
A CONFUCIAN ACCOUNT OF CONTEMPLATION-IN-ACTION

儒家著作中的“在行动中默观”

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ABSTRACT

Philosophically speaking, “to contemplate” is to think deeply about an issue or to consider something at length. “Contemplation” in the Aristotelian tradition is understood to involve an elevated intellectual state and it leads a human being to the activity of happiness. The object of contemplation can refer to the nature of the good or even the virtues. The outline and objectives of Confucian contemplative practice can be found in the classical Chinese text *Zhongyong* (Central and Constant). The purpose of Confucian spirituality is to become a *junzi* (noble person) and this is achieved by the practice of *shendu* (being careful about one’s inner self). Gao Panlong’s reflections on *jingzuo* (quiet-sitting) serve as the theoretical basis for showing how Confucian contemplative practice promotes moral excellence in the ordinary affairs of professional life. A comparative approach is employed in this paper in order to use the conceptual framework from the *Nicomachean Ethics* to re-construct an account of contemplation-in-action as found in the *Zhongyong* and the *Jingzuoshuo* (Treatise on Quiet-Sitting). Specifically, it is argued that the Aristotelian notions of “contemplation” and “action” are analogous to the corresponding Confucian concepts of *jing* (stillness) and *dong* (movement).

CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION IN THE *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

The ancient Greek thinker Aristotle (384-322 BCE) discusses the notions of “contemplation” and “action” in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As a noun, θεωρία *theōria* (contemplation) of something involves “looking at it, examining it carefully, and seeing the answer” (Irwin, 1999, p. 349). As a verb, θεωρεῖν *theōrein* (to contemplate) refers to the kind of theoretical study “that comes closest to meeting the conditions for complete happiness” (Irwin, 1999, p. 350). In Aristotle’s usage, the meaning of

“contemplation” includes studying, observing and attending to something. In its broadest sense, the noun πράξις *praxis* (action) refers to what can be intentionally achieved by one’s own effort. More narrowly, it refers to what is done based on a rational decision. In its narrowest sense, it refers to what is done rationally for its own sake (Irwin, 1999, p. 315). On this account, “action” is directed towards εὐπραξία *eupraxia* (doing well or acting well) (Irwin, 1999, p. 315). Hence the verb πράττειν *prattein* (to act) refers to doing or achieving something.

The nature of happiness as an activity is explained in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

We said, then, that happiness is not a state. For if it were, someone might have it and yet be asleep for his whole life, living the life of a plant, or suffer the greatest misfortunes. If we do not approve of this, we count happiness as an activity rather than a state, as we said before. (1176a34-1176b2)

According to Aristotle, ἐνέργεια *energeia* (activity) can be understood in two senses. On the one hand, “first activity” refers to possession of the power to perform an act. Possession of a soul is an example of first activity. On the other hand, “second activity” refers to the actual performance of an act. Happiness is an example of a second activity of the soul. It is worth noting that happiness is not a state because a state is a first activity (Irwin, 1999, pp. 315-316). Thus the noun “activity” refers to the actualisation or realisation of a subject’s capacity for something. In addition, an intimate relationship between contemplation and happiness for the human being is expressed in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

If happiness is activity in accord with virtue, it is reasonable for it to accord with the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing. The best is understanding, or whatever else seems to be the natural ruler and leader, and to understand what is fine and divine, by being itself either divine or the most divine element in us. Hence complete happiness will be its activity in accord with its proper virtue; and we have said

that this activity is the activity of study. (1177a11-18)

In Aristotle’s usage, εὐδαιμονία *eudaimonia* (happiness) is identified with the highest human good. Happiness is the ultimate end of human life because it is complete and comprehensive in itself (Irwin, 1999, p. 333). So being happy is closely associated with living well or doing well.

From the Aristotelian point of view, contemplation is the study of something for the sake of understanding and it produces theoretical knowledge, understood as knowledge for its own sake. The act of contemplation requires that one’s attention is directed *outwards* and it is a pre-requisite for action. In its strictest sense, action refers to doing something *intentionally* and choosing to do it *rationally* for its own sake. On this account, contemplation creates the conditions necessary for a human being to pursue the activity of happiness, understood in terms of living or acting well. Therefore, the contemplative-in-action refers to a person who grasps the nature of reality through observation and examination. This comprehension of reality enables the person to make good decisions in order to act well and attain a good life.

COMPARING THE ARISTOTELIAN AND CONFUCIAN WORLDVIEWS

In the Greek worldview articulated by the Aristotelian tradition, the notion of “being” enjoys a certain priority over “becoming”. Things in the world which are in a state of change ultimately have to fulfil their end by achieving a state of stability. In contrast, the Chinese worldview found in the Confucian tradition tends to prioritise “becoming” over “being”. Things in the world never achieve a state of stability. They are always seen to be in a state of transition and so they undergo constant change. This understanding is expressed in terms of 陰陽 *yin-yang* which serve as co-principles underlying the nature of reality. On this account, the element of *yin* is constantly changing to the co-related *yang*, and the element of *yang* is always becoming *yin* at the same time. Thus the 易經 *Yijing* (Book of Changes) presents a system of orientation and divination that allows

human beings to navigate their way through their experiences of the dynamic nature of their existence in the world (Ames and Hall, 2001, p. 10).

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As a text written with the *yin-yang* cosmology in mind, the 中庸 *Zhongyong* (Central and Constant) aims to show how the activity of 中 *zhong* (the mean) can produce the state of 和 *he* (harmony) within the world of dynamism.¹ Human perception and evaluation bring a sense of focus to the affairs of the world which undergo constant change. This is because human beings aim to produce equilibrium in their dealings with others, the larger society and even the natural world. The application of 中 *zhong* (the mean) is in the area of 庸 *yong* (the ordinary) (Ames and Hall, 2001, p. 86). Hence the spiritual practice of 中庸 *zhongyong* can be described as the activity of practising the mean during one's considerations and decision-making in ordinary human affairs, especially those involving one's personal and professional life. Due to the constraints of this paper, the following discussion of spiritual practice and human nature in classical Confucianism will only take into account the traditional canon 四書 *Sishu* (the Four Books) as interpreted by Tu Wei-ming: 大學 *Daxue* (Greater Learning), 論語 *Lunyu* (Analects), 孟子 *Mengzi* (Mencius) and 中庸 *Zhongyong*.

1 James Legge translated 中庸 *Zhongyong* as "The Doctrine of the Mean" in 1861 and changed it to "The State of Equilibrium & Harmony" in 1885. The translation by Ian Johnston and Wang Ping as "Central and Constant" is preferable as it captures the meaning of the two Chinese characters more accurately. Tu Wei-ming translates it as "Centrality and Commonality".

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE IN THE *ZHONGYONG*

The principles and outline of Confucian contemplative practice are concisely captured in the first chapter of the *Zhongyong*:

What Heaven decrees is called "nature"; complying with nature is called "the Way"; regulating the Way is called "teaching." The Way is something that cannot be deviated from, even for an instant; what can be deviated from is not the Way. This is why the noble man is on guard and cautious about what he does not see; it is why he is fearful and apprehensive about what he does not hear. There is nothing more visible than what is hidden; there is nothing more apparent than what is obscure. Therefore, the noble man is careful about his inner self. When joy and anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet arisen, call it "the centre." When they have arisen, and yet are all in perfect balance, call it "harmony." Being in "the centre" is the great foundation of the world; being in "harmony" is the all-pervading Way of the world. Reach "the centre" and "harmony," and Heaven and earth are in their positions and the ten thousand things are brought forth. (Johnston and Wang, 2012, p. 407)

A central objective of Confucian spirituality is for a human being to become a 君子 *junzi* (noble person). In the *Zhongyong*, a noble person is presented as someone whose life displays the most profound meaning of being human. As already mentioned above, this meaning is always to be sought in the midst of the ordinary affairs of daily life. The noble person trusts in human nature which is an endowment from Heaven. The Way that human beings must follow in the world is easily identifiable and open to all because it is to be found by being in accordance with human nature. All that is required of human beings is to practise self-cultivation through a process of receiving moral instruction (Tu, 1989, p. 23). It is a given that all human beings already possess the ability to pursue self-actualisation by following

the Way. This is because the noble person is simply being true to the human nature endowed by Heaven. Put simply, the noble person follows the Way by using the mean as a spiritual practice and achieves the goal of harmony in the ordinary affairs of daily life. Hence a person develops nobility of character by consistently acting according to the principle of the mean (Tu, 1989, p. 24).

According to the *Zhongyong*, the foundation of following the Way is the contemplative practice of 慎獨 *shendu* (being careful about one's inner self). In the Confucian worldview, knowing what is individual to oneself is the key to knowing what is universal to all. The noble person plumbs the depths of human personality by growth in awareness of one's own interior life so that one may follow the Way which is in accordance with human nature. The examination of one's interior life is to gain the necessary understanding of one's own personality for the purpose of self-cultivation. At the same time, the understanding of one's own nature as a human being produces knowledge of others in the world because human nature is universal. The practice of being careful about one's inner self "is

directed *inwards* and it is necessary for grasping human nature. The objectives of contemplation include attaining centeredness and harmony within oneself. Becoming *centred* means to retain inner tranquillity before one's emotions are aroused. Becoming *in harmony* means to have one's emotions in a state of balance after they have been aroused. On this account, contemplation creates the conditions necessary for a human being to pursue the Way by employing the mean to achieve goodness in ordinary human activity. Therefore, the contemplative-in-action is understood as a person who grasps the nature of humanity through self-examination. This comprehension of human nature enables the person to make right decisions in order to act well and attain what is beneficial to one's personal and professional life. Recent research has been conducted on the experiential dimension of Confucian spirituality with reference to the notion of selfhood (Yao, 2008) and the place of Confucian values in spiritual leadership with reference to organisational behaviour (Hunsaker, 2017). Now that the relevance of Confucianism to discussions on spirituality and leadership has been noted, the next step is to re-construct a

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personal and not subjectivistic. The assumption is that when a person is perceptive of the subtle manifestations of his inner feelings, he is, at the same time, particularly sensitive to the world out there" (Tu, 1989, p. 26). In other words, *shendu* is indeed personal as it relates to one's own particular life experience. But it is not merely subjective because it does go beyond one's own feelings and opinions.

From the Confucian point of view, contemplation is attending to one's interior life for the sake of self-understanding and it produces knowledge of one's own nature. The act of contemplation requires that one's attention is

Confucian account of contemplation and action.

CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION IN THE JINGZUOSHUO

The neo-Confucian scholar 高攀龍 Gao Panlong (1562-1626 CE) presents the principles and objectives of contemplative practice in a clear and concise text titled 靜坐說 *Jingzuoshuo* (Treatise on Quiet-Sitting).

"Normalcy" and "ordinariness" – we must never downplay these two words! They express our essential living-substance; and because it is clear and

pure, unperturbed by anything, we call it normal-and-ordinary. Before a single stroke is written down, the *Change* is as such; before a person is born with a quiet disposition, [the world] is as such; and when delight, anger, sorrow and joy have yet to be aroused, [human beings] are also as such. This is, in fact, the innate pattern-principle of *Tian*. Each individual must immerse themselves in it and nurture it, for it is the way of self-fulfillment. (Gao, 2018, p. 28)

Confucian contemplative practice needs to be seen as a response to the *yin-yang* cosmology explained above. Human affairs are always in a state of transition and things that constantly change are sources of distraction and confusion. For Gao, to contemplate means to return to stillness and calmness within oneself in a normal and ordinary manner. Following the classical Confucian stress on 庸 *yong* (the ordinary), he teaches that contemplation does not involve any special or extraordinary techniques. Instead it is quite simply to bring oneself to stillness in a way that is 平常 *pingchang* (normal and ordinary). By practising 靜坐 *jingzuo* (quiet-sitting), one comes into contact with the disposition given by 天 *tian* (Heaven) which is originally quiet or tranquil. This form of contemplative practice allows for one to come to terms with one's inner human nature.

To proceed from stillness to movement, we need only to move with this clarity in a normal-and-ordinary way, for periods of stillness and periods of movement should be the same, and periods of movements and periods of stillness should be the same. They should be the same because that which is universal (i.e., our essential living-substance) is also called normal-and-ordinary, and therefore, is not limited to either stillness or movement. Scholars merely use quiet-sitting to recognize their living-substance, which neither remains still nor moves. Being strengthened within stillness is how we are genuinely strengthened in our movement; and being strengthened within movement is

how we are genuinely strengthened in our stillness. (Gao, 2018, p. 29)

Since things in the world are never found in a state of stability, human beings have to confront this reality with activity that is fluid and dynamic. Gao understands contemplation and action in terms of 靜 *jing* (stillness) and 動 *dong* (movement). The relationship between contemplation (stillness) and action (movement) is described as one of mutual dependence. The transition from contemplation to action is performed in a normal and ordinary way. Through contemplation, one comes into contact with one's human personality which is originally good in nature. One is enabled to live well by choosing actions which are in accordance with the goodness of one's human nature. Living well then reinforces the goodness of one's personality encountered through contemplation. On this account, there is a reciprocal relationship between contemplation and action.

Confucian contemplative practice enhances self-understanding regarding the goodness inherent in human nature. Following the Way reinforces this self-understanding by means of a life marked by wise decisions which lead to good actions. Contemplation and action enjoy a relationship of mutual dependence and enhancement. Being a contemplative-in-action in the Confucian tradition can be understood in terms of *yin-yang*, the co-principles of how human beings experience reality and manage their lives. From this perspective, the element of *yin* is traditionally considered passivity while the co-related element of *yang* is understood as activity. Thus the *yin* of stillness (contemplation) produces the knowledge that brings oneself to the *yang* of exterior movement (action). In turn the aspect of *yang* as movement (action) inevitably augments the element of *yin* as interior stillness (contemplation).

From a comparative perspective, the two spiritual practices have been presented as strategies designed for human beings to cope with divergent worldviews. Given the limitations of every philosophical and cultural context, one may argue that the two traditions of spirituality are complementary and even

mutually illuminating. On the one hand, the Aristotelian tradition highlights the stable nature of reality by recognising that all contingent things eventually achieve their own objective. On this account, the meaning of contemplation is to observe the *external* world in order to prepare oneself for action and this is achieved by study. One's rational decisions and intentional plans for action depend on one's theoretical knowledge of *objective* reality because the nature of the world is seen in terms of its stability. On the other hand, the Confucian tradition emphasises the unstable nature of reality by recognising that all things are in a perpetual state of flux. On this account, the meaning of contemplation is to attend to the *internal* world in order to prepare oneself for action and this is achieved by quiet-sitting. One's initial tranquillity and subsequent harmonious emotional state depend on one's experiential knowledge of *subjective* reality because the nature of the human being is seen in terms of its original goodness.



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