CONFUCIUS ON EDUCATIONAL FAILURE: THREE TYPES OF MISGUIDED STUDENTS

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Abstract. In this essay David Black claims that, if one pieces together the many sketches of educational decorum found in the Confucian Analects, one will discover three types of misguided student; that is, one will come to recognize that Confucius admonishes three types of insensitive learners who, due to the lure of personal advantage and social rhetoric, begin to mismanage the exchanges of respect particular to the educational process. These students misappropriate key rituals of decorum and dialogue, and consequently create a degree of disorder that, for Confucius, actually threatens the existence of civil society.

The Confucian Analects is a crafted collection of aphorisms, short narratives, and illustrations that have come to symbolize the spirit of Confucianism, even though Confucius himself had little to do with the actual production of the text. The document was compiled and edited by his disciples over an extended period of time and likely includes the philosophical conjecture of individuals who were either interpreting or expanding upon the ideas of the great sage. As a consequence of this, we cannot know in certain and precise terms what the historical Confucius taught; but we do know that the Analects — a compendium of ideas that was likely put into its existing form more than 200 years after the dates of Confucius's own philosophical activity — stands within academia as the most referenced repository of Confucian thought.

The content of the Analects is often studied for its social, ethical, and political instruction. However, it can be argued that Confucius was, more than anything else, a philosopher of education. He held a particular interest in exploring the subtleties of the student–teacher relationship and was determined to clarify the dispositions or habits of character appropriate to the quintessential "teacher" and "student." Unwilling to reduce ethics to a set of abstract principles, Confucius taught that moral excellence was achieved through the practice of behavioral dialogues; in other words, a humane or virtuous disposition was expressed through prescribed exchanges of respect that would be performed ritualistically between cultured individuals. Among other things, these rituals of respect highlighted the fact that different people occupied differing stations and offices in life, and, because of their unique and varying responsibilities, people needed to be treated with graduated levels of respect. Consequently, the educational setting served as a prominent place wherein one could both learn and embrace the minutiae of these social relationships.

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who, due to the lure of personal advantage or social rhetoric, begin to mismanage the exchanges of respect particular to the educational process. This academic mismanagement causes these students to misappropriate the rituals of decorum, thus creating a degree of disorder that, for Confucius, actually threatens the existence of civil society.

In order to appreciate this rather dramatic Confucian contention, one needs to take two fundamental steps. First of all, one must understand the function of a moral reconstruction practice Confucius calls the “rectification of names.” The rectification of names is a reformative morality, but it is not simply an intellectual corrective. As I will describe in the next section, this rectification initiative is a large-scale social adjustment process that recommends not merely a tutelage in theory, but a precision adaptation in the everyday comportment and demeanor of individuals. Once one understands this “rectification” activity in its general context, one can then pursue, as the second step of understanding, a more focused study of how the failure to rectify the specific names we apply to “students” leads to educational corruption. Let us attempt each of these tasks in turn.

Rectification of Names

When challenged by a disciple, Confucius once remarked that the top priority of a government would be to lead the charge in the “rectification of names” (CA, 13.3). In his Short History of Chinese Philosophy, Fung Yu-lan explains that this Confucian rectification of names is grounded in the basic recognition that “every name contains implications which constitute the essence of that class of things to which the name applies. Such things, therefore, should agree with this ideal essence.”

Working within the confines of this general assumption, Confucius generally limits his discussion to a relatively small category of names. He is not concerned, for example, with the names we might assign to inanimate objects or the purely denotative names we could associate with a game or a placid weather pattern. He instead focuses on the names we assign to classes of people and to the institutions and traditions such people represent — and even here he seems most concerned not with just any group of people but only with those individuals holding a certain status or social station in life. Although a measure of social chaos might arise if one began to refer to ground beef as “sushi” instead of “hamburger,” the truth is that our civilization could probably come to accommodate this change without turning the world on its head. Confucius is much more concerned with a class of names

the misapplication of which could actually damage the nerve center of culture. He points out that among the many names we apply to people, there are certain names — such as ruler, father, son, friend — that are morally charged and that, in addition to serving an indexical function, carry a strong connotation of practical wisdom.

In this respect, Confucius teaches that certain names project a consummate and internally disciplined meaning that transcends the conventional and commonplace usage of the name. Whenever a society modifies unreflectively its social and political landscape, these morally charged names tend to disconnect from their intrinsic intent and become identical with their conventional application. Confucius expresses strong objection to this when he says, “Let a ruler be a ruler, a subject be a subject, a father be a father, and a son a son” (CA, 12.11).

It is perfectly possible that the names of “ruler” or “teacher” can be applied to individuals by edict, diploma, or even right of birth; but, for Confucius, these names always connote an ideal pattern of behavior that is embedded in their meticulous usage and that allows “a ruler to be a ruler.” Confucius would say that if we are going to be honest in our use of language, then names such as those specified above should be applied to persons only when such individuals embody a particular level of socially responsible behavior, only when they have achieved a certain level of, not merely knowledge, but civility. We run a danger when we begin to apply a name to simply anyone who has achieved a recognized social standing or who has met in some superficial manner the standards of their society’s definition of a term. Instead, the names of ruler, teacher, student, parent, child — along with various titles of official office — ultimately refer only to a prescribed set of conscientious individuals who have developed a palpable depth of character and a self-consistent social demeanor.

When Confucius warned his student that the “rectification of names” was of paramount concern, the disciple reacted with puzzlement and asked, “Why should we rectify names?” The Master replied,

> How uncivilized you are. With regard to what he does not understand the gentleman is surely somewhat reluctant to offer an opinion. If names are not rectified, then words are not appropriate. If words are not appropriate, then deeds are not accomplished. If deeds are not accomplished, then the rites and music do not flourish. If the rites and music do not flourish, then punishments do not hit the mark. If punishments do not hit the mark, then people have nowhere to put hand and foot. So when a gentleman names something, the name can definitely be used in speech; and when he says something, it can definitely be put into practice. In his utterances, the gentleman is not casual about anything. (CA, 13.3)

This reply is not only castigating in its tone but rich with meaning. The key point here is that “civilized” individuals recognize that certain words carry more dignity than do the persons using them. In other words, Confucius unpacks the organizing premise of his argument when, at the conclusion of the preceding passage, he points out that the gentleman is “not casual about anything” (CA, 13.3).³ This comment is absolutely pivotal and should not be overlooked. It

³. Note how this passage dovetails nicely with earlier lines in this quotation where Confucius speaks about “how uncivilized” his student is and how “in regard to what he does not understand
conveys much about the profound respect for language that drives Confucian philosophy. Confucius is asking us to understand that the names we use are more than simply tools to be manipulated for our own profit or amusement. A civilized society will notice that the foundational meanings attached to these names are not conversational conveniences but wellsprings of moral instruction.

Nevertheless, since humans have a practical control over words, the usage of a name can be easily contorted so as to accommodate disreputable behaviors that an inattentive society associates unwittingly with a word. Confucius, of course, suggests that this is precisely the opposite of the practice that should exist. In other words, the rectification of names asserts that it is the social behaviors, not the words, that need to be adjusted. Our individual actions need to be rectified with a word's ideal meaning. In fact, once this happens, society can actually operate with less bureaucracy and legal intervention. This is why Confucius claims, “if one's character is rectified then things will get done without orders being issued” (CA, 13.6). This imperative to rectify names arises mainly within an uncivilized society, where names have lost their connection to their progenitive moral energy and have become neutralized into a merely customary or courtesy usage. For Confucius, it is the ideal and not the real sense of the name that one should associate with the truth. In other words, even though facts necessarily change, the civilized society adjusts facts in accordance with truth, instead of adjusting truth to stand in line with the facts.

In the mind of Confucius, the most important names find their ideal meaning in what is for the most part a historically based narrative. Confucius believed that the quintessential application of a name is significantly reminiscent of some antique or original usage of the word. When considering this Confucian respect for etymology and history, we should not conclude that the Confucian account of language is insensitive to necessary evolution. The point here is not that the full meaning of words is forever fixed. Confucius certainly understands that inevitable mutations arise within any living language. He recognizes that words need to adjust portions of their meaning to stay in step with the best aspects of cultural change. However, he wants such growth to be measured and appropriate. He supports innovation and cultural progress, but careful readers need to remember that, very early on in the Analects, he also urges us to “keep the old warm” when “understanding the new” (CA, 2.11).

Clearly, the meaning of a given name is in some degree tied to its social context, but this does not mean that the word’s reference range is infinitely flexible. Confucius would maintain that the meanings of certain names are attached to a historical anchor. These names will surrender their moral potency
when — through our disrespect for established language and ritual behavior — the names start to float free from their inherent tether. Although the precise usage of any name may need to change from time to time, Confucius warns that names should not grow so much that they abrogate their essence. By way of example, one could point out that there is indeed much about the meaning of "student" that is tied to cultural context and even to narrative place. The title of "student" cannot possibly be applied today in exactly the same way it was applied in ancient times.

However, the Confucian point is that the most meaningful names in cultural history have a theme that accompanies their variations, and a problem arises when the inevitable variations start to displace the theme. This is why he says, in the passage quoted previously, that we must keep the "old warm" even when we pursue the new. When morally charged names become free-range beasts and set about bucking on their own, without memory of their ideal and originative context, Confucius would claim that these names lose touch with humane exigency. Certainly, one might pursue new ways of being a student — that is, one might try to become an innovative species within the genus — but Confucius would insist that, when one moves in such a direction, one must also maintain respect for the long-term rigor and genesis of the name.

We note that in the world of music, for example, there can be cadenzas and inventive variations on a melodic theme, but to maintain musical harmony there must in the end be a theme to which these variations speak. There must be some definitive hub on some wheel to which they all point. Otherwise, the variations are variations no longer; they either become musically inept or develop into independent motifs.

Thus the call by Confucius for a rectification of names arises as a response to the demoralization of language. Names need to be rectified whenever the conventional sense of a name becomes disassociated with that name's primary moral imperative. As mentioned earlier, when a culture stagnates or degenerates, the prevailing usage of certain names may change in order to accommodate or rationalize the degeneration of that culture's character. However, what is even more troubling for Confucius is that the conventional usage tends to take precedence over the name's orienting meaning. Consequently, a relativistic realism robs names of their inherent idealism. It strips from them their natural humanism and steals from them their rightful dignity. The crucial point is that this less disciplined application drains from the names their inspirational character. This happens because society starts to apply the titles in a more egalitarian and less hierarchical manner. When it does this, it takes into account only part of the genuine meaning of the name; moreover, because this new definition does not include the name's restrictive ideal dimension, society is now able to use that term with a greater range of reference.

Confucius was concerned with praxis. He writes, "The failure to cultivate virtue, the failure to put into practice what I have learnt, hearing what is right and being unable to move toward it, being unable to change is not good — these are my worries" (CA, 7.3). In this respect, the bottom-line issue for Confucius is that the
misuse of names creates a stultifying social apathy that promotes cultural decay. In other words, because these reconstituted names persist with an incomplete definition, they can be applied to more individuals and to more types of behavior. However, when names begin to refer to so much, they end up referring to very little. These less restrictive names, unconstrained by the full implications of their ideal meaning, become morally impotent and confusion besets the kingdom.

Perhaps the best way to understand the rectification of names is to consider it in relation to an instructive distinction Confucius employs throughout the Analects. He attempts to distinguish between what he calls the junzi (noble or superior person) and the xiao ren (literally, the “small man”).4 One could say that small people are simply those who live within a small definition of their names. They live within the conventional but not within the moral sense of their title. We can thus say that small-minded people do not attune their behaviors with the full meaning of their names. One might act, for example, as a “merchant” in the conventional sense of the name by buying and selling goods at a profit. Yet this person might at the same time ignore the wider duties that necessarily accompany the full title of a socially responsible merchant. Thus, we can say that one becomes a virtuous, humane, or superior person to the degree that one recognizes and acts in accord with the full meaning of one’s name.

We should at this point note that Confucius never, in any explicit sense, places the names “teacher” and “student” on an official list of titles to be rectified, but the need for such rectification is certainly implied in much of what he says throughout the Analects. In fact, the respected Confucian scholar Chen Jingpan has already written a book that does an excellent job of describing Confucius as a “teacher.”5 By its own implications, this book goes a long way toward suggesting how the title of teacher might be rectified, even though Chen does not take up this task in a direct or detailed manner. As a potential complement to that important text, this essay will concentrate on the alternate side of the educational relationship and attempt to explain why Confucius would include the overused title of “student” among those names that should be subject to periodic rectification.

I will highlight three categories of students who are, at different points in the Analects, admonished by Confucius. These reputed students pursue their education as misguided learners because they fail to live up to the mandate of their name. They place their own narrowly focused agenda ahead of the practice of being a student in a complete sense. They function instead within the small and more conventional sense of their names.

However, if we cannot call these alleged learners students in a genuine sense, what titles should we apply to them? Once again, Confucius does

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4. There are many passages throughout the Analects where Confucius delineates the specific differences between the junzi and the xiao ren. See, for example, 4.11, 4.16, 4.24, 7.37, 12.16, 13.25, 13.26, 14.23, 15.21, 15.34, and 19.8.

not provide specific names for these misguided students, but I think there is evidence in the *Analects* that suggests how we might identify them. I propose that we refer to each respectively as the *flatterer*, the *dilettante*, and the *doctrinaire*.

**THREE DEFICIENT AMBITIONS**

The *flatterer* is quite simply the student who treats education as a means for social climbing or for obtaining a credential to advance in a specialized vocation. This student can be seen as a flatterer in the sense that he or she tells teachers what those teachers want to hear. Confucius best expresses his dismay with the flatterer, when he laments that “those who studied in ancient times were doing so on their own behalf, but those who study today are doing so for the sake of others” (*CA*, 14.24). The flatterer wants to provide others with, at least, the credible illusion of some practicable social skill. However, what is most important about these students is that the type of approbation they receive from others is anchored in appearance as much as worthiness. The flatterer’s commitment to rote realism does not really endorse any course of study as self-justifying. It instead pursues a “bulimic” view of education wherein information is, for the moment, ingested to please others but is then regurgitated before it is fully digested, analyzed, or absorbed. This is how students often circumvent genuine encounters with learning while pursuing the credentialing process that passes for schooling in our modern times.

Flatterers pursue self-interest but not education. They seek not the transformation of their character, but the transference of marketable rhetoric. These are the young persons who, in the eyes of in Confucius, “have brilliantly perfected their accomplishments, but do know not how to tailor them” (*CA*, 5.22). These are individuals who act with a minimal sense of shame but remain true “professionals” in the eyes of their society. A perfection of “accomplishments” can thus be attributed to those who have secured the proper training, the requisite techniques, and even the charismatic guile needed for a quick ascent into instrumental power. But when Confucius laments that the “gentlemen” of his times did not know how to “tailor” their accomplishments, he means that the humanistic adjustments of disposition that come from ritualistic self-discipline — and that create a respect for the moral well-being of the social whole — have gone missing in the educational evolution of these underdeveloped gentlemen.

The fully tailored citizen makes sincere use of language. Consequently, it is this “tailoring” or this “fitting” process, and not merely the instrumental value of their training, that makes civilized gentlemen worthy of holding an official position. The demoralized language employed by these unworthy overachievers wears away at their sense of discernment. Flatterers thus mistake “social advancement” for “self-development.” For them, nearly all words are reduced to their bureaucratic function, even words that should in their traditional use invoke a sense of the transcendent — a sense, that is, of the marvelous and the venerable — now
become tools for discussing the merely immanent, efficacious, or convenient. This misdirection of words is accompanied by the flatterer’s persistent manipulation of social ritual and courtesy. Such abuse of language and social propriety was thoroughly repugnant to Confucius. In fact, it is not a stretch to say that such thoughtless manipulation of traditionally venerated cultural practice would have been, in the eyes of Confucius, so reprehensible and singularly repulsive that it would have been tantamount to someone in the Judeo-Christian tradition using a crucifix to stir a can of paint.

Nevertheless, these insensitive acts began to prevail among a populace that was motivated more and more by monetary gain. Indeed, one should note that the concern for financial security was present even in the precapitalist world of the Zhou dynasty. Confucius himself pointed out that it “is not easy to find anyone who has studied for three years and is not intent on salary” (CA, 8.12). This is why Confucius might place the flatterers of the world among those who “study” but do not “think” (CA, 2.15). In their worst incarnation, such students develop into meretricious courtiers who pander amorally to the less developed tastes of a society.

In stark contrast with the people-pleasing flatterer, the second type of misguided student, the dilettante, is a self-indulgent learner, a narcissistic collector of superficial information and jargon. For this misdirected student, education is a means for projecting a contrived image of learnedness, a means for floating oneself out there like the fly-hook on a trout angler’s line. Confucius is speaking about these dilettantes when he chastises those who “pretend to possess things they do not have [and] pretend to be full when they are empty” (CA, 7.26). There is actually a degree of hedonism present here because the dilettante finds considerable pleasure in the activity of artificial learning.

Dilettantes often trot out their affected vocabulary and stylized methodology for purely aesthetic reasons or for the mere gratification of sounding like an

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6. Certainly, this dearth of respect for the marvelous and for the venerable encumbers our contemporary use of language. When people lose touch with the deeper meaning of words — when they overlook a word’s focal and singular essence — they tend to convert those words into terms that serve the superficial agenda of the hedonistic and self-serving activities that demoralized language supports. Consider, for example, today’s extraordinarily pedestrian usage of the term “awesome,” a word that is in itself historically and etymologically rich with venerable and inspirational overtones. If we remained cognizant of these overtones, we would understand that one really stands in “awe” only when one is transfixed by overwhelming feelings of fear, piety, or reverence for the numinous and the transcendent. Now, drained of its magnificence, the word awesome has found expression in the most un-awesome of situations. Today, someone might say, “What an awesome blazer you are wearing.” Or, when an exuberant sports fan proclaims, “I am going to watch the county bobsled competition,” we will probably hear some well-meaning interlocutor respond, “Awesome, dude!”

7. Understanding the difference between “study” and “thinking” — that is, the difference between absorption of information and meditative reflection — is crucial to understanding the Confucian account of self-cultivation. Neither study nor thinking can replicate the other, and yet their relationship is for the most part symbiotic. A more detailed discussion of the Confucian perception of study, thinking, and how these two differ will be developed in the third section of this essay.
“educated” person. However, Confucius warns, “If one is outwardly fierce but inwardly feeble, one may be compared to the small man. In fact, isn’t one just like a burglar making a hole through the wall?” (CA, 17.10). These dilettantes adopt dishonestly the countenance of a learned individual, but try to sidestep the human mandate for internal discipline. They posture like peacocks with feathers fanned, engaging in behavior for its pyrotechnic effects. However, they do not grasp the nuance of their own intellectually loaded words. Unlike the flatterer, these students may not endear themselves to others. Consequently, they may not be in line for the sought-after job or distinguished promotion that is granted to the dedicated flatterer. However, social acceptance is not the goal here; it is likely that true dilettantes would actually be dismayed if the general populace celebrated their usually haughty activities. If the pretentious members of this misguided group seek to impress anyone, they wish to gain the favor only of others like themselves.

The dilettante and the flatterer share one important characteristic. Both are quite obsessed with appearance. Those of small vision cannot imagine themselves in the world of genuine humanity and consequently find gratification only in the superficial enterprise of external decoration. This characteristic alone disturbs Confucius who points out that “clever words and a plausible appearance have seldom turned out to be humane” (CA, 7.15). Yet even in their polished appearance there is a critical difference between the flatterer and the dilettante. Flatterers shape themselves by adopting instrumental appearances that defer to utility and social logistics; in other words, the flatters are quite purposive in their activity and set their plans in accord with an organized agenda. They would never pursue appearance for the sake of appearance. Flatterers always construct their illusions under the guidance of a practical directive. Meanwhile, dilettantes pursue, not the appearance of utility, but rather the illusion of learnedness or sophistication, defining success not so much by becoming a leader of mainstream consciousness but by establishing an external image that would grant them membership in a cult of the educational elite.

This focus on appearance places both the dilettante and the flatterer in contrast with the third category of misguided student — the doctrinaire. The doctrinaire studies out of a purely theoretical motivation. This type of student grasps effectively the connotation of deep explanatory principles and thus develops a much more profound acquaintance with the landscape of learnedness than either the flatterer or the dilettante. Unlike the dilettante, such students do not necessarily pursue knowledge for pleasure or for show; they seek substantial discipline and meticulous structure. The problem is that the discipline they seek is essentially mental and decidedly abstract. The knowledge they possess fades away when it cannot find its place in the context of culture. Confucius warns, “if knowledge attains something and humaneness cannot safeguard it, then one is bound to lose it even if one has got hold of it” (CA, 15.33). Doctrinaires know the ends, but not the means. They could, for example, explain precisely why a given mechanism works the way it does, but they might not be able to operate the mechanism itself, much like an individual who could, for instance, describe
the principles of an internal combustion engine and yet not know how to operate a power lawnmower or chain saw. The doctrinaires are mind without body; they are consciousness without ritual; they are loci of understanding without instrumentality. They embrace truth but lack social propriety and a sense of the larger community. They revel in the sterile development of unapplied expertise.

In a somewhat cryptic passage, Confucius admonishes doctrinaire scholars because they “treat investigation as understanding” (CA, 17.22). What he wants us to see here is that formal investigation and inferential study is, at best, a prelude to genuine understanding. Authentic understanding involves, not merely a knowledge base, but also a full and conscientious comprehension of how that knowledge finds its affective place within the communal structures of human respect. Intellectual investigation produces important information, and perhaps even academic certainty, but it does not necessarily produce civility or sagacity. This is because one fully understands the imperative relevance of investigative inquiry only when one knows how to locate it within the cultural pursuit of happiness. In the mind of Confucius, one comes to fully “understand” some learned truth only when one sees the footprint of such truth in meaningful social practice.

The doctrinaires, thus, master the complicated categories of causality but struggle with the invigorating rhetoric and ritual needed to express truth in a productive cultural context. In effect, they are inept in bringing their ideas to market. The rigor of their logic is flawless, and their methodologies are impeccably designed; but these academics lack grace. In the moral sphere, they can discern the logic of responsibility but cannot actualize the exemplary life. They lack sensitivity to the ceremonial and customary practices of human existence, and this often leads these academics into unseemly behavior. Confucius states, “if one does not understand the rites, one has no means for taking a stand” (CA, 20.3). Put bluntly, the doctrinaires apply the coarse brush of conceptual clarity to the delicate fabric of social decency. These individuals can explain the mechanics and essence of virtue. Yet, due to their ineptitude with ritual, they never realize in their everyday actions the particulars of their theories. They cannot connect apodictic truth with social conscience.

Each of these three types of students represents a distinct educational failure, according to Confucius, because each lacks, in one form or another, a genuine connection to what Confucius views as the foremost educational virtue — sincerity. In fact, the virtue of sincerity is bedrock in all spheres of Confucian philosophy [see CA, 19.6, 7.25, and 11.19]. Problems of the worst kind arise when insincerity is directed toward the practice of ritual. Confucius reminds us that “the gentleman is ashamed when his words have outstripped his deeds” (CA, 14.27). Perhaps the flatterer and dilettante know something of the practice of ritual, but their conformity with such social custom is usually superficial or manipulative.

8. The notion of “sincerity” or “good will” [as it is alternatively translated] appears more than twenty times within the short space of the Analects.
The doctrinaire is insincere as well, but in a different manner. Doctrinaires do not misrepresent themselves or manipulate their education as a means for social gain. They are insincere in the sense that they do not place the full weight of themselves behind their activity: they seek cultivation by using their minds alone; they dip their toes into the water of self-cultivation but never fully submerge themselves in their total social development. They lack a form of courage and are thus not what they purport to be.

However, we must recognize that the different expressions of insincerity associated with these various categories of student are not identical. They produce different types of poison. And, for Confucius, the most distressing form of insincerity rests in the acts of the flatterers who are so consumed by the utilitarian mindset that they view ritual and decorum simply as tools for manipulating the emotions and opinions of others rather than respecting these rituals as intrinsically meritorious practices that deepen one’s sense of humanity and conscience. Confucius states, for example, that “the full observance of the ritual in serving a ruler is regarded by others as sycophancy” (CA, 3.18). The mainstream populace was beginning to see the venerable courtesies of traditional Chinese culture only in their utilitarian light. People began to pursue, not moral excellence, but distinguished reputation. Yet “the man of reputation,” as Confucius laments, “assumes an air of humaneness although his conduct belies it, and he does not feel any misgivings about persisting in this” (CA, 12.20).

**The Quintessential Student**

We might be able to sharpen our vision of the three types of misguided student by now sketching more fully the Confucian picture of the genuine student. What, for example, would Confucius consider to be the essential characteristics of an ideal student, of a student unencumbered by ulterior motives and manipulative aims?

If one tucked one’s tongue tightly into one’s cheek, this question could be answered by noting that the principal components of a Confucian curriculum were ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and computation.9 Needless to say, these areas of study would not match up well with the core subject matter of a modern liberal arts curriculum. However, it is clear from this list that Confucian education was designed to transform the whole student. David Hall and Roger Ames summarize this point well when they observe that Confucius perceived learning “as an enterprise which engaged a person both mentally and physically, both cognitively and experientially.”10

The genuine student thus pursues not only a diversified but also a wholehearted commitment to self-development. Full-scale devotion to learning is more than a tangential characteristic of sincere students. Even in the language of Western culture, the etymology of the word “student” is connected to the Latin

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10. Ibid.
The notion of *studium*, which suggests the traits of enthusiasm and zeal. In this respect, the genuine pupil will be at the very least “diligent and fond of learning” and will not be “ashamed to ask questions of those beneath him” (*CA*, 5.15). But beyond this, one can see that, for Confucius, the genuine student actually possesses the virtue that all three of the misguided students lack; that is, the truly humane student acts with *sincerity*. In all of its scattered accounts of meaningful study, Confucian philosophy places sincerity at the absolute center of the description. To take one example, consider this declaration: “If one studies widely and is *sincere* in one’s purpose, and if one enquires *earnestly* and reflects on what is at hand, then humanness is to be found among such activities” (*CA*, 19.6, emphasis added).

In his sincerity-grounded education, Confucius focused only on that which would elevate us into a full state of civilized behavior. As Hall and Ames explain, Confucius was “anxious to distinguish the appropriation of culture from that of functional, instrumental knowledge.” Similarly, in his older yet still important book *Confucius as a Teacher*, Chen Jingpan notes that learning, according to Confucius, is pursued for “self-cultivation and not for the praise of others; for practical conduct, and not for empty talk.” Chen points out that Confucius would instruct the dedicated student to “love learning by living a *simple* life, practicing earnestly what he has learned.” To this Chen adds that the dedicated student “should study extensively, and love the true learning. He should not speak more than he is able to fulfill, and he should also be ready to be rectified by good teachers, and constrained by the virtues.” Yet, even more significantly, Chen points out that Confucius believed model students “should not be diverted by any difficult condition in life.” In fact, the proper student should become especially humble and particularly wary in three situations: [1] when feeling “indignant,” [2] when aroused by “anger,” and [3] when facing “opportunities for gain” (*CA*, 16.10). In other words, these are the three moments when one is most likely to lose one’s educational focus. All of this suggests that education involves much more than the mere acquisition of knowledge. Abstract knowledge understood apart from the humanizing factors of sincerity and conscience works against the preservation of community. Better for one to learn nothing than to learn in a disingenuous manner. In Chen’s words, “knowledge without virtue is undesirable.”

In the education of the self, therefore, we attempt to approach not merely a personal but also a social ideal. As Tu Wei-ming points out, “Confucian self-cultivation presupposes that the self worth cultivating is never the private possession of a single individual but a sharable experience that underlies common

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11. Ibid., 46.
13. Ibid., 183 [emphasis added].
15. Ibid.
humanity.’’\textsuperscript{16} This depiction of the self as a necessarily interpersonal entity, suggests that the self is not a true self until it is fully enlarged and opened outward toward the world. In this process, self-cultivation happens essentially for its own sake, as a teleological realization of our universal humanity. Tu goes on to reinforce the points made by Chen when he writes, “self-cultivation is an end rather than a means; learning motivated by reasons other than self-knowledge, such as fame, position, and wealth, cannot be considered true learning.’’\textsuperscript{17}

Finally, in addition to the rigorous commitment to sincerity and appropriation of culture, there are at least two more tasks that were apparently assigned to the authentic Confucian student: (1) developing a “memory of debt,” and (2) promoting academic balance.

First, to speak about developing a “memory of debt” is to suggest that the truly educable mind recognizes that we are all deeply parasitic upon a significant context of history and culture that makes possible our own individual activity. Even the most independently motivated and naturally gifted persons we can imagine have stood on the shoulders of others and used objects of nature to get where they are — even persons who claim that they are “self-made” have built their achievement on the sacrifices of previous generations. Such individuals have, for example, benefited from the acts of selfless soldiers who died to save their countries; they have also taken advantage of the labor of social pioneers who constructed roadways, set up commerce, and drafted laws that govern their cities and provide protection and freedom of activity. By invoking this memory of debt, the educable student develops a disposition of humility and gratitude. In this respect, self-cultivation is seen not as an option but as a duty; it is seen as a significant part of one’s pietistic practice of payback, and it engenders a sense of shame rather than the sense of entitlement and privilege produced by the credentialing process.

Along with fostering this memory of debt and maintaining humility in one’s practice of learning, Confucius would argue that genuine students also strike an academic balance in their activity. By academic balance Confucius does not mean merely a proper coordination among subject matters, but also a balance in the way one connects with a subject. In other words, he teaches that the genuine student always strikes an educational mean between, on the one hand, working as an isolated collector of memorabilia and facts, and, on the other hand, acting as an inner-directed person of solitary reflection who believes that truth can be generated from within the individual and that meaningful learning is possible without knowledge of human history and social arts. Confucius expresses quite succinctly the dangers in failing to observe this mean. In one famous passage he


\textsuperscript{17.} Ibid., 56.
says, “if one studies but does not think, one is caught in a trap. If one thinks but does not study, one is in peril” (*CA*, 2.15).

When considering this passage, it is best to remember the particular ways in which “study” differs from “thinking” in a Confucian conception of education. The activity of study includes not only a focused and disciplined effort to absorb and retain crucial information, but also a meaningful quest to adopt in one’s everyday life the socially acceptable courtesies and customs of a civil culture. Traditional Confucian study always included the careful review of great historical texts — such as the *Book of Senses*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of Ritual*, and so on — texts that represented, within the Confucian school, a virtual warehouse of humane ideals. In this context, study was indeed rote, but it was never passive or disinterested; neither was it simply mental. Regular participation in athletic activity, singing in communion with others, and the daily practice of social graces were all a part of what Confucius meant by “study.”

However, if study is the careful ingestion of culture, “thinking” can be seen as the digestive component. Thought provides the analysis, the critical reflection that is needed, according to Confucius, to “break down” what one has swallowed. Such thinking not only allows one to fit one’s learning to one’s time and circumstance, but it also protects one from authoritative manipulation. In other words, the practice of thinking also helps one notice when the leadership of a kingdom has wandered astray and no longer warrants the submission of its subjects. Thus, to summarize the Confucian difference between study and thinking, one could say that the enterprise of study directs itself toward the “what” and “how” questions embedded in the execution of social behaviors, while thinking introduces the spirit of “why” into one’s reflections.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that the balance of thought and study is achieved by pursuing them in equal measure. Confucius would say that the young student must begin by allocating a majority of time toward study before moving toward the somewhat more secondary activity of thinking. This is so that students, when they begin to think, can direct their thinking into civilized matters and begin an analysis or reflection from the standpoint of the previously described memory of debt. Our thinking, however important, cannot be helter-skelter. It must flow from a highly integrated social and historical context; it must begin from an orienting place. In the mind of Confucius, this first place of thought can be established only through devoted study, only through a program of development that would include not only a review of classical texts, but also a careful emulation of the behaviors of those with good breeding. If we start our thinking too soon, or if we are not reserved in the expression of our personal opinion, then our thoughts are likely to be empty or injurious to others. Consequently, we find that the proper balance between study and thinking was, for Confucius, weighted to the side of the former. His most extreme expression of this preference for study appears in a passage where the Master says, “I once did not eat all day and did not sleep all night in order to think; but there was no benefit. It would have been better to study” (*CA*, 15.31).
This passage is certainly written with potent words, but we must not interpret them to mean that Confucius believed that all thought was futile. What Confucius is really trying to do by employing this strong statement is to caution the young thinker against formulating ethical beliefs from inner feelings alone. He is trying to warn the youthful mind that trusting one’s own instincts and untutored opinion can lead to social chaos. If we overdo this “inner” thinking about morals, we will make ethics too personal and relative; for Confucius, such private musing removes from one’s moral sphere the cultural mirror that individuals must use to see their human deficiencies. Indeed, he writes, “I have never come across anyone capable of discerning his errors and inwardly bringing himself to justice” (CA, 5.27, emphasis added).

In light of the preceding analysis, I think we can see that none of the three types of misguided student would have struck this proper mean between “thinking” and “studying.” Indeed, perhaps all of them miss the mark completely when it comes to either study or thinking. The flatterers are more like studiers than thinkers because they arbitrarily absorb information thoughtlessly without challenging its value or meaning. However, one should notice that there are also two senses in which flatterers are not true studiers at all: [1] what they memorize they soon forget, and [2] what they study is instrumentality, not conscience, not history, not laudatory behavior or great books. They pursue profit and not education. Meanwhile, the doctrinaires might study and think diligently; still, when they do either of these, their focus is limited to the merely academic range of life. They thus fail to either study or reflect upon the prudent structure of social customs and rhetorical practice. Finally, the dilettante neither studies nor thinks in any significant respect at all, and instead reduces both of these activities to their outer coating.

**Honor and the Dissipation of Ritual**

In conclusion, we might apply this Confucian analysis more directly to our present-day institutions of education. After all, if we consider honestly Confucius’s critique of the disingenuous learner, we must admit that all three types of misguided student would likely be counted among the “good” students of our own time. There are excellent grades and laudatory letters of reference awaiting the flatterer and the doctrinaire; and even the dilettantes, despite their shameless showboating, seem to find their share of admirers. The three types of misguided students populate the dean’s list at every college in the country. Gold tassels will dangle from their graduation caps. And much of this can be linked to our cultural failure to rectify names.

So why, in fact, do we as a culture fail in such rectification? What causes this demoralization of language? There are many possible answers to this question.  

18. Some Western thinkers have, like Confucius, addressed the demoralization of language, if in very different terms. Both Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, recognized the propensity of our ethical language to become empty and formal. More recently, Alasdair MacIntyre has offered a historicist account of such problems and argues that we lose touch with the potency of ethical words.
For Confucius, however, I think the answer is clear. He would say that we are in need of the rectification of names because our culture, like his own, has fallen out of touch with the practice of ritual. We no longer take as seriously as we perhaps once did the formalized gestures of bodily comportment, of supplication, and of veneration that were used to express respect and modesty, and that helped tame and direct our human spirit. We have separated ourselves from many of the imagination-based vehicles we once used to enliven our sensitivity and sense of self-control. For example, instead of using poetry and music to forge conscience and community, we now relegate these practices to the status of entertainment or fine art. Activities that used to involve the discipline of bodily muscles and perception have now been replaced with more abstract counterparts. We could note, for example, that our society no longer practices calligraphy and instead processes its words on a computer screen.

It is not by accident, then, that the Analects includes an entire “book” that does nothing more than recall and describe the Master’s various practice of rituals (CA, Book 10). Ritual is central to the Confucian perception of a “moral” culture. Confucius explains that human beings are in great degree ceremonial creatures.

because we live in an era of moral confusion engendered by liberal, capitalistic modernity. Within such a context, words are stripped of their ethical vibrancy and become functionalist entities, carved up by the alienating agendas of modern culture. However, such historicist accounts would not explain why Confucius observed the need for rectification of language in ancient China. It does, nevertheless, remain interesting to note that the philosophy of Confucius anticipates many of the points that would later be developed by MacIntyre. Confucius would certainly have appreciated, for example, MacIntyre’s claim that we today possess “simulacra of morality; we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have — very largely, if not entirely — lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.” Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 2.

19. Confucius asks, “If someone is not humane in spite of being a man, what has he to do with ritual?” (CA, 3.3). Elsewhere, the Master asserts that if a ruler “keeps order by means of ritual [people] will have a conscience” (CA, 2.3). And later he tells us that “one is aroused by the Songs, established by ritual, and perfected by music” (CA, 8.8). The student Yan Hui says that Confucius “skillfully lures people on step by step. He broadens me with culture and constrains me with ritual” (CA, 9.11). One note of caution: when interpreting the term “ritual” in the preceding passages, one must not be led astray by modern, demoralized understandings of ritual that often depict the practice as a mindless, mechanical, and rote procedure that can be performed without focus or commitment; in fact, we can say that Confucius’s entire philosophy is, in one sense, an attempt to address such empty sterilization of ritual and to bring human culture back into a sincere, concerted connection with ceremonial life. Ritual is a source of moderation and restraint, and Confucius points out that there “are few indeed who fail in something through exercising restraint” (CA, 4.23).

20. It is important to note that Confucius incorporated into his ensemble of rituals much more than simply the observances employed in a plainly religious or courtly ceremony, although these latter would have certainly been included in the fold. Confucian ritual measured social conscience in nearly all spheres of public and private life. For example, Book 10 highlights the following: the appropriate ritual for boarding a carriage, the preferred facial expressions used by gentlemen when speaking with superiors, and the proper way to hold the jade tablet; it also includes rituals for cooking, eating, sleeping, and purification; one finds accounts of how to enter a palace gateway, and how to stand, walk, and even how to breathe when ascending a formal stairway. All of this confirms the indubitale claim that matters of comportment were, for Confucius, integral to everyday existence and crucial in the process of self-cultivation.
In the absence of ritual, we lose our capacity to connect experientially with fundamental edicts of our conscience. Ritual, for Confucius, produces a sense of ethical equilibrium and makes adjustments between and among our emotions, instincts, and passions. In this way, it creates a palpable stasis within moral perceptions where chaos would otherwise exist. This conscientious equilibrium point or moral fulcrum is somewhat akin to the Aristotelian theory of the mean, but it is not exactly like it. Ritual brings mind back together with body; it helps place the abstract in the context of the concrete, giving birth to moderated dispositions.

In the current world of un-rectified education, we employ ritual infrequently and, even then, quite often in a mechanical fashion. In a world where students cannot find their motivation and inspiration within the sense of conscience developed through ritual, they have come to employ other motivators. It is fair to say, for example, that a contorted notion of honor has assumed a principal place among these new educational stimuli. Although it is common knowledge that most students are driven to do well in their classes because of the promised social and financial rewards they will receive as a return on their investment, the catalyst of honor now also plays a significant role, especially for those who do not want to say that they are going to school merely for the money.

While our contemporary perception of honor may not carry the same meaning and majesty associated with classical expressions of valor and esteem, we find that, at least, a reductive version of honor is now inseparably tied to our understanding of educational achievement. For example, honor is definitely on the minds of the flatterers because they live in an increasingly competitive world within which they are challenged to stand out. Needless to say, these “honor” students are not Confucian in their educational orientation; that is, we cannot conclude that these students are pursuing honor through an idealistic form of motivation. In fact, the contemporary pursuit of honor does not necessarily redirect these students from their basically narcissistic agendas; after all, there is no doubt a very good feeling associated with being honored.

However, within this new process of educational motivation, the laudable ideal of the honorable has been eclipsed by the conferral of honors. In other words,

21. Aristotle, who in some ways is the closest thing to Confucius that the Western world has known, argues that it is through habit and not through abstract thinking that the most important components of our virtue are formed. While his philosophy differs significantly from that of Confucius, he does note that truly humane action always utilizes an affective arena of inspiration. Aristotle maintains, for example, that good action cannot exist “without a combination of intellect and character.” He argues that intellect itself “moves nothing.” Aristotle, Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. W. D. Ross [New York: Random House, 1941], 1139B:35.

22. The university at which I am employed not only promotes several multiyear honors programs but also maintains more than thirty distinct honor societies. New honor societies are added regularly as various fields and subfields of inquiry are developed or defined. Departmental prizes for excellence have grown in number from one per discipline to as many as two or three per subject of study. Entangled in this mess are the many “leadership” courses that are now quite trendy both in and outside of academia. Indeed, there are more different ways to honor a student today than ever before.
the stylized symbols of excellence have become confused with excellence itself, and the former can now carry one further than the latter in a superficial society. Honor has now become a token of esteem instead of the recognition of some deep disposition of character that is worthy of note.

If an honor is to mean anything from the standpoint of worthiness, the achievement associated with it must transcend the merely technical and pragmatic study of the various means by which one might, for instance, become captain of a sports team. Confucius would again equate genuine honor with self-knowledge — that is, he would associate honor with the particular self-discipline that makes one deserving of the title of team captain, whether or not one actually receives the honor. Indeed Confucius remarks, “I am not concerned that I have no place; I am concerned how I may fit myself for one. I am not concerned that I am not known; I seek to be worthy to be known” (CA, 4.14, emphasis added).

Consequently, a cruel and giant irony arises in the un-rectified world of education. In their pursuit of honors, many students engage in decidedly dishonorable activities — such as plagiarizing term papers or registering for less than challenging courses. These dishonorable manipulations of the system assist them in their quest for official acclaim. These are the tactics embraced by the pseudo-student whom Confucius describes as “the sort of person who wants to get results quickly” (CA, 14.44). In a world driven by such a preference for academic shortcuts and merciless efficiency, the pursuit of symbolic honors produces as much disrespect as it does respect. And perhaps this is why, in the Dao De Jing, for instance, the ruler of the kingdom is advised not to propagate but to limit the distribution of honors because “not exalting men of worth prevents the people from competing; not putting high value on rare goods prevents the people from being bandits; not displaying the objects of desire prevents the people from being disorderly.” When we find innovative ways to honor students, we create more incentives for them to become academic “bandits.” We focus more on the work a student produces than on the progress of the student’s education. Yet, for Confucius, the greatest importance of education rests in the way it shapes the independence and character of the human spirit. It is likely that, among other things, a quality education ought to instill within the student a sense of pride and a level of self-esteem. However, it is better to have little self-esteem than to have a pernicious and misplaced self-esteem that has been produced from insincere praise or illicit practice. After all, a false sense of entitlement is tantamount to a lack of self-knowledge, and no serious-minded education could be considered thorough if it did not bring about some honest knowledge of the self.

The fact is that honors, considered on their own, are virtually meaningless because the true meaning of any honor depends on the knowledge and good will of those who present the award. This is what Aristotle argues when he claims that the genuine meaning of honor “is thought to depend on those who bestow honour

rather than on him who receives it.\textsuperscript{24} Nevertheless, there are businesses and educational institutions in our society that view these recognitions as somewhat reliable indicators of excellence. In other words, however gained, these honors will open doors for students. Shameless flatterers become fascinated by the social utility of these reputed marks of distinction, even if they neither understand nor believe in what these awards represent. Certainly, then, in this context, the bestowing of honors has at least some causal connection to the devolution of Confucian sincerity in learning. For many, therefore, the rationale for pursuing honors melts into the same lust for personal profit that drives the general practice of bulimic education. Honors become both an ambiguous end and a certain means.

Despite this, it is important to point out that not all of the failures noted here are the fault of misguided students and their technocratic societies. If he were to evaluate the degeneration of humane learning in our contemporary world, Confucius would not fail also to admonish the faculty members who offer the less than challenging courses, or who would provide “advising” to those who want to pursue the insincere paths of education. In much the same manner as the wayward students, these un-rectified academics have surrendered to the misdirected spirit of their times and have thus become complicit in this spiraling charade.

\textsuperscript{24} Aristotle, \textit{Basic Works of Aristotle}, 1095:25.