Kung Fu Tzu or Confucius (551-479 BCE) lived during the late Zhou period in China, a period of great turbulence that eventually led to the Period of Warring States (475 BCE -221 CE). Confucius was dismayed by the chaos and believed that order and unity could only be restored to China if two changes occurred. One, if people returned to traditional values and two, if society was governed by morality. Convinced that his teachings could improve society for the better, Confucius left his home determined to find a ruler who would appoint him to a high political position and give him the opportunity to spread his philosophy and effect change. While Confucius succeeded in securing a minor government post for a few years, his central belief in leading with honesty was neither welcomed nor heeded by the rulers of his day. As a result, he lost his political post and spent the majority of his life as a wandering teacher. He died thinking he was a failure and did not live to see his ideas bear fruit or witness how his students spread his teachings, eventually transforming them into a successful state philosophy that lasted two millennia and influenced the lives of people and governments in Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Confucius’ highest aspiration was to contribute to the cause of civilization. Although he was successful in this goal posthumously, he did not achieve this in the manner he originally conceived. Confucius spent his life convinced that the only way to effect change was from the top-down. He could not have imagined succeeding the opposite way. Yet, it was by changing society from the bottom-up that his teachings made an impact on China and Confucius became one of its most well respected teachers. His students/disciples spread his teachings after his death and his philosophy, known as Confucianism was eventually institutionalized as the philosophy of the state and used to train government officials for over two millennia from the Han Dynasty to the Qing dynasty (i.e. 206 BCE -1912 CE except for the years between 220-589 CE). By changing individuals from the bottom-up during his lifetime and transforming society from the top-down after his death, Confucius and his philosophy created a prosperous circle of interwoven relationships between those at the bottom and top of society i.e. individuals and their government that helped China become the longest continuous civilization in world history.

Without Confucius, there would be no Confucianism and without Confucianism, the history of China, East Asia and the world would not be the same. According to Michael Hart who ranks Confucius as fifth among the world’s 100 most influential people, Confucius appealed to many young students and scholars because “his personal sincerity and integrity were beyond question… (and) he was a moderate and practical person and did not demand of men what they could not achieve… Confucius was not asking the Chinese to change their basic beliefs. Rather, he was
restating, in a clear and impressive form, their basic traditional ideals” (30). Confucius played a pivotal role in establishing a philosophy that grounded itself on the belief that every individual possessed the ability to make a positive difference in society. He believed that if every individual received an education that trained them to think and act benevolently towards others, this would have a domino effect and create a society where virtue, good manners and humaneness would reign supreme and everyone would benefit. His ideas won the hearts and minds of people in China as well as Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Studying the Confucian classics became a fundamental part of the Chinese civil service exams and helped build a society where one’s position was based on merit, not birth. According to Hart:

Confucius was the first man to develop a system of beliefs synthesizing the basic ideas of the Chinese. His philosophy, based on personal morality and on the concept of a government that served its people and ruled by moral example, permeated Chinese life and culture for well over two thousand years, and has greatly influenced a substantial portion [one quarter] of the world’s population. (27)

For Confucius the key to transforming society was transforming the individual. And, the means to transform the individual was education. He called on rulers to enrich their population through education and also stressed skills training, art appreciation and learning beyond knowledge. He is known to have said, “He who learns but does not think is lost. He who thinks but does not learn is in great danger” (The Analects 2.15). Confucius believed that “a perfect society could come about if people played their social roles properly” (Molloy 230). These social roles became the foundation of five great relationships, which dictated how individuals were to relate to one another i.e. father-son (parent-child), elder brother-younger brother (elder sibling-younger sibling), husband-wife (partner-partner), elder-younger (elder friend-junior friend), and ruler-subject. While these relationships assume authority and obedience to the elder or more powerful person, each is based on reciprocity. For example, “the loyalty that is due the husband from the wife is contingent on the husband’s being the kind of husband who warrants – instinctively inspires – such loyalty, and comparably with the other four relationships” (Smith 181). In addition to adhering to these five relationships, individuals who cultivated five great virtues were on the path to being “superior” people or showcasing humanity at its best. Those who embodied all five virtues in thought and action were termed chun tzu and were in Confucius’ view, the key to unlocking a bright future for China.

The first of the five great Confucian virtues is jen (ren). Jen means being considerate of others and includes possessing sympathy, humaneness, kindness, and human-heartedness (Molloy 234). It was important for Confucius that jen be carried out in a genuine manner. That is, displaying sincere empathy, not superficial concern for others.
Jen ties in with the second virtue, which is li and refers to correct behavior or propriety. Li can also be translated as having good manners and “putting jen into practice” (Ibid). Confucius was tremendously concerned with ritual (another meaning of li) and since he believed that the majority of one’s life passed in conducting some form of rituals, it was necessary not just to do them automatically but to think about being in the moment while performing them and doing so in a dignified manner (Puett). For this reason, he spelled out in great detail how to behave in different situations from saying “thank you” with a sense of gratitude to appreciating others when shaking their hands (Ibid). With regard to propriety, Confucius stated that:

...respectfulness, without the rules of propriety becomes laborious bustle; carefulness, without the rules of propriety becomes timidity; boldness, without the rules of propriety becomes insubordination; straightforwardness, without the rules of propriety becomes rudeness. (The Analects 8.2)

The third virtue that Confucius stressed is shu or reciprocity. It is also sometimes called the silver rule and better known as “Do not do to others what you would not wish done to yourself.” According to Molloy, what makes this rule unique from the golden rule is that it makes one consider one’s own actions from the other’s perspective (236). Some scholars include shu with jen and instead, cite chun tzu as one of the main virtues. Chun tzu or humanity at its best can be thought of as both a virtue and the end goal of Confucianism as it represents the person who in spite of accruing great learning and virtue is humble and does not boast or display his superiority to others (Smith 173). Chun tzu is not translated as the ideal person because Confucius firmly believed that no person could be perfect at all times, but people could strive to be the best. When asked about how a person becomes a chun tzu, Confucius related that five things make an individual a man of humanity. They are:

... reverence, generosity, truthfulness, diligence and kindness. If a person acts with reverence, he will not be insulted. If he is generous, he will win over the people. If he is truthful, he will be trusted by the people. If he is diligent, he will have great achievements. If he is kind, he will be able to influence others. (The Analects 17.10)

The fourth virtue Confucius stressed is xiao or filial piety, which means caring for one’s family as well as being loyal and devoted to them. Here Confucius was underscoring the importance of following tradition. He felt strongly that xiao was critical to establishing a society where every member “would be cared for and protected, and no one would feel abandoned” (Molloy 230). That is, the old would take care of the young and vice versa. Some scholars include xiao under li as it highlights the importance of behaving well with one’s parents and elders. In its place, these scholars stress te or the power of moral example where “goodness becomes embodied in society neither through might nor law, but through the impress of persons we admire” (Smith 178). This principle was crucial in establishing a society led by morality, not force - where
rulers would only win the cooperation of their subjects if they merited it. Te is an ideal that not only ensured stability in China for over two millennia but also was translated by Jesuits and influenced the thinkers of the European Enlightenment and the U.S. independence movement (Puett). The Jeffersonian ideal of governments deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed is a Chinese Confucian/Eastern invention absorbed by the European/American West! It also gives credit to Confucius because it is not an ideal he edited from the past like filial piety, but one he invented himself. According to Confucius, “If the ruler himself is upright, all will go well even though he does not give orders. But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders, they will not be obeyed” (The Analects 13.13).

The fifth and last great virtue is wen, which refers to being cultured and is also sometimes translated as “the arts of peace” (Smith 179). For Confucius, an educated person was required to be skilled in and have an appreciation for “art, poetry, literature, calligraphy, painting and music” (Molloy 236). This was important for Confucius because he believed in art’s power to “transform human nature in the directions of virtue… its power to make easy [by ennobling the heart] a regard for others” (Smith 179). Confucius felt strongly that the nation that cultivated wen and had the most exalted culture exemplified in “the finest art, the noblest philosophy, the grandest poetry” won the ultimate victory in world politics as it elicited “the spontaneous admiration of women and men everywhere” (Ibid 180).

Today, these Confucian virtues would be considered part of a character education curriculum. For Confucius, such character education was critical to developing a benevolent society and his sayings written by his disciples in The Analects “were designed to create the prototype of what the Chinese hoped the Chinese character would become” (Ibid 171). The civil service exams helped ensure that Confucian virtues did not remain the subject of books or study alone but became an active and alive part of their government, culture and society and made an imprint on their hearts, minds and souls. This is best illustrated in the following saying:

If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character.
If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home.
If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation.
If there is order in each nation, there will be peace in the world. (Ibid 174)

The ultimate goal of Confucianism as evidenced in the quote above is to create peace and prosperity by transforming society one individual at a time – to move their hearts in such a way that they will embody the supreme quality of chun tsu. With an education in history, the arts and sciences as well as a highly cultivated sense of moral virtues in thought and action, chun tzus would have a multiplier effect on the world around them. Confucius believed that a society that comprised of such well-educated and virtuous people or chun tzus would lead China to brilliance.
Becoming a *chun tzu* was no easy task – it required both sympathy and empathy, pictorially depicted by the Chinese character *hsin*, which symbolizes both mind and heart (Ibid 182).

According to Confucian learning, the heart and mind work together as follows:

… (the) heart-mind that is *hsin*… expands in concentric circles that begin with oneself and spread from there to include successively one’s family, one’s face-to-face community, one’s nation, and finally all humanity. In shifting the center of one’s empathetic concern from oneself to one’s family one transcends selfishness. The move from family to community transcends nepotism. The move from community to nation overcomes parochialism, and the move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism (Ibid).

What is remarkable is that Confucian philosophy once applied, did help ensure long-lasting peace and stability to China and led it to a golden age of achievements and inventions in the arts and sciences. China became prosperous and famous throughout the world. But it did not happen overnight. Chinese dynasties, beginning with the Han worked diligently in creating and recreating civil service exams that genuinely assessed whether their prospective scholar-bureaucrats possessed *chun tzu*. They did this not only by testing applicants on knowledge-based questions, but by having their future leaders compose essays and poetry that would provide evidence of their character (Puett). By taking Confucius seriously and stressing benevolent concern for others, the central theme underpinning most of his great virtues, the Chinese were not only able to transform individuals into *chun tzus* and build a highly civilized society based on moral virtues; they succeeded in impressing and influencing other societies as well. Their achievements were so great that surrounding countries adopted Confucianism and even the Mongol empire, which conquered China in the thirteenth century, instead of converting China to its ways was conquered by Chinese civilization (Smith 192!)

Confucianism has had a tremendous impact on China, its neighbors and the world and yet the question remains, is it a philosophy or a religion? The answer lies in how one defines a philosophy and religion. Its standing as a philosophy is unquestioned, but what is debated is its applicability to religion. If one defines religion as encompassing a sense of the divine or providing an explanation for how humans originated and what happens after death (as it is defined in the West), Confucianism is not a religion for Confucius felt it was impractical to waste time focusing on matters that human beings cannot determine for certain. However, if one believes that any way of thinking that provides people with meaning and guidelines and does not preclude the supernatural can be considered a religion, then Confucianism qualifies as a religion. According to Molloy, religion has been narrowly interpreted by the former definition and is often viewed from this Western lens; however, it need not be constrained to this perspective. Molloy argues that “like Theravada Buddhism, Confucianism is a moral system that functions as a religion in providing
meaning and order in people's lives... [it also has scriptures/writings and] a mystical dimension that enables people to experience their unity with the universe and harmony with society" (227). As a result, Molloy treats Confucianism as a religion. Huston Smith believes it can be argued both ways. He stresses that while Confucius did much to crystallize the “this-world orientation” of the Chinese by shifting people’s attention from Heaven to Earth, he did not drop Heaven from the picture entirely (185). However, Smith does suggest that while Confucianism deserves inclusion in any study of world religions, especially given its inordinate success in Asia and global influence, Confucius’ philosophy was “a blend of common sense and wisdom. It contained no depth of metaphysical thought, no flights of speculation, no soul-stirring calls to cosmic piety” (Ibid).

Michael Puett, using Confucius’ own sayings as a reference point, believes that Confucius would find this debate irrelevant. He argues that for Confucius, the main concern is not rewards or punishments once we are dead but being benevolent in the present. Even though being benevolent does not guarantee that good things await us after we die, our benevolence will help shape a better world and that alone is a worthy and unselfish cause. According to Puett, Confucius was “disgusted by anyone who thought of him as a sage because that implied there was no need to listen to others and one needs to be able to listen to learn.” Based on this knowledge of Confucius’ views as well as other sayings from The Analects, it is clear that Confucius did not want to be worshipped nor did he advance the worship of a higher being. Even though countless statues and temples dedicated to him abound in China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Singapore, he is not worshipped as a divinity but revered as a man of great principles whose philosophy had far reaching influence. Whether his teachings qualify as a philosophy is therefore not the subject of debate; that is clearly evident to all. With regard to religion, since Confucius did not reject a belief in Heaven or a higher power, he would be considered an agnostic and his teachings, depending on how one defines religion can be interpreted both as a philosophy and/or religion.

Through simple words of wisdom and a focus on education and morality, Confucius infused in his people key ingredients that would lead them to victory on the world stage and even today, continue to propel them toward success. While neither Confucius nor Confucianism is single-handedly responsible for the unparalleled success China has had over the centuries, both have played a major role in the advancement not only of China but East Asia and the world. His legacy proves that taken seriously, honesty, kindness, and concern for others have the power to civilize and transform the world. For providing this insight and demonstrating its effectiveness, Confucius deserves credit as one of the most influential philosophers the world has ever known.
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