

Transformative Critique: What Confucianism Can Contribute to Contemporary Education

Geir Sigurðsson¹ 

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Abstract Critical thinking is currently much celebrated in the contemporary West and beyond, not least in higher education. Tertiary education students are generally expected to adopt a critical attitude in order to become responsible and constructive participants in the development of modern democratic society. Currently, the perceived desirability of critical thinking has even made it into a seemingly successful marketable commodity. A brief online search yields a vast number of books that are mostly presented as self-help manuals to enable readers to enhance their critical abilities. But how should critical thinking be taught? Is it at all possible? Instead of attempting to provide a direct answer to this pressing question, this paper seeks inspiration in a culturally rather remote philosophy of education that hitherto has not been regarded as a stimulant for critical thinking, namely the ancient philosophy of Confucianism. The paper argues that not only are most if not all types of thinking regarded in the West as ‘critical’ also present in Confucianism, but also that the Confucian philosophy presides over a particular type which increasingly tends to be neglected in the contemporary West; a type that I call ‘transformative self-critical attitude’. Through a comparison with the well-known Teaching Perspectives Inventory in higher education, the transformative self-critical attitude is used to elucidate some further aspects of the Confucian philosophy of education that may offer valuable insights to contemporary educators.

Keywords Critical thinking · Confucianism · Higher education · Teaching Perspectives Inventory · John Dewey

✉ Geir Sigurðsson
geirs@hi.is

¹ Faculty of Languages and Cultures, School of Humanities, University of Iceland, Nyi Gardur, Saemundargata 12, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland

Introduction

Critical thinking is often considered the hallmark of Western or Euro-American thinking (Ryan and Louie 2007: 411f.). Being critical is understood as a certain attitude, an approach, to any ideas, beliefs or assertions that meet us in life. It is therefore associated chiefly with an epistemological stance that takes nothing for granted, subjects everything to rational scrutiny and requires adequate reasons or evidence for acceptance. The father and model of critical thinking would undoubtedly be Socrates with his incessant questioning and use of the dialectical method, although the latter may be more appropriately attributed to Plato. Other ancient proponents of critical thinking were the Skeptics, some of whom were so critical that no reasons were considered good enough for accepting a proposition. This critical attitude was later reinforced during the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment periods, when each individual human being was seen to be endowed with 'natural light of reason' (Descartes) enabling him (and to a lesser extent: her) to be independently capable of understanding, testing and assessing the validity and even truth of any given assertion.

The rise of democracy and even more so the advent of the information age have yet increased the perceived importance of critical thinking for being able to function as a responsible citizen and informed individual. Educationalists, intellectuals, most parents and the occasional politician have highlighted the importance of producing citizens with a high level of critical thinking. At the same time, the growing tendency to apply criteria of free-market capitalism in contemporary Western societies has put pressure on academic philosophy to justify its own worth, both toward students whose main concern is finding occupation, as well as toward society that increasingly demands tangible evidence for its usefulness. One outcome of this has been the emergence of 'applied' philosophy dealing with concrete ethical, legal, medical, technological or other issues. Not surprisingly, therefore, since critical thinking is generally believed to belong to philosophy, teaching critical thinking is stark becoming an acknowledged part of this 'applied' sphere of philosophy as the field's concrete contribution to the educational sphere as well as a viable and respectable occupation for contemporary philosophers. The incorporation of higher education into mainstream society whereby the university becomes a mass institution has further helped to increase the demand on universities to 'produce' graduates demonstrating critical and creative skills (Altbach et al. 2009: 115).

Currently, critical thinking receives much attention. A brief search for books on the subject in any large web-based bookstore yields dozens of volumes, most of which have been published after the turn of the new millennium. Many of these, perhaps the majority, present themselves as self-help manuals to train the critical thinking skills of readers (and future leaders). Critical thinking is therefore clearly a marketable commodity or an industry in great demand to which these writings are responding. This paper may be a part of that response.

The primary aim of this paper is to show that critical thinking, traditionally held to be a particular if not an exclusive feature of Western thinking, is no less an important component in ancient Confucian philosophy. Indeed, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of a continuously critical attitude from which we, products of contemporary Western culture, may have much to learn. I shall begin by briefly unfolding the different meanings of critical thinking in current (Western) discourse. Subsequently, I will identify the extent to and the sense in which it can be found in ancient Confucianism. This is where I propose the particular kind of critical disposition in Confucianism that I choose to call

‘transformative self-critical attitude’. Lastly, I compare briefly the early Confucian views of education and teaching with current Western theories and practices in higher education in order to demonstrate that early Confucianism has much to offer for the current status of (higher) education in the world.

Meanings of Critical Thinking

Considering the vast number of writings on the subject, it is only fair to expect that there is no succinct definition of critical thinking shared by all; nor, presumably, can there ever be, as each field and profession appears to understand the notion differently. ‘The critical thinking of the historian’, as Barnett (1997: 3) observes, ‘is quite different from that of the physicist and both, in turn, are quite different from the viewpoint of the chief executive of an international corporation in proclaiming that graduate employees should be adept at critical thinking’. However, most formulations tend to be variations on the same theme. A relatively early definition, which has the virtue of being both generic and succinct, presents critical thinking as ‘reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do’ (Ennis 1987: 10). A somewhat narrower understanding can be found in the works of Deanna Kuhn, who conceptualizes critical thinking as ‘the sense of reasoned justification of argument’ (cf. Fung 2014: 339). Indeed, it is very common, not least in North America, to associate critical thinking with the ability to make sound *arguments*. The landscape, however, is certainly broader and more varied than this. Brookfield (2012: 32–51) identifies five ‘critical intellectual traditions’, which can be summarized as follows:

1. ‘Analytic Philosophy and Logic: Detecting Language Tricks’. Being the most influential tradition, it revolves around arguments and reasons from a supposedly ‘neutral’ point of view based on formal logic, aiming at detecting logical fallacies, invalid reasoning, rhetorical distortions, linguistic manipulations, etc.
2. ‘Natural Sciences: The Hypothetico-Deductive Method’. This tradition refers to the empirical scientific method of testing a hypothesis through observation and evidence collection. It presumes the provisional nature of all knowledge and remains open to new discoveries that may refute our current beliefs.
3. ‘Pragmatism: The Experimental Pursuit of Beautiful Consequences’. Referring to American pragmatism, this tradition employs the strategies of ‘constant experimentation’, ‘learning from mistakes’, and ‘deliberately seeking out new information and possibilities’ with the aim of bringing about better social forms.
4. ‘Psychoanalysis: Living an Integrated, Authentic Life’. The aim of this tradition, initiated by Sigmund Freud, is to critically analyze our experiences in order to bring to consciousness the hidden assumptions produced by these experiences that prevent us from realizing our potentialities and our ‘true’ personality.
5. ‘Critical Theory: Speaking Truth to Power’. Traceable to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant while particularly influenced by Marxism, this tradition is the most overtly political one by seeking to promote social justice by uncovering and struggling against ideological manipulation and power inequities.

Brookfield claims that what different traditions and disciplines have in common in their understanding of critical thinking is that the aim is ‘to recognize, and question, the assumptions that determine how knowledge in that discipline is recognized as legitimate’ (Brookfield 2012: 28). Thus, critical thinking in his understanding is first and foremost the

epistemic endeavour to uncover hidden assumptions, as is also clearly indicated in the title of his book.

Apart perhaps from the psychoanalytical and to some extent the pragmatic traditions, there is a strong tendency in the traditions identified by Brookfield to direct themselves outward: at claims, arguments, speakers or texts outside one's own personal sphere. In Western intellectual history, however, a certain emphasis on directing a critical attitude inward has been in place since the beginning of philosophical activity. Socrates is credited with the famous saying that he is wiser than others 'to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know' (Plato 1997: 21d). Even when detached from Plato's peculiar epistemology involving the dual worlds of ephemeral (and thus unknowable) phenomena and eternal (and thus knowable) forms, this mode of thinking presents itself as a self-critical precondition for an openness to learning something new, and at the same time as a clear contrast to dogmatic thinking. Dogmatic persons claiming to have grasped the truth are unlikely to spot flaws in their views and thus to overcome them. On the contrary, those who are open to the possibility that their beliefs may be incorrect are more receptive to new evidence. Interestingly, Confucius, to whom I will turn in more detail later, presents a strikingly similar way of thinking in his conversation with his disciple Zilu: 'Shall I teach you what wisdom is? Knowing what one knows and realizing when one doesn't know, this is wisdom' (*Analects*: 2.17).¹ Since, in the Confucian tradition, there is no end to knowledge and understanding (unlike, it seems, for Plato), wisdom consists in an attitude to be always ready to acquire new learning. This vision is reinforced in another early Confucian master, Xunzi, who begins his magnum opus with the simple but powerful statement that 'Learning must never be halted' (*Xunzi*: 1.1).

But let us rest in the West just a little longer. The notion of 'critique' was eternalized in the Western philosophical vocabulary by Immanuel Kant. Much has been and still is written on Kant's critical method, which cannot be covered here in any detail. However, let me just highlight two interrelated aspects of his critique: on one hand, Kant's critical thinking is first and foremost thinking critical of itself. Kant's epistemology deals primarily with our own faculties of reason and understanding rather than with the objects of knowledge themselves. Thus, the Kantian sense of critique is reason's critique of itself with the aim of identifying the conditions necessarily present to yield certain results.

Interestingly, on the other hand, it involves critical limitation or denial of knowledge, e. g. in his famous postulates of pure practical reason, i.e. the immortality of the soul, the existence of God and the freedom of the human will, previously deemed to be unknowable as 'antinomies' of pure reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1966: B454–488). While later in the book Kant hints at the resolution of the antinomies on the grounds of reason's 'practical interests', i.e. as constituting the 'foundations of morality and religion' (Kant 1966: B494), it is in his second Critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where they are now presented in such a way that they must be accepted (*angenommen*) as if true for the sake of securing the function of practical reason and hence morality (Kant 1974: A6). Kant's formulation is interesting in this context chiefly because it hints at a pragmatic understanding of knowledge. Indeed, the well-known Kant scholar Hans Vaihinger elaborated his own version of the 'as if' in terms of a doctrine of fictions, which he defined as '... hypotheses which are known to be false, but which are employed because of their utility' (Vaihinger 1935: xlii). Vaihinger clearly goes a step beyond Kant by declaring these fictions to be false, but he nevertheless shows that Kant accepts that principles may

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations of non-English sources are my own.

be justified in science and life on the basis of utility (i.e. some practical value) rather than a more straightforward understanding of truth.

Critical Thinking in the Confucian Tradition

One problem with the general Western view of critical thinking (and philosophy in general) is that it neglects both context and change. Logical analysis decontextualizes statements by isolating them and applying abstract rules to them (Lam 2014: 1450). The general framework is undeniably rather one-dimensional. In each case, an object to be critiqued is identified. The object is in some sense simply there, isolated in its changelessness, and waiting for us to scrutinize it. The aim is to gain full knowledge of the object or to bring it fully into consciousness. As Barnett (1997: 7) has argued,

Critical thinking is a defining concept of the Western university but it has been interpreted narrowly, being confined largely to its place in relation to formal knowledge. The critical life in the domains of the self and the world has been given short shrift. Critical self-reflection and critical action have hardly appeared as components of higher education.

Writing about the role of critical thinking in higher education, Barnett (1997: 7) asks for a larger emphasis on ‘critique in context’, suggesting that the narrow concept of ‘critical thinking’ be replaced with the ‘wider concept of critical being’. Such a concept encompasses reflectivity and imagination: ‘Reflection and critical evaluation... have to contain moments of the creation of imaginary alternatives. Reflexivity has to offer resources for continuing development’ (Barnett 1997: 6).

Barnett’s points are helpful for engaging with and appreciating the critical tendencies inherent in Confucianism. Confucianism is in fact seldom if ever associated with a critical spirit. On the contrary, Confucianism is more often regarded as a rigorously hierarchical, conservative or even reactionary ideology whose teaching methods largely consist in one-dimensional transmission, rote-learning, repetition and absence of questioning. For example, Chad Hansen, a renowned sinologist, claimed early in his career that ‘we may eventually be forced into acquiescing in the growing consensus that Confucius was an apologist for a feudal code of ethics’ (Hansen 1976: 203–204). And according to Brookfield (2012: 217), ‘Confucius asserted that students would better spend their time absorbing ideas from experts than thinking independently’. This latter claim is all the more curious as such an assertion by Confucius cannot be found anywhere in writings attributed to him or ostensibly quoting him.

Clearly it is my intention to refute views such as these. And this will be done in a twofold manner. Firstly, I will show that a kind of critical thinking as it is predominantly understood in the West today is certainly at play in ancient Confucianism. Secondly, and more importantly, I venture to formulate a different kind of critical thinking that Confucianism has to offer, one that is more in line with Barnett’s notion of ‘critical being’.

Confucianism is notoriously hard to define. The main reason is that Confucianism became the official state ideology in China during the Han dynasty in the second century BCE and, with some interruptions, remained the dominant ideology until 1911 when the last Chinese dynasty collapsed. Therefore, Confucianism tended to absorb most streams of thought in China during this long period and presented itself in different periods of time in an extremely multifaceted manner. Being an official ideology, it was most often controlled

and manipulated by the political elite, while other more experimental strands and dimensions tended to be suppressed. With time, especially during its last few centuries as state ideology, it became rather stagnant and even reactionary. Moreover, it is hard to conceive of any aspect of social living on which Confucianism, as an all-embracing umbrella of intellectual activity, did not have some impact. Consequently, there is considerable confusion as to how to understand Confucianism. These issues are complicated and much discussed among contemporary historians, philosophers and other scholars. I will not venture into these hazy fields on this occasion. Instead I will follow the lead of many philosophers who seek to extrapolate valuable aspects of the Confucian philosophy and simply limit my discussion to the fundamental or canonical writings from the so-called pre-Qin period, i.e. before the first dynasty was founded in 221 BCE. My focus will be on the *Confucian Analects* while I also rely on some other sources from the same period.

However we ought to define the Confucian philosophy, it is clear that education forms the core of its early teachings. Confucianism can consistently be presented as a philosophy of education or even philosophy of life in so far as education is understood as the continuous aim of human living as expressed by Xunzi above. It seeks to instill in individuals a drive to continuously improve themselves as individual and social beings and thus realize a society in which people are able to find fulfilment as individual beings *qua* social beings. It is thus simply untrue that the Confucian philosophy asserts that individuals should be oppressed for the sake of social cohesion, that the few may be sacrificed for the sake of the many, although such dogmatic dispositions certainly emerged during the last few centuries of dynastic rule. Individual creativity and critical approach to the world are considered fundamental abilities to contribute to a good society. The development of society can only take place through the development of individuals, but at the same time the healthy development of individuals cannot be detached from a healthy development of society. Both require the other for success.

Time is here of fundamental importance and its impact should therefore be mentioned briefly. The general cosmological assumption on which all schools of thought in ancient China based their teachings is that the world and everything that exists are immersed in time and thus in a constant process of change. A consequence of such a worldview is that there cannot be any eternal and unchanging truths applicable in all situations since everything is always changing. On the contrary, it is necessary to maintain an open mind and consider all possibilities as the changes in both social and natural surroundings are to at least some extent indeterminate and unforeseeable. This is the main reason why it is considered of limited value to decontextualize statements and apply abstract principles and rules to them. On these bases, then, Confucius emphasizes, after discussing the steadfastness of some excellent personalities of the past, that ‘I, however, differ from all these, for I have no “must not” or “must”’ (*Analects*: 18.8). The point is that he does not limit himself to conventional rules, but is flexible at all times and adapts to the variations specific to any situation. A general principle cannot be adopted to apply to all situations. On the contrary, individuals are compelled to constantly engage in the demanding task to carefully assess each situation and make their decision on its basis. This is why the notion of ‘appropriateness’ (*yi* 義), also sometimes translated as ‘rightness’, features prominently while a notion of ‘truth’ comparable with the one found in Western discourse is absent.

This, however, doesn’t mean that ‘untruth’ was unheard of. A kind of critical thinking understood as the epistemic function of uncovering hidden assumptions and being skeptical of what is being said is easily found in early Confucianism. Confucius generally distrusts speech, and he frequently expresses his distrust in his emphasis on *xin* 信, ‘to be true to one’s words’. To this, the notion of *zhengming* 正名, of ‘using names appropriately’, is

closely related. Both *zhengming* and *xin* imply that words ought to be properly applied in the right situation at the right time, that they should be taken seriously, and thus emphasize the conformity between speech and action. There are numerous passages in the *Analects* where Confucius underscores the priority of action to speech, e.g. ‘The ancients were wary of speaking as they would be ashamed if they themselves would not live up to what they said’; ‘The exemplary person desires to be slow to speak but quick to act’ (*Analects*: 4.22 and 4.24). Being ‘slow to speak’ is further associated with ‘humanness’ (*ren* 仁), a supreme moral level in Confucianism (*Analects*: 12.3). To speak of one’s intentions is easy. The difficulty consists in accomplishing that which one intends to do. There is, moreover, the obvious possibility of deception through the use of language, which was probably rampant in the unstable political situation of Confucius’s days: ‘I detest when glib speakers overturn states and clans’ (*Analects*: 17.18). Experience taught Confucius to gradually become more wary of what people say, suspending judgment about their character dispositions until their verbally intended actions had been carried out: ‘The Master said: Initially, in my dealings with others, I listened to their words and believed that they would act accordingly. Now, in my dealings with others, I listen to their words but observe their actions’ (*Analects*: 5.10). Trustworthiness, or making good on one’s word (*xin* 信), was of fundamental importance for Confucius: ‘If anyone does not make good on his word, I don’t understand how such a person can function at all. If a large carriage lacks a linchpin in the yoke, and a small carriage lacks a linchpin in the crossbar, how can they be made to move at all?’ (*Analects*: 2.22) To be trustworthy, to keep one’s words, is the prerequisite for being able to function in a social context. On the other hand, Confucius also rejects ad hominem prejudice: ‘An exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) does not promote people because of what they say. Nor do they dismiss what is said because of who says it’ (*Analects*: 15.23).

Moreover, the refusal to limit the critical attitude to an analysis of fixed statements does not at all mean that general rules of logic are dismissed. In the following, Confucius introduces a case of modus ponens and warns of the common logical fallacy to affirm the consequent, sometimes also called ‘fallacy of the converse’: ‘A man of virtue is sure to be the author of memorable sayings, but the author of memorable sayings is not necessarily virtuous’ (*Analects*: 14.4). We may symbolize the statement in formal logic thus: p (man of virtue) \rightarrow q (author of memorable sayings). But the converse does not hold: $\neg(q \rightarrow p)$. Lam (2014: 1455f.) offers more examples of this kind.

Before turning to what I take to be a unique Confucian version of critical thinking, I would like to elaborate briefly upon the following Confucian dictum: ‘Learning without reflection results in confusion, reflection without learning results in peril’ (*Analects*: 2.15). Reflection is here the equivalent of reasoning while learning concerns one’s understanding of reality, in particular the cultural tradition in which one lives. The first part of the statement is a clear disapproval of mere preservationism. Those who simply stick to old methods and norms without critically reflecting on how to adapt them to new situations are unlikely to be successful in their efforts. They will end up in confusion or disorientation. In another ancient treatise, the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) Confucius is reported to have said that those who are “born into the present age and yet return to the ways of the past will cause themselves misfortunes” (*Liji zhijie* 2000: 148). In the *Analects*, moreover, Confucius says that ‘one who realizes the new by reviewing the old can be called a proper teacher’ (*Analects*: 2.11). Reflecting without regard for cultural tradition, on the other hand, will have as a consequence that one fails to grasp the appropriate ways of dealing with situations and will therefore endanger oneself and/or others in the sense of losing one’s foothold in reality, a reality that can only be adequately apprehended through the categories shared by one’s culture. From this perspective, then, such endangerment is

tantamount to a form of alienation in which the endangered subject loses itself in skepticism, in an evacuation of meaning. Being merely critical, i.e. destructive and not constructive, can lead to a form of nihilism.

Thus, Confucius and his followers certainly encourage critical thinking in much the same sense as we find in the West, but they emphasize the importance of what may be called ‘contextual critique’, i.e. a critique that takes note of the particular circumstances in each case and the direction in which they are likely to be heading, not unlike the critique demanded by Barnett as discussed above. Since the underlying value of the critique, its ‘point’ so to speak, is not merely ‘truth’ but ‘appropriate solutions’, it will tend to take more factors into consideration than does Western critique in most cases. Confucian critique is nuanced and complex, aiming at an advantageous configuration of the interests of all those concerned. Furthermore, considering the importance of the temporal dimension, an ongoing and incessant critique is demanded of each and every individual traveling the Confucian way.

The Confucian Bells and Whistles

I propose that what Confucianism has mainly to contribute to critical thinking is what may be called a ‘transformative self-critical attitude’. In addition to the dimensions of time and cultural values, Confucianism also adds a reflexive dimension. Certainly, such a dimension is not wholly absent from the Western traditions, and can for instance be identified rather clearly in the Socratic approach. In his 1995 monograph, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, Stephen Brookfield emphasizes the importance of self-reflection for the ambitious teacher, while he does not seem to consider it from the point of view of the student (cf. Miller 2010). The Confucian take on self-reflection, however, involves the student no less than the teacher. In fact, the student is rather the main focus of attention, because we are all in a certain sense students, irrespective of our formal position or employment, and the objective, of course, is improvement. A more in-depth emphasis on self-reflectivity can be found in the works of Richard Paul and Linda Elder, who define critical thinking as ‘self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking’ and ‘the art of analyzing and evaluate thinking with a view to improving it’ (2006: 4). They concentrate in particular on egocentricity as ‘one of the fundamental impediments to critical thinking’ (2001: 398). Another influential move toward self-corrective thinking is found in the Philosophy for Children programme initiated by Matthew Lipman in the late 1960s. Lipman, strongly influenced by American pragmatism, envisaged that self-reflectivity developed most effectively in a community of inquiry, in which ‘the members of the community begin looking for and correcting each other’s methods and procedures. Consequently, insofar as each participant is able to internalize the methodology of the community as a whole, each is able to become self-correcting in his or her own thinking’ (Lipman 2003: 219).

Such approaches, while still too rare, are most certainly responses to an unfolding of a most unsettling condition. Critical self-reflection in the Western understanding of critical thinking seems to have been seriously challenged in recent centuries, possibly as a consequence of the rise of radical individualism in the late Renaissance and early Modern Age. More recently, this tendency may even have been exacerbated by the growing problem of narcissism in Western society through social media, celebrity worship and parental

overvaluation, all of which combine to breed unrealistic self-images (Brummelman et al. 2015: 3661; Zehetner 2015: 742).

The Confucian ‘transformative self-critical attitude’ refers to the ongoing and never wholly attainable effort to transform oneself to become fully human. It involves recognizing ‘one’s moral obligations to both oneself and others, obligations that force one to transcend self-centered activity, that from the Confucian perspective create the basis for the problems we all encounter in the world’ (Taylor 1998: 95). This is far from being some kind of self-effacement, but is a pedagogical process in which our initial and exclusive concern for our own ego is gradually overcome to become a concern for other persons. On this, I have written the following elsewhere (cf. Sigurðsson 2014):

First, the ego’s dominance symbolizes a primitive state, as it is virtually or literally the sole concern of the individual in his or her initial circumstances after birth. As the infant grows up, it develops a natural kind of affection for the people in its surroundings, usually the parents and other next of kin. This is the first step towards reducing the scope of the ego in the sense that one’s concern embraces others as well. The Confucians call it ‘personal cultivation’ (*xiu shen* 修身), indicating that becoming a genuine person means to become a social kind of being. Successful personal cultivation or indeed *transformation* means successful expansion of our natural affection, certainly graded affection according to the closeness of relations. One treats one’s grandmother differently from one’s insurance agent, and so one should, but, believe it or not, a cultivated person will still have some affection for her insurance agent. For the Confucians, a petty person, *xiao ren* 小人, is someone who fails to overcome his infantile egocentricity. An exemplary person, a *jun zi* 君子, is one who succeeds.

To illustrate the difference between a petty person and an exemplary person, we may quote Confucius once again: ‘Exemplary persons understand what is appropriate, petty persons understand (their own) profit’ (*Analects*: 4.17).

It may seem that we have strayed from the topic of critical thinking. But this is far from being the case. For the continuous overcoming of egocentric concerns involves a strong kind of reflexivity that always takes heed of the self and its role in the overall picture. The involvement of the self is considered no less important than any other component of the overall situation. A critical attitude to the external object only is therefore not at all sufficient. In a world in which every situation is unique and changing, principles can at most be used as rules of thumb or vague guiding lights, but never as absolute rules to be followed. This implies that Confucianism makes tough demands on individuals to engage themselves in constant critical assessment, appraisal and scrutiny of whatever they are dealing with in every single moment. Being logical, however important, is not necessarily the right way to proceed in all circumstances. The parties to any given situation, their position, circumstances and last but not least feelings, must also be taken into consideration. There must be a sophisticated ‘sense’ for the situation and the configuration of all its elements. Therefore, what comes closest to being an almost universal principle is ‘empathy’ or ‘reciprocity’, as expressed in the following conversation between Zigong, Confucius’s disciple, and the Master himself: ‘Zigong asked: “Is there a single expression that can be applied in one’s entire life?” The Master responds: “There is ‘reciprocity’ (*shu* 恕): do not impose on others what you yourself do not want”’ (*Analects*: 15.24).

In other words, human life is identified as the ongoing challenge of being continuously in novel and hitherto unexperienced situations. Certainly, they are often quite similar, seldom dramatically different, and we can build much on our previous experiences, but

they do vary at least slightly and in some cases quite considerably. Thus, we must be constantly prepared to approach things afresh. For the ultimate aim is not to identify truth or untruth, but to find agreeable ways to come to terms to all those who have a stake in the issue.

Reflection and concentration are much emphasized in Confucianism. The development of one's sense for the surroundings requires both discipline and steadfastness. To be sure, it also requires propriety, i.e. ceremonial or even ritual (bodily) training that trains one's ability to interact appropriately with other people and the broader social environment, but I will leave this, admittedly important, aspect aside on this occasion. I discuss it to some lengths elsewhere (Sigurðsson 2015). Let me just briefly touch upon the exhortation to reflexivity found in early Confucian writings. Xunzi makes it clear that a wise man, when in the conduct of official duties, 'when he is adequate, considers situations in which he might be inadequate. When progressing smoothly, he reflects on any rash action he might take' (*Xunzi*: 7.3). Thus, one must always be vigilant, prepared for changes, and, last but not least, maintain oneself in the mode of learning or self-improvement. In a similar manner, Confucius has little patience for those who are unwilling to examine themselves. He says on one occasion: 'Oh my! I haven't yet met anyone, who, when identifying his own excesses, is ready to critique himself' (*Analects*: 5.27). And: 'When meeting excellent people, think how to become equal to them; when meeting unexceptional people, turn inward and examine yourself' (*Analects*: 4.17). Any experience, any association with others, is taken as an opportunity to improve oneself: 'When in the company of only two others, I am certain to find a teacher. Realizing where they excel, I follow them; realizing where they do not excel, I mend my own ways' (*Analects*: 7.22).

Lastly, several passages stress the importance of being mindful of oneself in solitude. Being a social being is not merely a game; the world is not a stage and the people merely actors, as Shakespeare would have had it. Our roles are not simply played out, they are lived, and thus we cannot simply cast them entirely aside when it suits us. The Confucians therefore remind us that we must be mindful of ourselves when alone. Book 10 of the *Analects*, for instance, is a collection of detailed descriptions of Confucius's behaviour in various formal and non-formal situations, the latter of which include his comportment while eating and sleeping, and even the way in which he mounts his carriage. Confucius's comportment is not presented as constituting universal rules to be imitated. It is, on the contrary, highly personalized as manifesting the particular character traits of Confucius himself, and therefore a mode of action inimitable by others. The point is that even when in solitude, one must not let one's guard fall. To be able to transform oneself into a responsible, socialized individual, one must maintain a constant self-critical and disciplined attitude so that the transformation occurs in one's character but not simply on the surface by knowing how to go through the motions. To become a human being is a deep-learning process.

The Confucian Teaching 'Methods' and Higher Education Today

Confucianism does not offer systematic teaching methods. In fact, 'method' may be an inappropriate word, for the view of life and world as being in constant flux calls for the ability to meet and deal with any unforeseen situations. It is therefore a training of skill, dexterity and spontaneous responses, which requires personal creativity and the ability to be self-critical. Thus, a unified method is not desirable, since it has the danger of molding

students uniformly. To the extent, however, that we can speak of teaching methods, two can be identified: a verbal and a performative method. The verbal method means teaching through dialogue. Dialogue in the Chinese tradition is a continuous hermeneutic process in which the teacher is meant to inspire the student to come up with his or her own elaborations of the original ideas. Thus, a 'teacher' could also be understood as a text and the 'student' the reader and interpreter of that text. The major part of the *Analects*, however, is a particularly conspicuous example of the priority of exhortation over dictation or transmission. At the same time, this accounts for the virtually infinite richness drawn from it by Chinese students of the *Analects* for the last two and a half millennia, and, as it happens, for its general failure to leave an impression on Westerners who tend to be disappointed by its lack of theoretical argumentation and 'rational' systematization. For the Master, when responding to the questions posed by his disciples, tends to perplex not only his readers but also his own disciples by being extremely laconic and vague. The clear expression of their perplexity in the *Analects* is certainly not without significance. Moreover, many of his answers also appear to be mere platitudes or tautologies, and he frequently responds differently to the same question on different occasions. There are some passages, however, where Confucius provides a hint of an explanation, or at least a rationale, for his own method. For example: 'If, when showing [the students] one corner and they do not return with the other three, I do not repeat myself' (*Analects*: 7.8).

Confucius's ideal students are those who elaborate on his laconic 'hints' and succeed in drawing the whole picture. On one occasion he discusses some sayings with his disciple Zigong who subsequently illustrates the Master's answer with an appropriate quote from the ancient Chinese *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經). Confucius responds to Zigong's performance by praising him for being able to infer what follows from the point he himself made initially (*Analects*: 1.15). This, however, does not mean that Confucius is fishing for one particular answer, that the 'other three corners' are already established and need merely be discovered. Nor is it the point, important in Plato's *Meno* and common in contemporary pedagogic theory, that making the students go through the entire process for realizing the answer will help them acquire a better and fuller understanding of the issue than if they were simply provided with the answer. The method of 'hinting' certainly serves the purpose of motivating the students to critically reflect on the issue and develop their own understanding of it. But the key point consists precisely in 'their own understanding'.

In a particular section on learning or education in the *Book of Rites*, this hinting-method is spelled out even more clearly:

When exemplary persons have realized the sources for successful teaching, as well as the sources that make it of no effect, they are capable of teaching others. Thus, when exemplary persons teach, they lead and do not herd, they motivate and do not discourage, initiate but do not proceed to the end. Leading without herding results in harmony; motivating without discouraging results in ease; initiating without proceeding to the end results in reflection. Harmony, ease and reflection characterize efficient teaching. ... Good singers induce people to carry on developing the tunes. Good teachers induce people to carry on developing the ideas. Their words are few but efficient, plain but outstanding, with few illustrations but instructive. Thus they are said to carry on developing the ideas. (*Liji zhijie* 2000: 291)

For Confucians, knowledge and wisdom are understood principally as the ability to handle affairs efficiently. Therefore, education will necessarily revolve largely around ways in which how best to enable the student to develop skills to manage real affairs. A

performative mode of education, a mode in which the student gains firsthand experience, is therefore emphasized even more than the verbal mode. After all, as quoted in the aforementioned section on learning in the *Book of Rites*, ‘teaching is [only] the half of learning’ (*Liji zhijie* 2000: 288). The point of Confucius’s vague hints is to make his disciples ponder his words, develop their own understanding, and then act on that understanding, not least by practising propriety and social etiquette. Knowledge or understanding must also lead to action.

For this reason, education is to a significant extent left to the students themselves. It is only through self-education or self-cultivation, the kind of education that must never come to an end, as Xunzi says in his opening passage, that we may hope that society keeps developing and adapting to the always unpredictable forces of circumstances.

Human beings are not capable of resolving adequately all the difficulties that meet them in life. Some things are clearly beyond their control. But an important aspect of every situation, an aspect over which one can have control, is one’s own response or contribution to it. In order to improve oneself in life, one needs to ponder one’s responses and think what one could have done better. Such reflexive self-critique is likely to engender positive transformations. Its success is not certain, but it is the best we have. In any case, a lack of self-critical reflection is certain not to lead to any improvements: we will then not learn from our mistakes. In this particular respect, Confucianism aligns itself with the pragmatic tradition as summarized by Brookfield above. As a matter of fact, Confucianism has often been positively compared with the philosophy of American pragmatists such as William James and in particular John Dewey (cf. Hall and Ames 1987; Tan 2003; Ames 2011; Sigurðsson 2015). Unfortunately, this aspect cannot be discussed to any length here. As an example par excellence of the educational process of self-critique, Confucius seems to have cultivated himself to such an extent that he achieved a spontaneous and rather carefree relationship with his surroundings: ‘The Master said: “When I was fifteen, my heart was set on learning; at thirty, I took my stance; at forty, I was no longer perplexed; at fifty, I had realized the heavenly forces of circumstance; at sixty, my ear was attuned; at seventy, I could give my thoughts and feelings free rein without overstepping the boundaries”’ (*Analects*: 2.4).

Now, what remains is to make a brief comparison with Western educational theories that possibly resonate with the Confucian mode of thinking. Although Confucianism has had a strong impact on primary education in China and elsewhere in East Asia throughout the centuries, it is notable that Confucius’s own disciples were already (probably young) adults. Thus, a comparison with tertiary education today makes sense from at least this particular perspective.

The five perspectives included in the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (TPI 2001–2014) developed by Pratt and Collins are quite helpful in this respect. It turns out that the Confucian ‘transformative self-critical attitude’ overlaps with at least three of the five perspectives, namely the Developmental, the Apprenticeship and the Social Reform perspectives. This is especially interesting considering the fact that Confucianism is normally held to be narrowly limited to the Transmission perspective in which teachers ‘pass along (teach) a common body of knowledge and way of thinking similar to what is in the text or the teacher’ (Pratt 2002: 7). Certainly, particular political and social circumstances in the Ming and Qing dynasties (16th–19th centuries) had the effect that Confucian approaches to learning were impoverished and largely reduced to memorizing, rote and surface learning, which I have touched upon elsewhere (cf. Sigurðsson 2010: 69–70), but this is far from being the case in the early Confucian philosophy.

The Developmental perspective takes it as the main goal of education ‘to develop increasingly complex and sophisticated ways of reasoning and problem solving within a content area or field of practice’ (Pratt 2002: 8). The Confucian way admittedly takes a broader view and does not limit itself to a certain content area. The task is to develop as a socially adept human being. This is by far the most important goal of education. However, it accords with this perspective in many ways, e.g. by having as its goal ‘to change the way learners think rather than increase their store of knowledge’ (Pratt 2002: 8) and ‘that learners construct their understanding rather than reproduce the teacher’s understanding’ (Pratt 2002: 8). As Confucius complains on one occasion of his disciple Yan Hui: ‘Hui is of no help to me. There is nothing I say with which he disagrees’ (*Analects*: 11.4). As Pratt (2002: 9) remarks, ‘[i]t is not easy to teach from this perspective’ as it ‘is difficult to refrain from telling learners rather than letting them figure it out from themselves... Indeed, from this perspective, sometimes less (telling) means more (learning)’. Moreover, it is Deweyan in the sense that it is supposed to build on the particular experience that each student already has, and must thus be individually oriented. As Dewey (1944: 343) once wrote: “‘Reason’ is just the ability to bring the subject matter of prior experience to bear to perceive the significance of the subject matter of a new experience. A person is reasonable in the degree in which he is habitually open to seeing an event which immediately strikes his senses not as an isolated thing but in its connection with the common experience of mankind’. In order to count as reasonable, the person must be habitually open; it must be a lasting disposition and not merely a single whim.

The Apprenticeship perspective has to do with the ‘development of skilled competence’ (Pratt 2002: 9) but is also ‘the transformation of the learners’ identity that occurs as they adopt the language, values, and practices of a specific social group’ (Pratt 2002: 10). This is in line with Confucius’s performative mode of teaching as briefly mentioned above and powerfully implemented in the practice of propriety and quasi-formalized social skills. One’s knowledge reveals itself in action, in what and how one does what one does, but the knowledge or understanding is also developed through the acts themselves. This is what Dewey (1934: 44) calls ‘doing and undergoing’, or gaining transformative experience through action and interaction. In more detail, he says: ‘Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication’ (Dewey 1934: 22).

Lastly, the Social Reform perspective is very much at play in early Confucianism. If this perspective entails working ‘toward a set of ideals’ as Pratt (2002: 13) contends, it conforms to Confucianism in the sense that the overall aim of the latter is to reform individuals in order to produce a well-functioning society. Thus, it breaks down the dualism between the collective and the individual inherent in the Western Social Reform perspective’s contention that the ‘collective, rather than the individual, is the object of change’ (Pratt 2002, 13). Instead, Confucianism sees these aspects as two sides of the same coin. Individuals reform themselves by productively and creatively participating in the collective. In the *Analects*, Confucius describes persons of the high moral ability termed ‘humane’ (ren 仁) as those who ‘establish themselves by establishing others and promote themselves by promoting others. To be able to correlate one’s conduct with those who are close could be said to be the method of becoming a humane person’ (*Analects*: 6.30). The following discussion, the only passage in the *Analects* where self-cultivation (*xiuji* 修己) is explicitly mentioned, is even more illuminating:

Zilu inquired about exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子). The Master replied: ‘By cultivating themselves, they are respectful.’ ‘Is that all?’ asked Zilu. The Master replied: ‘By cultivating themselves, they bring accord to others.’ ‘Is that all?’ asked Zilu. The Master replied: ‘By cultivating themselves, they bring accord to all people. Even a Yao or a Shun [famous Confucian cultural heroes] would find such a task extremely hard.’ (*Analects*: 14.42)

Confucian self-cultivation means cultivating oneself as a responsible social human being. It is essentially a cultivation of relationships. I cultivate myself as a father, son, uncle, husband, teacher, or even simply a social citizen, all of which are roles that require important social interaction. It would be hard to see how such cultivation would fail to contribute to at least a slightly better society. Today we tend to turn much of our attention to the lot of those who live in distant societies while people may at the same time be suffering virtually in our own backyard. Confucians would agree with glocalism, that we must act locally while thinking globally. We must start at home in order to start somewhere. Morality begins with face-to-face interaction. As Levinas (1969: 245) remarked: ‘To utter “I,” to affirm the irreducible singularity in which the apology is pursued, means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I’. Face to face with other people, we must learn respect, humility and not least empathy: to put ourselves in other people’s *shu* 恕. We cannot always assume to know what other people are thinking, feeling or what motivates them. We can certainly find ways to improve our sensibility, but we must always be open to the possibility that we might be wrong. Developing such skills improves ourselves, and if it does, it is at the same time also bound to improve our social surroundings.

Conclusion

I believe that I have demonstrated in this essay that early Confucianism contains strong, extensive and, from a Western perspective, even unique critical traits. Going back to Barnett’s points to which I referred at the beginning of “[Critical Thinking in the Confucian Tradition](#)” section, the early Confucian teachings contain, indeed emphasize, ‘critique in context’, and, with their stress on action and overall social development, should be interpreted as entailing a ‘wider concept of critical being’. Learning to be human is necessarily a critical task, but one that demands a continuous assessment of circumstances, configurations and situations in which the self is also an integral part no less than others. Therefore, critical scrutiny must also include the thinking and acting self: a self-critical element is wholly indispensable.

But learning to be human is also a never ending, in brief, a lifelong task. And, indeed, Confucianism takes education precisely to be lifelong learning. It therefore focuses on the development of a certain mode of living to which we should stick as we (are supposed to) continue to learn until the end of our days. The ‘transformative self-critical attitude’ is precisely such mode as it enables us to adapt to and respond appropriately and with humility to our social and natural environment. Education, in my view, not least tertiary education, should do just that.

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