

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON VIRTUE ETHICS OF CONFUCIUS AND CHANAKYA

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Abstract: 'Be careful of your thoughts, for your thoughts become your words. Be careful of your words, for your words become your actions. Be careful of your actions, for your actions become your habits. Be careful of your habits, for your habits become your character. Be careful of your character, for your character becomes your destiny.'

It is by virtue of good character that one can be fully functioning, effective and eligible for leadership and success in life. The strength of mind and development of character gives meaning to our life, endorse individuality and enhance efficiency.

Virtue ethics in this sense is well echoed in the value ideologies of Acharya Chanakya aka Kautilya and Confucius aka Master Kung who are epitomized as great visionaries, strategists, educators and politically motivated figures. Their action-oriented philosophy seems to be deeply rooted in their acumen and vision of making a 'righteous' individual who can participate in the society to bring about the most advantageous reforms.

The wise educators, one known as the 'Uncrowned Prince of China' and the other 'Uncrowned King-maker', based their realism on cultivation of values by espousing ideal way of life for the pursuit of materialistic, psychic, moral and spiritual development.

The paper attempts to contemplate upon the magnum opus work of these timeless legends viz. Chanakya Neeti, Arthashastra and Analects (Lunyu) that emphasize on the significance of virtues and values that help celebrate life in the optimal manner.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first part gives a brief background of Confucius and Chanakya, with reference the then prevalent socio-political conditions that initiated the two mentors towards their respective reformative mission. The second section draws parallel from their works, dealing with the insights on imbibing virtues, character-enhancement and value-education. The concluding part attempts to bring about a confluence of the doctrines to highlight its sagacity and relevance in today's time, as a key for successful quality life.

Given that we are still not bereft of fraudulence, social ills, crimes, poor governance etc, the biggest agenda of 21st century is to save humanity, rationality and help maintain a sustainable society. The teachings of the masters revolutionized the society then, by stressing the fact that 'man is the maker of his own destiny' and whether a king or a commoner, one is responsible to facilitate one's progress on the strength of his/her disposition. This indeed is the hallmark of practical wisdom which we are in need of today.

Key words: Virtue-ethics, Chanakya, Confucius, Analects, Chanakya Neeti, Arthashastra

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of civilization, the world has seen men with extraordinary strength of character, who always stood firmly by their principles, valued rationality and envisaged a way of life much ahead of their times. These legends created history and set examples for subsequent generations. Their lives illustrate that mental strength and character development impart meaning to our existence and endorse individuality.

Two such insightful personalities, venerated across geography, cultures and eons are Acharya Vishnugupta/Chanakya aka Kautilya and Master Kung/Konzi aka Confucius. Both are epitomized as great visionaries, master strategists, educators and politically motivated figures, who through their incomparable acumen espoused a path leading to a successful and quality life.

Notwithstanding the time gap of nearly two centuries separating the maestros, they can still be regarded as contemporaries of each other. Their views on ideal governance, proficient administration and 'righteous' individuality are considerably similar. Their legalistic approach carries an undertone of virtue ethics. The talk on 'superior man', need for character building, strengthening of moral fiber, as put forth by Confucius seems to echo in the works of Chanakya. Though he may not have known Master Kung, Chanakya appears to have lived the very existence that Confucius envisaged. Their life experiences, which bear testimony to the philosophical tenets they taught, are discussed in the first section of the paper.

II. LIFE OF THE MASTERS

The Chinese regard Confucius as the 'Uncrowned Prince of China'. Born in 551 B.C. in the Shantung province (then the Lu kingdom) of China, Konzi mastered history, poetry, philosophy and music. He was a highly acclaimed philosopher, teacher and political theorist, and more so as the wise-man of China. His life graph shows that he began his career as a teacher, served ministerial posts in the government and then returned back to teaching. Master Kung once remarked, "At fifteen, my mind was bent on learning; at thirty I stood firm; at forty I was free from doubt or delusion. At fifty I understood the will of God, I knew the decrees of Heaven; at sixty my ear were receptive of the truth; at seventy I could follow the promptings of my heart without transgressing the boundaries of right." (Glimpses of World Religions, Pg.204)

The Chinese spring and autumn period (770-480 B.C), followed by the warring states period (480-221 B.C), saw the downfall of the once strong Zhou dynasty in the power tussle between feudal states. There was political struggle, moral chaos and intellectual conflict. During such a violent and volatile period, Confucius proposed the restoration of the socio-political and moral order. He strongly felt that society lacked virtue and that people should return to practicing their old traditions, which propagated righteous conduct.

Acharya Chanakya is well known as the 'uncrowned king-maker', who played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Mauryan Empire. Born in 350 B.C., he completed his education from the University of Takshashila; where, later, he became the professor of political science and economics. He was well versed in Vedic and Upanishadic literature and was highly venerated by his disciples. He observed that the weak republics in Bharatvarsha were involved in mutual power and land struggles. He realized that their subjects lacked a sense of pride and were oblivious of their rich ancestry and heritage. He appealed to Dhanananda, the king of Patliputra to save the Aryavarta from the invaders. However, when he saw that the throne of Patliputra was occupied by an undeserving and unrighteous king, he vowed to dethrone him. When he came across a young Chandragupta (raised by cowherds, but seeming to be of royal lineage) playing with his friends, enacting the role of a 'just' king and exhibiting virtuous conduct of justice, courage and temperance. He decided to tap this leadership quality in the young boy and train him further for the good of Aryavarta. Chanakya advocated moderation in materialistic pursuits and insisted that a king follow the path of rectitude and nurture kindness, patience and equanimity of mind. He set an example by himself leading the life of an ascetic, refusing materialistic adornments even after becoming the Prime Minister or 'Maha-Amatyā' of the first generation of the Mauryan Empire.

Born during troubled times and having witnessed political instability, both the masters aspired for the efficacy of a good and ideal leadership with the aim of bringing about harmony (Datong as per Confucius) and righteous rule (dharma as per Chanakya). They advocated the path of self-cultivation and self-possession, which is to be achieved through one's mental and moral strength. Both argued that 'being morally superior may not be inherent; rather it is a matter of character and individual development.' The second section of my paper throws light on the insights into virtue, character enhancement and value education analogously found in the works of the two great scholars.

III. WORKS OF THE MASTERS HIGHLIGHTING VIRTUE-ETHICS

Acharya Chanakya and Master Konzi believed in practicing what they preached. They based their instructions on morality and pursued impeccable logic. Confucius literally lived and taught his philosophy of 'Dao de ren' (the truth/path of virtue of benevolence) with respect to social ethics. Likewise, Kautilya believed in and professed 'Dharma' and 'Danda' (virtue and law) with respect to political ethics. These are well documented in their seminal works, viz. Analects by Master Kung; and Arthashastra and Nitishastra by Acharya Chanakya, respectively. Their works clearly vindicate that both firmly believed that law, order, prosperity and progress of a society largely depends upon 'good ethical conduct, which is achievable through self discipline and ethical anchoring.

Composed in the fourth century B.C., Arthashastra, regarded as a quintessence of Vedic wisdom, is a text on governance and efficient distribution of resources and wealth. It has embedded in it the richness of material well-being, economic productivity, and social welfare with a connotation of rational and ethical understanding. In Book I, Vinayaadhikarananam, chapter II of Arthashastra, Kautilya explains that there are only four sciences, which teach everything concerning righteousness and wealth. These are Anvikshiki (philosophical inquiry), Trayi (the triple Vedas), Varta (trade and agriculture) and Dandaniti (science of governance). Further, Acharya states that philosophical understanding forms the substratum of action oriented life. Anvikshiki is, therefore, essential to distinguish between shreyas and preyas, dharma and adharma, artha and anartha. 'Philosophical inquiry' as thoughtful deliberation, illuminates the meaning of all vidyas, covers entire dharma and is the ashraja for all karmas. In chapter V, Acharya asserts, "A king who is well educated and disciplined in sciences, devoted to good government and bent on doing good to all people will enjoy the earth unopposed." According to Kautilya, the requirement of 'Vinaya' is creating a successful leader and guiding principles for leadership. Vinaya is either svabhavikah (innate character traits) or krutakah (acquired ones). Moreover, kriya (instruction) can discipline only those with virtues such as wisdom, temperance, obedience and deliberation.

Though, Kautilya is believed to have endorsed the ideology of 'end justifying means', he talks of both virtue ethics and action oriented principles of ethics. He gave importance to virtues and morals and considered dharma to be rooted in good practices. This is because Artha needs to be guided by dharma. No amount of control can reduce unethical behavior unless there is a solid internal ethical grounding. Although, good conduct is 'radically empirical'; it still needs to be guided by conscience to render it pragmatic. Arthashastra refers to 'Dharma' in multifarious ways; not just as duty but also as righteousness and strength of character in personal and social conduct. Dharma is responsible for the creation of an ethical climate within the state as also at an individual level, so as to ensure productivity. Irrespective of whether a king or a commoner runs for a post, Acharya insisted on evaluating 'character' references before hiring services. In particular, the leader of a state must have and exhibit disposition that can create an ethical climate. With sound philosophical and ethical understanding, the leader will be rightly entitled to be 'Raajarishi' (an enlightened king).

According to Acharya, a Raajarishi is an amalgamation of saintly values with those of a just ruler. Such a leader is bestowed upon with righteous character, and performs what he has promised, irrespective of the consequences. It is mentioned that, "A king endowed with the ideal personal qualities enriches the other elements when they are less than perfect (A.S. 6.1)." Acharya supported the maxim of 'Yatha Raja Tatha Praja' i.e., as is the king, so will be the people. "Whatever character the king has, the other elements also come to have the same." (A.S. 8.1).

Further, a king who possesses moral virtues such as piety, truthfulness, reliability, liberality, courage, temperance, justice, propriety of conduct among others needs to dispense three duties, viz. Raakshaka, Palaaka and Yogakshemaka. "In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness; in their welfare, his welfare. He shall not consider as good only that which pleases him, but treat as beneficial to him whatever pleases his subjects." (A.S. 1.19.34).

Another magnificent work by Acharya, Chanakya Neeti Sutras, applies the Vedic astuteness to groom individuals for the art of living. This text also talks about virtue ethics and its practical utility. Acharya opines, "What good can the scriptures do to a man who has no sense of his own? Of what use is a mirror to a blind man?" (CNS: 10.9). Thus, one with a good disposition has no need for any other adornment. Another sutra narrates that when a sadhu was asked about his family, he replied; 'Truth is my mother, and my father is spiritual knowledge; righteous conduct is my brother, and mercy is my friend, inner peace is my wife, and forgiveness is my son: these six are my kinsmen'. (CNS: 12.11). The above mentioned virtues must be imbibed so as to be mindful of discernment of one's character. Similarly, it is said, "He should be considered to be living, who is virtuous and pious, but the life of a man, who is destitute of religion and virtues, is void of any blessing". (CNS: 14.12).

A few centuries before Chanakya, the wise man of China gave an insight into the fundamental principles of morality and ethics to help regulate human society. Unlike Kautilya, who authored his own works, it was Confucius' disciples, who collated his teachings in the form of the Analects or Lunyu (edited conversations). The words of the great Master embodied in the text, reflect the cherished moral and philosophical values in China. The chapters in the Analects encompass discussions between Confucius and his disciples. The book talks at length; on a number of topics ranging from state administration and fostering of social development to setting up of moral models

for masses and encouraging virtue morality. The core of Confucian ideology is self cultivation of virtues and maintenance of personal ethics, which is well portrayed in the Analects.

It majorly highlights Master Konzi's insistence on 'Dao De Ren' scheme of ethics, which aimed at social harmony or 'Datong'. Confucius has remarked, "I set my heart on Dao, base myself on De, lean upon Ren for support." (Analects 7:6).

Dao is the principle that organizes and governs all. It points to the 'way' to acquire virtues, and enrich one's nature and potential, thus facilitating a life of harmony. It is a path leading towards social and personal excellence. Confucius refers to the word 'De' in the book with reference to both virtuous conduct and virtuous disposition. Virtuous conduct is the reflection of inner strength of character and perfection of moral behavioral standards. As per Konzi, superior kingship comprises of possession of De as the moral power. In Book II, Konzi advises, "He who governs by means of his virtue is, to use an analogy, like the polestar: it remains in its place while all the lesser stars do homage to it" (Analects 2:1). At another place, he mentions that the moral character of a king is like wind and of those beneath him is like grass blades; when the wind blows, the grass bends. (Analects 12:19). Virtues need nourishment and cultivation and this, (xiu ji) in turn, leads to cultivation of personal life (xiu sheng). With the pursuit of yi or righteousness, one must nourish one's character to be good and efficient in what one does. Once one possesses the cultivated virtues, he has the charismatic power to influence others just as the wind.

Ren or humaneness is a quality, which helps maintain well ordered family, state and world. Master states, "He who can enact five things in the world is ren. Reverence, tolerance, trustworthiness, quickness and generosity. He is reverent, he receives no insults; he is tolerant, he gains the multitudes, he is trustworthy, hence others trust him with responsibilities; he is quick he has accomplishments, he is generous, hence he is capable of being placed in charge of others." (Analects 17:6).

Confucius believed that governance (zheng) involves setting things upright. For this, a leader or a ruler needs to imbibe the nature (xing) and character of a superior man or Junzi. Junzi literally means 'one posing princely and moral characteristics.' To highlight the personality of junzi or a superior man; master differentiated him from 'small' man or xiao ren. "A junzi comprehends according to right; the small man comprehends according to profit." (Analects 4:16).

One who lives by a refined moral code and follows Dao or path of self-conduct, as well as internalizes ren or goodness is a superior man. The life of a junzi is an exemplification of the universal order. The superior man represents ethical nobility and is attributed with three marks, viz. virtue, wisdom and bravery. Virtuous character makes him free from anxiety, wisdom frees him from perplexity and courage helps him overcome fear. These qualities enable him to conform to the path of moderation in all endeavors. Thus, a junzi or a superior man becomes capable of sustaining political functioning and social stratification through ethical values. If a ruler sets himself right, he will be followed without his command. If he does not set himself right, even his command will not be obeyed. (Analects 13:6).

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Moral practical wisdom is vividly seen in the life and works of Acharya Chanakya and Master Confucius. The Raajarishi of Chanakya is the same as the Junzi of Confucius. The sagacity of Master Kung and the prudence of Acharya Chanakya, presents a well cultivated and conscientious depiction of life. The notion of an ideal statesman as envisaged by the masters, though utopian, is not unachievable. Today, the socio-political issues are magnified in degree and kind. The pragmatic sagacity and analytical comprehensiveness of the masters is very relevant and significant. A competent and ethical political elite that despise vices and egocentricity, but, also acts with integrity, is the need of the hour. The words of Michael Josephson aptly express the need for character education today in a nutshell as,

BE A PERSON OF CHARACTER
BE HONEST
even if it costs more than you want to pay.
TREAT PEOPLE WITH RESPECT
even if they don't seem to deserve it.
FULFILL YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES
even when you could dodge them.
CARE ABOUT PEOPLE
even if you don't know them.
BE FAIR
even when you have the power to take more than our share.
PLAY BY THE RULES
even when others do whatever they can get away with.

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