius married at age nineteen and had three children, but "his relations with his wife and children were without cordiality."<sup>1</sup> As a young man, Confucius took a minor administrative position with a noble family in his home state of Lu and later worked intermittently for the ruler of Lu as a minister, taking fifteen years off to study the history of the Zhou rulers and educate himself in the noble arts of ritual, music, archery, chariotting, arithmetic, and calligraphy [art of drawing characters used in Chinese writing]. When Confucius realized that the ruler of Lu was more interested in dancing girls than in the serious business of governing, he resigned and spent the rest of his life as a teacher, trying unsuccessfully to find another ruler who would appreciate his advice. He died at the age of seventy-three, after transmitting to many students the message that China could be strong again if the values and virtues of the past were restored. During the next two generations, his disciples compiled his teachings in a book known as the *Analects* ("Sayings"). "No book," wrote a recent translator, "in the entire history of the world has exerted, over a longer period of time,

a greater influence on a large number of people than this slim little volume."<sup>2</sup> Other Confucian ideas are contained in works written by his students and followers, including *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Great Learning*, and *Mencius* [the name of one of his disciples].

Hardly the stuffy or severe person often depicted in legend, Confucius was physically strong and a good hunter and sportsman, who spent much of his life traveling at a time when this required considerable stamina. He taught his followers that civilization depended on virtue, and especially on the virtues of "humanity" (*ren*, translated as "human-heartedness," "love," or "benevolence") and "propriety" or "correct behavior" (*li*). In its simplest form, *ren* means to treat others with humaneness and respect, as you would like to be treated. (There are three statements of the Golden Rule in the *Analects*.<sup>3</sup>) A person with *ren* would show his or her respect for others by proper behavior or civility. *Li* is not mindless bowing to others but a whole set of customs that brings order to our lives and helps us show our love for our fellow humans. The formal aspects of Confucian etiquette are important ways to convey our attitudes. "Authority without generosity, ceremony without reverence, mourning without grief—these I cannot bear to contemplate," Confucius said.<sup>4</sup> A good society would exist if people were honest with themselves and caring toward each other.

While Confucius believed that all could develop through education the virtues of *ren* and *li*, he generally described these as the qualities of a "gentleman." Although Confucius understood that most leaders of society would be aristocrats, he did not believe that only the members of the upper classes were, or could be, virtuous. With the proper education, anyone—providing he was male—could develop the wisdom of a true leader or sage. One became a "gentleman" by education in history and literature, not by birth, and the true leader, whatever his background, should lead by moral example. To influence people, "approach them with dignity and they will be respectful. Be yourself a good son and kind father, and they will be loyal." He believed that "when their betters cultivate civility [*ren*], the people are easily led."<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that Confucius envisioned a society in which human relationships—especially those within the family—were more important than laws. Any summary of the ideas of Confucius will mention the importance of the duties of children toward their parents and family. It will also mention the importance of the Five



Relationships described in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, those between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, and friends.<sup>6</sup> If all involved in these relationships behaved properly and with full human respect toward the other party, society would be orderly. An orderly society is a well-governed one, but here the knowledge, sincerity, and wisdom of the ruler was as important as his behavior. This is made clear in a passage from *The Great Learning*, which points out that ancient rulers, wishing to “order well” their states, had to first “regulate” their families. This required that they “first cultivate their personal lives.” They did this by being sincere and trying to extend their knowledge through “the investigation of things.” Once “things were investigated,” their “knowledge was extended,” their wills were made sincere, and their personal lives were improved. This led to the proper regulation of their families and “when the family [was properly] regulated, the state [was] in order and there [was] peace in the world.”<sup>7</sup> The Chinese believed there was a moral order in the universe. A good leader, reflecting this moral order by living a just and proper life himself, would more easily win the trust of his subjects. If his life were balanced and harmonious, there would be harmony in the country. All this did not mean that a good ruler could ignore the crops or disband the army; it simply meant that these things were not enough—the successful ruler also had to set a moral example that others were able to imitate. Confucius’ follower Mencius put it bluntly in his advice to a ruler who asked him how to govern:

You’d better get back to basics. If mulberry trees are planted on plots of one acre, people in their fifties can wear silk. If you do not pull men away for battle during the breeding times of your livestock, people in their seventies can eat meat. . . . Pay careful attention to education, teaching the Justice of filial piety and fraternity, and the grey-haired will not be seen in the streets carrying heavy burdens on their backs.<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis by Confucius on the importance of human relationships became popular in part because Chinese society already put much emphasis on the family. Early Chinese religion, like that in many other early human societies, involved intense respect for and veneration of one’s ancestors. Within three centuries of his death, Confucius’ ideas, modified to stress the importance of loyal subjects and to deemphasize such things as the moral duty of intellectuals to criticize unjust rulers,<sup>9</sup> had become the ruling philosophy

of the Han dynasty. And the moral gentlemen of Confucians became the bureaucrats of the Chinese state for the next sixteen centuries. Bureaucrats tend to value rules for their own sake, and this is why many people—in China and elsewhere—came to associate *li* with ritual for its own sake, instead of seeing it as a manifestation of *ren*. After several centuries of what came to be called State Confucianism, no “gentlemen” would speak as bluntly to a ruler as Mencius had done. When the ideas of creative thinkers become the official policy of a government, they become more influential because they are backed by state power. However, they can also lose some of their original “edge.” This happened to the ideas of Confucius over the centuries as millions memorized his words to pass state civil service examinations but far fewer tried to live them in the way he must have intended.

Whether Plato’s ideas on government have been misinterpreted in the centuries since his death is harder to determine, if only because everything written by this “father of Western philosophy” has been the subject of extensive discussion and debate. Plato’s political and ethical ideas seem more complex than those of Confucius, at least to those of us with a modern Western education and biases. Yet Plato’s understanding of human nature, and consequently of the ideal state, were as influenced by the events in fifth century Athens as Confucius’ ideas were by the disorder of the Warring States period in China.

Like Confucius, Plato was born into an aristocratic family. His father claimed descent from the last of the kings of Athens and his mother was related to sixth-century leader Solon, who established some of the first democratic institutions in the city. Plato grew up during the Peloponnesian War,<sup>10</sup> which saw the Athenians replace their democratic government with an oligarchic [rule by a group] one known as the “Thirty Tyrants.” These were in turn overthrown by democratic forces after Athens lost the war to Sparta. This democratic government, however, fearful of internal enemies after Athens’ defeat, put Plato’s teacher, Socrates, to death in 399 B.C.E. for “corrupting the youth,” that is, asking too many questions. Both by family background and by virtue of his experiences as a young man, Plato was familiar with different types of government. Growing up in such a troubled time, it is perhaps not surprising that he devoted much of his life—and a major book, the *Republic*—to trying to determine the best form of government.



Also like his Chinese counterpart, Plato spent time traveling but most of his life teaching. While in his twenties, he traveled to Egypt, Italy, and Sicily. In two visits to the city of Syracuse in Sicily in the 360s, Plato tried unsuccessfully to tutor the ruler, Dionysus II, in hopes that he would become the ideal “philosopher-king” Plato described in the *Republic*. Plato had already purchased land near Athens and established a school, the Academy, where he taught young men his principles of ethics and government, “to educate citizens for statesmanship.” This school, which some call the first university, remained in existence for nearly 900 years.<sup>11</sup> During his long life, Plato wrote many philosophical dialogues, lengthy written conversations in which Plato’s ideas on the nature of morality, truth, beauty, and justice are put in the mouth of his teacher, Socrates. The *Republic*, one of the longest dialogues, contains Plato’s picture of the ideal state and of the virtues and education of the people who were to govern it, led by a philosopher-king.

Before we can understand why Plato thought that philosophers—literally “lovers of wisdom”—made the best rulers, we need to appreciate his belief that society or the state should be organized to reflect our basic human nature. In the first place, like most thoughtful Greeks of this period, Plato believed that only in the city-state, or *polis*, could a human being find fulfillment. Second, Plato believed that each human soul consisted of three parts, a rational part, a part containing our desires or appetites for pleasure and wealth, and a part he called the spirited part, which contained a person’s love of honor and desire for victory. Each part of the soul then corresponded to one of the three social classes in Plato’s political community. The spirited part was best represented by the military class, or soldiers. The general population of “producers,” or craftsmen and merchants, represented the desires or appetites, and the rational part of the soul was most active in the ruling class of “guardians.” In a harmonious state, just as in a harmonious individual, all of the parts must work together. For this to happen in a well-governed state, the rational part must control the other two.<sup>12</sup>

In their wisdom, Plato’s guardians resembled the group that Confucius called gentlemen. Yet they are different from the ruling class in China in at least one important respect. They understand ultimate or universal Truth (the idea of the Good) in a way that others cannot, even if the others are educated. To make this point, Plato wrote an allegory [a story in which the images or facts sym-

bolize something else] of a cave. In the *Republic*, Plato asks us to imagine a cave in which prisoners are chained, from the neck down, against a wall facing the rear of the cave. Behind them is a fire and between the fire and the prisoners is a path along which the guards walk back and forth, carrying cutouts of animals and people; some guards are talking as they do this. The prisoners, who have been chained there from birth, see the shadows which the figures cast on the rear wall and mistake this for reality. If one of the prisoners was freed and dragged (since he would be afraid of the unknown) to the mouth of the cave, he would see the sun, something more “real” than the fire because it is the source of the fire. If that same prisoner, once he adjusted to the light and overcame his bewilderment, were sent back into the cave to tell the other prisoners that they were mistaking shadows for reality, they would not believe him; in fact, says Plato, they would probably try to kill him for telling such tall tales, disrupting their lives and challenging their accustomed beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

In this allegory, the images on the rear wall of the cave represent what most humans take to be truth or reality: talking, moving shadows. The sun represents ultimate Truth or the ultimate Good, the source of all lesser “truths.” In Plato’s ideal state, the ruling class of guardians, led by a philosopher-king, would govern because they were the only ones who had seen the sun or, as Plato put it, they “had knowledge” while others “had beliefs.” Their natures, in which the rational part of the soul dominated, meant that they were “made to practice philosophy and be political leaders, while others shouldn’t engage in philosophy and should follow a leader.”<sup>14</sup> The guardian class was also put in control of the state in Plato’s *Republic* because they had a specialized education and social life which prepared them for their leadership role. Plato’s instructions for the education of his guardians goes far beyond anything that Confucius had in mind for his gentlemen.

Members of Plato’s guardian class had to be reliable, courageous, and good-looking (since this was a reflection of inner worth). They would be raised in an environment in which women were equal to men, even to the point of fighting on the battlefield when necessary, and exercising naked together in the gymnasium. Men and women would share wives, husbands, and property, but guardians could mate only with other members of their class. That way, only “outstanding” children would be produced. Otherwise,



Plato wrote, "our breed of guardians will become tainted."<sup>15</sup> It was also permissible for members of the guardian class to tell "helpful lies" to the lesser members of the community if this was necessary "for the good of the community," for example, to get people to fight foreigners. The education of guardians would focus on physical training and on the liberal and fine arts, including music and math. They were to avoid literature, drama, and poetry which contained fantasies. Guardians had to be trained in dialectic [philosophical argument] and had to learn that the five senses were unreliable, and that all real truth was universal in nature and, thus, beyond the senses.<sup>16</sup> The lifestyle and education of this group was justified if we understand that rulers really were different from other people. As Plato put it,

God included gold in the mixture when he was forming Those of you who have what it takes to be rulers (which is why rulers have the greatest privileges), silver when he was forming the auxiliaries [common soldiers, merchants, etc.], and iron and copper when he was forming the farmers and other workers.<sup>17</sup>

Plato's specifications for his guardians left him open to later charges, especially by twentieth-century authors, that he was elitist to the point of being totalitarian. It was almost as if he were advocating a closed caste system in contrast to the more open or "democratic" system of Confucius, in which anyone could become a "gentleman." Some have even said that the ideas in the *Republic* foreshadowed the practices of Hitler's Germany.<sup>18</sup> Those who try to defend him against these charges point out that Plato's rulers were hardly like modern dictators. Since they *really did know Truth and Justice*, philosopher-kings would behave justly. It has not been an altogether convincing defense. On the other hand, we should remember that Plato was describing an ideal, or utopian, state and was doing this as a way of highlighting for his readers the importance of reason. It is also true that Plato did modify some of his views later in life, when he wrote the *Statesman* and the *Laws*. In these works, he decided that the views in the *Republic* were too utopian. In the *Laws*, he suggested that it was better for people to rely on laws than on the moral leadership of a guardian class. The philosopher-king became a legislator who enforced numerous rules governing in detail the

lives of citizens. It was a "second-best" solution for him, but, by that time, he was less interested in helping the select few acquire ultimate knowledge and more interested in molding the character of all citizens of the state.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that the views of each of these ancient thinkers have been both disputed and misunderstood by later ages—in more ways than we can discuss here—is itself a tribute to their profound impact on succeeding generations. Whatever else we might say about them, they did raise a standard of human perfectibility for their respective societies, and they did so by challenging the "commonsense" notion that things had to be the way they always had been—or had appeared to be. Each argued that life could be better, both more reasonable and more moral, if we trusted our senses less (Plato) and really believed in the human capacity for love (Confucius). There was a significant difference, however, in how human improvement was to be achieved. Confucius had faith that all men and women could behave humanely toward each other, and he believed that, if they did this, the society they would create through their ritual acts of propriety toward each other would ennoble all within it. Led by the gentlemen of knowledge and virtue, the Chinese could create a society that, if not perfect, was at least in harmony with the forces that governed the universe.

Plato had less faith than Confucius in humans' ability to create a perfect society. After all, most people in any community, he believed, were destined to live their lives mistaking shadows for reality. People were certainly able to use their reason to control their desires but they were not, as a rule, willing to do so. Therefore, in the *Republic* at least, he proposed that the only way a society could approach anything like perfection would be by giving power to the few who were able to use reason, leave the cave, and understand the Ultimate Good.

Perhaps Confucius had too much faith in his fellow humans, and Plato too little. Perhaps they were both right, and both wrong. One thing is certain: for good or ill, we cannot understand Chinese thought and behavior without understanding Confucius, and Western philosophy makes little sense unless we start by discussing the ideas of Plato. And to be a truly educated citizen in the twenty-first century, we need to know both of these thinkers.



## Notes

1. Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, vol. I (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 51.
2. "Introduction" to *Analects*, translated with notes by Simon Leys (New York: Norton, 1997), xvi.
3. Since there are many translations of both the *Analects* and Plato's *Republic*, passages in these works are generally divided by numbers, like chapters and verses in the *Bible*. See *Analects*, 5.12 (chapter 5, passage 12): "I would not want to do to others what I do not want them to do me"; this is also repeated in 12.2, and 15.24. All passages from the *Analects* are taken from the translation by Simon Leys referred to above.
4. *Analects*, 6.27.
5. *Analects*, 12.16 and 14.41; see also 12.19–20.
6. See *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. I, compiled by Wm. Theodore De Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, and Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 120.
7. For the full text of this passage, see *The Ways of Religion: An Introduction to the Major Traditions*, 2d ed., edited by Roger Eastman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 175.
8. C. Muller, translator, *Mencius*, n.d. <<http://www2.gol.com/user...muller/contao/mencius.htm>> (November 15, 1996). Many other translations are available.
9. See *Analects*, 13.15: In responding to the question: "Is there one single maxim that could ruin a country? [Confucius said] 'The only pleasure of being a prince is never having to suffer contradiction. If you are right and no one contradicts you, that's fine; but if you are wrong and no one contradicts you—is this not almost a case of 'one single maxim that could ruin a country?'"
10. See chapter 5 of this book on Thucydides and Sima Qian for a brief description of this conflict.
11. William S. Sahakian and Mabel Lewis Sahakian, *Plato* (New York: Twayne, 1977), 31–37.
12. See *Republic*, passages 435–442. All references to *Republic* are from the translation by Robin Waterfield (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996). See also Sahakian, *Plato*, 80.
13. Plato, *Republic*, 514a–518b.
14. *Ibid.*, 476d, 474b–c.
15. *Ibid.*, 535a–b, 456–460. See chapter 7, "Women, Children, and Warfare" in Waterfield's *Republic* for Plato's description of relations between the sexes in the guardian class.
16. *Ibid.*, 382c–d, 389b–c, 414d–e, 525–534. Also Sahakian, *Plato*, 114–121.
17. *Ibid.*, 415a.

18. See R. Brambrough, ed., *Plato, Popper, and Politics* (Cambridge: W. Hefner & Sons, 1967) and T. L. Thorson, ed., *Plato: Totalitarian or Democrat?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963). While Plato's views on such things as communal property and sex were shocking to many—in his day as well as ours—it is anachronistic (out of place chronologically) to blame him for the excesses of twentieth-century Hitlers and Stalins. If nothing else, the fundamental goal of Plato—how to promote the good life—contrasted with the fundamental goal of the modern totalitarian dictators, which was power.
19. See "Laws," trans. A. E. Taylor, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 1225–1513.

## Further Reading

- The Analects of Confucius*. Translation and notes by SIMON LEYS. New York: Norton, 1997. A lively translation with a useful introduction and very interesting endnotes.
- DAWSON, RAYMOND. *Confucius*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. A short, readable introduction to the life and ideas of Confucius.
- SAHAKIAN, WILLIAM S., and MABLE LEWIS SAHAKIAN. *Plato*. New York: Twayne, 1977. A good place to start reading about Plato's life and ideas. Brief and clear.
- PLATO. *Republic*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996. Perhaps the most readable translation of this work; there are many others available. Also has a useful introduction.