

Ethics, Politics and Law:
East and West

Ed. by H.-C. Günther

East and West.
Philosophy, ethics, politics
and human rights

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Preface

The contributions collected in this volumes are partly lectures given at a Humboldt Conference in Prague in 2016 (Szelezák, von Senger, Blair/MacCormack, Günther1: a short version was published in H. Seubert (ed.), *Orte des Denkens*, Bautz 2017, 325ff., Scheerer), partly they are external contributions (Günther 2, Alam, Müller). Günther (3) is the keynote speech given at a symposium on terrorism in Meran, November 2015.

Müllheim, October 2018

Hans-Christian Günther

Thomas Alexander Szlezák

Change and Stability of the State in Confucius and Plato

Confucianism was the leading intellectual force in Chinese history, notwithstanding the existence of substantially different approaches to human life, to the state and to reality as a whole such as Taoism and Buddhism. And Confucianism developed soon after Confucius an orthodoxy which certainly underwent some changes, yet always tried to keep its identity through the centuries. The dominance of Confucianism was unchallenged for more than two millennia, once it had survived the attempt to burn all of its books and to extinguish the whole movement by killing its supporters in 213/212 B.C.

There was no comparable movement in Europe – unless we want to regard Christian religion, dogma and theology as a parallel phenomenon. Yet Christian religion and its clergy never dominated the states of the Middle Ages and of early modern times as completely as Confucianism did in China – temporal and clerical power remained always separate in Europe – , and the period of its undisputed intellectual leadership anyhow did not comprise two and a half millennia. Moreover, Confucianism was never a matter of faith, like Christian belief, but rather a matter of mentality and

argument.

So we should look for a European equivalent to the role Confucianism played in China not in the field of religion, but rather in the realm of philosophy. Here Platonism appears to be the most likely candidate. Of course the differences are enormous: there was never a state in Europe governed by philosophically trained Platonists, there was no unchallenged dominance of Platonism not even in philosophy – even in Neoplatonic times there existed a strong Aristotelean current –, let alone in society, politics and religion. Still Platonism was the only intellectual force in European history that emerged as the most fruitful and creative source of philosophical orientation even after periods of temporary neglect. And Plato was arguably the thinker who inspired more of the great philosophers than anyone else in the West and the one who had the most numerous and strongest renaissances.

When reading accounts of Confucius's life and philosophy, one feels constantly reminded of Plato – much more of him than of, say, Aristotle, or Plotinus or Kant or Hegel. The numerous similarities of their ethical outlook could lead us to the view that Plato and Confucius were – across the borders of history and geography – something like philosophical siblings, if not twins. Only when we ask for the ultimate driving force behind their ways to approach reality, we detect a deep discrepancy. It is the

incompatibility of Plato's metaphysical approach with the pragmatic, down-to earth approach of Kungfutse.

All the more surprising and significant is the fact that the two thinkers have very similar views on the necessity of a change of the corrupt states of their lifetimes and the stability of a future well-ordered state.

Let me first recall a few facts from the lives of the two philosophers, which can show that it does make sense to scrutinize them in a comparative perspective. On the one hand, the biographies of Plato and Confucius are utterly dissimilar, insofar as Plato stayed all his life (with the exception of three longer journeys) in his native city Athens, whereas Confucius wandered around in a number of states. On the other hand, there are some striking similarities. Both tried to be politically active, and both failed to achieve their political aims. Confucius had a personal desire to play an active role in contemporary politics and was finally Prime Minister in a minor state, whereas Plato was first urged by others, later prevented by again others, to become the leading philosophical adviser in the reform of the state of Syracuse (which was in his time the greatest military power in Greece). But quite apart from their unequal political ambitions, both thinkers were important theorists of education, indeed the greatest educational thinkers in the East and in the West. And both were

founders of important schools of higher education. Plato's foundation, the Academy, still gives the name to all kinds of institutions of research and higher education all over the world. Confucius instructed, according to the Shiki (Lin Yutang, *Konfuzius*, 1958, 69) up to 3000 disciples. Plato's School attracted a considerable number of important scientists and mathematicians. And both Schools were regarded as the appropriate philosophical preparation for future statesmen. Even the way how posterity dealt with Plato and with Confucius links them in a certain sense: these two thinkers, and only they, were later regarded as manifestations of the divine in the human world: Plato was declared son of Apollo right after his death, in Neoplatonic times he was referred to a *ho theios Platon*, the divine Plato, and at the end of Byzantine times he was portrayed, at least in one church in Epirus (NW Greece) as *ho hagios Platon*, Saint Plato. For Confucius there were in the beginning offerings at his grave, later a temple, then many temples in many places, and in modern times, many many centuries after his death, he was declared a god. This is certainly the highest honour posterity can bestow on a human (even the Pythagoreans regarded Pythagoras not as a god outright, but as a third kind between god and man,).

A good starting point for understanding what Confucius and Plato expected from a state as it should be are perhaps their

respective views on history and on their own times. For Confucius, his time was an utterly corrupt epoch. He shared the common Chinese belief that human civilization had been established many centuries ago by wise rulers, emperors and kings, who were models for all time to come and were later seen as holy men, as Saints. Their rule was characterized by a complete correspondence and harmony between Heaven and Ruler. Yet the harmonious order established by the early emperors had in the course of history collapsed more than once, then built up again. Confucius travelled in his long life through nine provinces. Nowhere he could find acceptable political conditions. So he conceived a programme of developing a new education – but not by starting afresh, as if nothing had been achieved in former times. On the contrary, his aim was to renew the old moral and social order by collecting and editing the texts of the old Chinese tradition. Renewal of Antiquity was the programme – a procedure by which the old contents would themselves be turned into something new. The eternal truths were more in evidence, better visible in ancient times. The task was not to replace them by new insights, but to give them back their original force. This was no doubt one of the reasons why Confucius did not write treatises in his own name. Personal teaching without a written theoretical programme seemed to him more efficient for his aim of a moral

and political renewal.

Plato's judgement on his time, the late 5th and the first half of the 4th century B.C., was no more favourable than that of Confucius on the 6th century in China. According to Plato, all states in the Greek world are in evident disorder, in none of them has justice a chance to be realized. This desolate state of affairs is, however, precisely what had to be expected for the epoch in which we are living. In Plato's half-mythical philosophy of history, our world is necessarily in one of two alternating periods. When god governs the world, life for mankind is easy. It is the time which Greek mythology believed to be the time of the government of the god Kronos, father of Zeus, the present holder of power in heaven and earth. But after myriads of years, „when the circuits of the universe have completed the measure of time allotted to it“, god lets it go (Politicus 269 c5). The world is thus left alone, governed by its own original forces and impulses, by its innate desire (*symphytos epithymia*, 272 e6), which would lead it finally to the dissolution of all order and make it „sink into the boundless sea of unlikeness“ (273 d6). Yet before that would happen, god takes over government again. Our present time is part of the god-forsaken period. We are heading for disaster, not knowing when god will step in to rescue his world.

This picture of a continuous deterioration of the moral

status of societies and states is combined, in Plato's philosophy of history, with a theory of progress in the arts, or *technai*, i.e. in the field of technical knowledge of any kind. The more societies deviate from ancestral simplicity, truthfulness and harmony, the more their needs and desires and greed grow, and with their desires also their ability to fulfill them. Plato would never deny that there is ample technical progress amidst the ubiquitous social, political and moral decline. As to philosophy, we have received from the gods one basic insight which serves as a starting point for a meaningful analysis of reality. The people of old, who were superior to us, since they lived nearer to the gods, bequeathed us the knowledge they had got as a gift of the gods to mankind, namely the fundamental truth that all existing things consist of one and many (of *hen kai polla*) and that they have innate limit and unlimitedness in their nature (Phil. 16 c7-10). From this starting point a philosophical method can be developed, which Plato calls dialectic, a method that is able to disclose the true nature of all things and guide human mind to the full recognition of the essence of the Good, which is for him the principle of all reality. In spite of his belief that the decisive insight about the constitution of all reality by the one and the many is a heritage from the people of old – the *palaioi* –, Plato is not concerned with the renewal of older philosophical literature. His *palaioi* mean obviously the

Pythagoreans, but Plato would not restore or comment writings of Pythagoras (if there were any) or his disciples, he rather construes his new dialectical philosophy which he propagates and divulges in a great number of dialogues, all of which have fortunately survived to our times.

The concept of human nature is certainly not identical in Confucius and Plato, but on the other hand not wholly dissimilar either. What is common to both thinkers is the conviction that the natural endowment or desires and impulses of man have to be ordered rather than overcome or eliminated. Education has to bring the better impulses to the fore and repress as far as possible negative tendencies. For Confucius, truth is already available (through the morality established by the kings of old), we just have to seize it and make it our own. Learning is for him much more important than trying to find new results. Moral perfectioning is the precondition of learning. This basic activity, learning, is conceived mainly as a task for the male – one does not find in Confucius the idea that females can reach the same results in learning and all other fields as men can. But individuals, male or female, do not experience themselves as accomplished persons. Man in general has to grow and to strive in order to become man in the full sense. He has to find his true self.

Confucius distinguishes four types of character. Those who

possess all virtues and knowledge by birth can be called Saints. He has not seen such persons himself, we read somewhere in the Lunyu, but they existed in antiquity. Then there are those who are willing and able to acquire knowledge by learning. This is the character of the noble man (kiün-tse). Next to him are those who find learning difficult, but still strive to achieve knowledge and to improve. A fourth character type does not care for true knowledge, does not even try to acquire it. The first and last types are what they are: the first one does not need to change since it has reached perfection, the last one is unable to change. The two types in the middle have their own dynamics, they necessarily experience progress and at times also failure (K. Jaspers, *Die großen Philosophen*, I 1959, 169). Notwithstanding his unending attempt to improve, the wise and noble man will never achieve perfect and complete knowledge, which is unattainable for man (except for the Saint).

When we turn now to Plato, we find again that human nature is not something that we should leave behind us – that would be impossible. The task is to establish the right balance between the heterogenous forces that constitute human soul. Soul has, in Plato's philosophy (psychology), three 'parts' which are in constant conflict: the lowest part or *epithymetikon* consists of the bodily desires (*epithymiai*), which try to dominate the whole soul;

the middle part, called *thymodeides*, is characterized by more noble emotions, such as a sense of justice, but also of ambition; the highest part Plato calls the *logistikon*, or thinking soul; it is of divine origin and by its very nature superior to the other two parts. The aim of moral education and of moral behaviour is to guarantee the dominance of reason in the soul over ambitions and desires. This means to restore the natural order of human nature.

Truth is available for mankind, it is contained in the unchanging relationships in the cosmos of the ideas. The task is to seize these eternal truths by approaching the ideal world by way of dialectical research. This is extremely difficult, only very few persons are able to grasp what an idea is. But contrary to Confucius Plato holds that perfect and complete knowledge of the essence of reality is attainable for man, and moreover that both men and women can reach this ultimate goal of mankind. For Plato too moral improvement is an indispensable precondition of philosophically relevant learning. Only by such learning man becomes man in the full sense, i.e. realizes his full potential. And on this way he gets to know his true self, which is identical with the divine upper part of his soul. Those who live a philosophical life, i.e. those who are able to grasp the ideas and pursue dialectical research, are as high above common people as Confucius's wise and noble men are above people who do not even

strive to acquire knowledge. Between the philosopher who attains moral perfection and knows in what it consists, and the man with no moral ambition at all, Plato acknowledges as a third type the man who attains civic virtue by behaving reliably in a correct way, though not knowing why he does what he does.

The attitude to religion that follows from their views on the nature of man, his aims and duties, is with both thinkers a conservative one. For Confucius, the offerings and rites have to be observed, they guarantee family cohesion and help to maintain inner calm. Confucius was far from initiating a religious revolution. Anything of this kind would have been foreign to his frame of mind and to his temper, and moreover he certainly knew that a sudden turnover in religious matters would entail the turnover of the state as well. He does not seem to have been a religious thinker, he offers no specific religious message, neither a positive nor a critical one (except that he keeps away from superstition, magic and sorcery).

In sharp contrast to Confucius, Plato was a genuinely religious thinker. Nowhere in Plato can one read longer passages without being confronted with words like 'god' or 'divine' (*theos* or *theios*). His last word concerning this whole complex is that god is for us the measure of all things (Laws 716 c4).

But did he not introduce new religious concepts fighting the

Greek religious tradition? What Plato criticized was the theology of the poets, which comprized among others the belief that the gods could be the source of evil for humans, as in Aeschylus's famous verse „a god makes mortals guilty when he wants utterly to destroy a house“, quoted by Plato in the *Republic* (380 a). But Plato nowhere attacked the state religion of his city. One could argue that in his programmatic „Apology of Socrates“ he defends a man who was sentenced for his deviation from state religion, thus launching an indirect attack on Athenian religion. But the Platonic Socrates denies any intention to change anything in existent religious practice and claims rigorously that his creed is unambiguously consistent with the official religion, the rites of which he had always observed. Moreover, he claims that his philosophical activity is something Apollo requires him to do and that his whole life as a philosopher is service to the god of clearness and truth. This was new, but could not be taken as directed against the Delphic Apollo religion, rather as an attempt to support it. In his dialogues, Plato makes the leading dialecticians like Socrates or Timaeus pray for help from the gods. And the essence of Timaeus's cosmological account is that god created the best world possible and that he cares for mankind. Nearer to popular religion is the advice of deification of philosopher kings after their death, dedicating them a state cult – provided Apollo

allows it through his oracle at Delphi (Rep. 540 bc). In the Laws Apollo, god of light, clarity and pureness, is the constantly mentioned and invoked highest authority. – All this is not to deny that it is extremely difficult to pin down Plato's personal religion, since in the dialogues he never speaks in his own name but makes various figures of dialecticians utter their views (which are, however, not contradictory).

On the background of the views and attitudes discussed so far on history, on the nature of man and on religion we can now try to sketch briefly what our two philosophers said about politics and the state. That there is no clear distinction in Confucius between state and society (in the sense modern sociologists and political analysts regard state and society as two separate, though related entities) is a common place. In Plato, this is less evident. When he describes, e.g., the various moral dangers which are likely to corrupt a talented young philosopher in Athens (Rep. 48.), or when he enumerates in the Apology interlocutors of different professions whom Socrates tried to convince of the necessity of philosophical knowledge of oneself, he is concerned with Athenian society rather than with the state. Certainly both philosophers are convinced that the presence of virtuous leaders at the top of the state will ensure a higher level of virtue in the population (in Plato: Epist. 7, 335 c -336 b). Consequently, both think it indispensable

that the adviser of kings (in China) or the philosopher kings (in Plato's future ideal state) are up to the highest moral standards.

Laws are necessary, but *per se* they are not of great value. It is the morality of those who behave as law-abiding citizens which makes the difference. It is the *yen*, which is in Confucius something like morality, at the same time humanity, or the essence of man, which gives the laws their value. The man with the right attitude to his family, to his fellow-citizens and to the state will do what is morally required even without the instructions of the law. This truly Confucian view is pushed even further by Plato's vision of an ideal state in which the philosophers would rule without laws, just by their insight and their ability to communicate to their subjects what they think is good for the state.

The population as a whole, the many or the crowd, can be educated to obey the rulers and the state employees. But they will never understand the essence of ethics. Here again we find full agreement between Confucius and Plato. Understanding reality in general, and of ethics in particular, is for Plato a matter of knowing the difference between the idea, which is eternal and changeless and independent of human cognition, and the temporal instantiations of the idea, which are subject to change in time and will ultimately perish. This distinction is, as mentioned above, according to Plato not only inaccessible to the understanding of the