

Self-Knowledge and Teaching in Confucius and Plato

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I am grateful to Rosa Hong Chen for bringing to our attention the powerful philosophical insights and possibilities that Confucius's *Analects* have for philosophy of education as it is conducted in North America and for inviting us to compare his insights with those of perhaps the most influential figure in Western philosophy, Socrates. I am also grateful for the opportunity that Chen has provided for me to think systematically and comparatively about the way that these two seminal figures can and do inform our understanding of the nature and importance of self-knowledge and the role of the teacher in attaining it.

Chen makes a strong case that Confucius and Socrates agree that acknowledging one's own ignorance is the necessary condition for acquiring other sorts of knowledge a both of oneself and of what is worthy in life. For if one assumes that one already knows, one simply cannot learn anything. The meaning of Socrates's metaphor of himself as a torpedo fish in the *Meno* and of Confucius's frequent irony about and criticism of himself and his disciples is that part of the role of the learner and the teacher is to make it difficult to maintain the complacent assumption that one already knows. Each also has a similar goal for himself and others, to become the best person that one can be. And to this end, self-knowledge also seems to be crucial, for without it, one can never establish morally legitimate personal aspirations or realize them. However, beyond these two points of agreement about self-knowledge — that it includes knowledge of one's own initial ignorance and that it is instrumental to leading a good life — Confucius and Socrates as represented in Plato's dialogues seem to have significantly different approaches to gaining such self-knowledge and thus to teaching for that end.

Confucius sees knowledge of others, as Chen rightfully observes, as one important element in developing one's own legitimate aspirations to be the best person that one can be. The example of others helps one identify just what the possibilities are for what one might become, for both better and worse. Thus, others are a means for learning about oneself and what might be the prospects for one's own aspirations and limitations. However, for this learning to be effective the others one encounters cannot be identical to oneself; they must be better and worse. From our betters one learns the possibilities for improving ourselves. From our inferiors we learn the weaknesses to avoid or correct, if possible. Moreover, this process of learning about ourselves from others assumes that one already has at least a nascent and general criterion for what is better and worse, good and bad. Otherwise, one could not identify the examples that one encounters as worthy or not.

Now, it is theoretically possible that everyone is born with an internal compass for such values. It is also theoretically possible that we learn these values from those whom we observe. However, Confucius does not appear to think that these

theoretical possibilities are viable. For him, one's initial assumptions about these values may be mistaken because Confucius insists that we admit our initial ignorance of the good so that we can later learn about it. Equally, particular others may be mistaken in their assumptions about these values. Therefore, this criterion of value must come from beyond ourselves and the others we encounter. And for Confucius this source seems to be our cultural and moral tradition. Consequently, although learning from the examples of others is seemingly necessary for establishing specific legitimate aspirations, it is not sufficient in at least this one respect. Finally, these examples of others and the evaluations we make of them based on our moral traditions reveal only possibilities for oneself. Those possibilities have to be evaluated in one's own life — tested against the realities of one's own nature, capabilities, and circumstances. It may be that we discover that, try as we might, we cannot attain all of the best possibilities or avoid all of the worst. All we can do is our utmost under the guidance of the examples set by others and the values of our moral traditions, which, of course, is not a guarantee that we will succeed. Thus, the crucial element of self-knowledge — namely, the specific form of one's aspirations to be one's best realistically possible self — has for Confucius three different sources: moral tradition, the examples of others, and experiments we conduct about ourselves under their guidance. It should be noted that these specific aspirations might be significantly different for each of us, which may explain the seemingly confusing, different responses that Confucius gives to the same questions of his various disciples. Teaching for Confucius is, like learning about oneself and others, a moral duty that each person performs in a variety of ways — by being honest about oneself in order to be a useful example to others, by providing access to and consideration of the materials of moral tradition, and by encouraging those around one to be honest about and with themselves.

There seem to be crucial differences with Socrates, however, about the meaning of and the path to self-knowledge. As with Confucius, Socrates believes that one needs a moral criterion for establishing one's own legitimate aspirations and for judging one's own life. However, this moral criterion, according to Socrates, comes from the inside, not the outside; it is part of one's moral nature. Others are useful in the search for this moral criterion precisely because they are identical to oneself, instantiations of the Form of Humanity with access to the Form of the Good. Interaction with others is helpful in identifying this criterion because they can provide a safeguard against self-delusion, thinking that we know the good when our conscious conception of the good has been tainted by self-interest, the desire to satisfy our own appetites, or the desire for honor. Because others have the same Form of the Good within them, they are able to ask us questions or to respond to our questions in ways that help us see when our developing conscious conception of the good does or does not satisfy our own and others' internal criterion for genuine goodness. Thus, for Socrates, finding the moral criterion involves an internal search that is facilitated by conversation with and criticism of others who are involved in the same enterprise. Moreover, finding the moral criterion is a kind of self-knowledge because that criterion is already implicit in our nature as human beings.

Thus, Socrates's conception of self-knowledge seems very different from that of Confucius, despite their agreement that the search for the good must begin with the acknowledgment of one's ignorance and that others have an important role in that search. For Socrates, the moral criterion is an inherent part of self-knowledge because it is internal to each of us. For Confucius, by contrast, the moral criterion is the product of the wisdom of the ages reflected in tradition; it is something to be genuinely discovered and not merely uncovered. As a result, this criterion stands in a different relation to the self for these two philosophers. For Socrates the criterion is genuinely knowledge *of* the self, of what is already included in one's own nature. For Confucius, the moral criterion is knowledge *for* the self that establishes a self-independent standard for our character and conduct. To Confucius, this criterion is not foreign to human selves, such as an imposition by the gods might be, because it results from the accumulated wisdom of humans based on their experience and their reflection. But it is not self-knowledge *per se*.

Because of this difference in their conceptions of self-knowledge, the relevance of others to it and thus the role of the teacher in facilitating it are also distinct. For Socrates, the role of others in helping us attain self-knowledge depends on their essential similarity, indeed their identity, to us. Because of this similarity, they can through questioning and criticism help us identify the Form of the Good that is implicit in us all. And as Chen rightly concludes, for Socrates the teacher's role is that of the midwife who helps bring to consciousness that which is internal to us, namely, the Form of the Good. But this metaphor does not seem to capture the role of the teacher for Confucius. As we have seen, others whom we encounter, in Confucius's view, can provide models and encouragement in the development of self-knowledge, but they are not the source of the moral criterion, because the materials of culture and tradition play that role. Others can make those materials available to us and can help us understand the meaning of those materials, but they cannot understand those materials for us; that is a task each of us must pursue. And, while that understanding of the moral criterion is necessary to the self-knowledge each of us is to achieve as we come to realize our best selves, it is not knowledge of ourselves.