

COLLEGE GUILD

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PHILOSOPHY

Unit 5 of 6

Ethics to Politics

Just to recap our journey thus far, we've been to Plato's cave, Kant's office and Descartes' living room to learn about metaphysics, epistemology and ethics respectively.

Ethics comes from the Greek word "ethos" which means "character". In the last unit we talked about the two main ways ethics is understood: consequentialism and deontology. For the ancient Greeks, ethics had to do with developing a virtuous character. They believed that if you develop such a character, you will not only know the right thing to do, but you will also do it. They called this "virtue" ethics.

Interestingly enough, a similar idea can be traced to ancient China as well. We are now going to see how ethics and politics are deeply connected by going to China and studying the work of Confucius, a Chinese philosopher who lived from around 551 BCE – 479 BCE.

Confucius was a Chinese teacher, editor, politician and philosopher. He emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice, and sincerity. Confucius's principles are understood to have a basis in common Chinese tradition and belief. He is traditionally known for championing strong family loyalty, ancestor worship, respect of elders by their children, and of husbands by their wives. He also recommended family as a basis for ideal government. He adopted the well-known principle "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself", an early version of the Golden Rule. His words were, *What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.*

1. How is the Golden Rule a useful tool in human relationships? How about in government? In the criminal justice system?

The *Analects*, also known as the *Analects of Confucius*, is the collection of sayings and ideas attributed to Confucius and his contemporaries, traditionally believed to have been written by Confucius' followers around 500 BCE. The *Analects* is just one of four books collected by Zhu Xi, who helped canonize Confucius's thoughts during the Song Dynasty (960-1297).

Here is a fragment from the *Analects* on cultivating one's moral compass in everyday life:

1.4 Zengi said, Everyday I examine my own person on three counts: In working on behalf of others, have I failed to be true to myself? In my associations with friends, have I failed to be true to my word? As for what has been passed on to me, have I failed to rehearse it?

2. What are some values or "virtues" you can identify from the above quote? Which virtues do you think are particularly important to leading an ethical life?

Zhu Xi's interpretation of Confucius's ethical doctrine were included in the civil service examination in China, showing the philosopher's enduring political influence. The term **politics** refers to any sphere in which power relations between various individuals and groups are worked out. Through this definition, politics bleed into many aspects of our everyday life such as interactions between parents and children, teachers and students, and even between friends and people on the street. However, in this case, we are mainly looking at the role Confucius's ethical thought has in government.

Below are some passages in the *Analects* that talk about civil service positions:

4.14 *The Master said, Do not be concerned that you have no position, be concerned that you have what it takes to merit a position. Do not be concerned that no one recognizes you, seek that which is worthy of recognition.*

4.17 *The Master said, When you see a worthy, think of becoming equal to him; when you see an unworthy person, survey yourself within.*

3. Please explain what Confucius is advocating here. How would you summarize his message?

4. What common problem in politics is the *Analects* speaking to here?

Here is a fragment from the *Analects* on the importance of filial piety or loyalty to one's father.

4.18 *The Master said, When one has several times urged one's parents, observe their intentions; if they are not inclined to follow your urgings, maintain respectfulness and do not disobey; labor on their behalf and bear no complaint.*

5. Why do you think strong family structure was thought as a good basis for government? Do you agree with Confucius?

Another element of Confucius's ethics is a sense of the tragic. He often looks to the past as a time of moral exemplars while he views his present time as one riddled with chaos that can only be remedied temporarily with the structure of participating in rituals.

6. How would participating in rituals contribute to a more ethical society?

Perhaps the fragment from the *Analects* below is most evocative of the ethical worldview Confucius held:

4.25 *The Master said, Virtue is never alone; it always has neighbors.*

7. Can you untangle this simple, but profound quote? What are some different ways we can understand Confucius's meaning here?

8. Instead of giving maxims or codes of conduct to live by, Confucius prefers a one on one approach where he gives different responses to people who may ask the exact same question? Why do you think Confucius used this approach?

One way political power is achieved is through education. By having people share the same community standards and culture through a uniform education, states can form unity and a sense of identity that leads to shared governance.

In this way education is deeply tied with politics for both insidious and empowering reasons. Without education, citizens would not know how to form ethical governments that respect the rights of its citizens. Philosophy of education draws from all three branches of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. It addresses methods of teaching (pedagogy) as well as education policy and courses of study (curriculum). Some questions asked are: "What makes up a child's upbringing and education?", "What are the values and norms revealed through educational practices?", and "What are the limits of education?"

Philosophy of education is not easily defined because of the multitude of ways of understanding education combined with the many approaches of philosophy.

9. Tell your story about an educational experience where you thrived academically and/or personally.

10. Tell your story about an education experience that was not so pleasant.

11. Who was your favorite teacher and why was he/she special to you?

We will look at several theories of learning through philosophical history.

Plato (424 BCE – 347 BCE): Plato advocated removing children from their mothers' care and raising them as wards of the state. Education included learning facts, skills, physical disciplines, and music and art. A child's education would be directed toward specific aspects of society and designed to train and blend gentle and strong qualities in the individual to create a harmonious person. Both boys and girls would receive the same kind of education.

John Locke (1632 – 1704): Locke believed that the mind is a "tabula rasa" or blank sheet until experience in the form of sensation and reflection provide the basic materials — simple ideas — out of which most of our more complex knowledge is constructed. He argued that the "association of ideas" that one makes when young is more important than those made later in life because they determine who one becomes as a person. Locke's philosophy also developed into the later discipline of psychology.

John Dewey (1859 – 1952): Dewey believed that education was important in order for society to continue on. He was against authoritarian, strict teaching which was concerned with delivering knowledge and not enough with understanding students' actual experiences. He believed that students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum, and that all students should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning.

Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952): Montessori felt children should be given freedom in an environment prepared with materials designed for their self-directed learning activity. Teachers observe children to bring about, sustain, and support their true, natural way of being. Montessori schools are still in existence today and are popular. Classrooms are mixed in age, students choose learning activities within a preset range of options, and they are given uninterrupted blocks of work time.

Paulo Friere (1921 – 1997): A Brazilian, Friere was committed to the cause of educating the impoverished people of his country. He believed that learning was reciprocal (concerning two or more individuals) between teacher and students, where the teacher learned from the students as well as taught. Emphasis is on student-teacher dialogue.

12. Make a chart. Choose three of these educational philosophers and write what you think is a positive trait and a negative trait of their theory.

13. What do you think is the best way to educate a child from birth through 18? (In other words, this is your personal philosophy of education.)

During Confucius's time, the Zhou Dynasty (1122–256 BCE), education was centered on the six arts: rites, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and mathematics.

In the *Analects*, you can see a glimpse of this in the following passage:

3.23 *The Master instructed the Music Master of Lu: "The pattern of music is something we can understand. Music commences with unison, and then follows with harmony, each line clearly heard, moving in sequence towards the coda."*

14. Why do you think musical education was emphasized? How does it contribute to Confucius's ethical outlook?

15. Why do you think importance of the arts in education has declined in our time?

In our next unit, we will be further exploring the arts and its relation to philosophy through the field of aesthetics. We will be returning to Germany to take a look at the theory of a philosopher named G.W.F. Hegel who proposed a sweeping theory on Western art.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes