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Plato & Confucius on the Ladder of Eros and Politics

PLATO¹ Now, if you are finished reviewing my manuscripts of the *Symposium*, might I ask for your thoughts? I believe our philosophical dialogue on this matter will be of great value.

CONFUCIUS² Very well. It seems you Greeks are very keen on the idea of love, or as you call it, Eros. And you are set on pursuing love and extending it to the greatest extent?

PLATO That would be one of the primary goals of our philosophy.

CONFUCIUS Well, I'll have to disagree on what the highest extent of love is. I do believe my concept of love is vastly different from yours.

PLATO I heard much of your preachings revolve around love, too, though I'm afraid I am not entirely familiar with them. Would you care to brief me on your perspective?

CONFUCIUS With pleasure.

In Chinese culture, we heavily emphasise respecting the elders in our family. And what is filial piety, if not love for our family? However, most start and stop at family. I argue that this familial love should extend beyond family. What is society if not one big family? Our neighbours are but our brothers in a broader context, and our rulers our elders. I propose that we can only achieve benevolence in society by extending this familial, brotherly love; you rarely see someone who practices filial piety but not loyalty or vice versa (*The Analects* 1.2).

¹ Here throughout this conversation, the points of view of the speakers in *Symposium* are taken as Plato's own.

² Here throughout this conversation, the verses of *The Analects* are taken as Confucius' precise opinion.

- PLATO But the love you describe is merely on a low level in the grand scheme of Eros. Love for family and society is akin to love for human behaviour, customs, and institutions. And these, on the ladder of love, while higher than common love, are also steps beneath the pinnacle of love.
- CONFUCIUS How so? What, then, are the steps that I am missing according to your philosophy?
- PLATO Next would be the love for the beauty of subjects of study (*Symposium* 211c), where you can truly begin to appreciate the limitless ocean of beauty (*Symposium* 210d). My preferred subject of study is, of course, philosophy. So, here situates my love for philosophy. For you, it might be the study of social relationships and politics. Either way, they are the same in that they are both extensions of the human psyche, only formalised and formulated to be easily graspable and transmittable. And the pinnacle of love is, of course, for beauty itself.
- CONFUCIUS I'm afraid you are losing me.
- From what you've said so far, you defined love to be for the beauty in things, and you are trying to attain higher levels on the ladder since they constitute a better form of love. Is that correct?
- PLATO That is correct.
- CONFUCIUS Yet, from what I understood, the ladder of love tends towards the abstract the higher you climb. And by climbing, one abandons or, at least, pays less attention to the levels beneath. Applying to the societal landscape, does it imply that people should forego observing familial ties and loving their families in favour of loving the idea of family?
- PLATO That's a reasonable interpretation but not entirely accurate. By climbing the ladder, one needs not forgo the lower levels, for that would incur a horrid logical contradiction. The first two levels are the love for someone's physical beauty and that for everyone's physical beauty (*Symposium* 211c); forgoing the former for the latter is simply impossible since the latter necessarily encompasses the former.

CONFUCIUS I apologise, but I still fail to see how this would apply to solving the political debacle plaguing my country.

My preachings for familial love come partly from the decentralised political structure of my country, where regions are entrusted to family members of the emperor. And since positions of power are hereditary, the entire kingdom remains controlled by one family even after generations. I encourage people to fulfil their roles in society, even the regional leaders, the roles of the family of the central power (*The Analects* 12.11) and hope that reminding competing regional leaders that they are of the same bloodline can reawaken familial love between them and ease conflicts.

PLATO I do see your logic in this, my dear Confucius. However, I also observed one fatal flaw you've overlooked. Do you mind if I ask you a series of questions?

CONFUCIUS Please.

PLATO The political tension – does it stem from disputes between competing political regimes?

CONFUCIUS Indeed.

PLATO Are the leaders of these regimes all family? Do they all have blood ties?

CONFUCIUS Yes.

PLATO And things were peaceful?

CONFUCIUS Up to a certain point recently. Although, the tension has been brewing for a few generations already.

PLATO Would you say familial love held the regions together back in the day?

CONFUCIUS I would.

PLATO However, as positions of power are transferred from generation to generation, familial ties get increasingly diluted to the point of obscurity, where one can argue they do not exist anymore. So, time can weaken familial ties, would you agree?

CONFUCIUS That's a fair assessment.

PLATO Then, one must conclude familial love alone is unable to hold a kingdom together, at least not forever.

CONFUCIUS I believe that is the inevitable conclusion.

PLATO Indeed, it is.

While I appreciate your efforts to reawaken familial recognition between the leaders, I sincerely believe your efforts are misguided. Even if you are successful in your endeavours, there is no guarantee that it will not collapse in the same way a few generations from now. Relying on familial love is merely a superficial solution.

CONFUCIUS What would be a better solution?

PLATO Climbing the ladder of love, of course.

CONFUCIUS To loving the beauty of subjects of study – politics and social relationships, as you had mentioned?

PLATO Precisely.

Pragmatically, familial love concerns only the emperor himself, as it is his family. But politics is a matter of the people. If the emperor loves governance as a subject of study, then he must also love his people. If he loves politics more than family, he must also love his people more than himself. I think hardly anyone would disagree that such an emperor would try to look out for the people, not the least to avoid driving his regime into warfare by any means possible. Naturally, there will be fewer conflicts overall.

CONFUCIUS I suppose that would be true. Caring for the people also cares for himself since there would be no need for the ruler to worry about his own needs if those of the people were satisfied (*The Analects* 12.9). After all, the trust of the common people is the most critical aspect of government (*The Analects* 12.7).

PLATO You pulled the words right out of my mouth. I am not entirely unversed in your teachings; I believe you've preached that if the ruler desires goodness, the peasants will, too (*The Analects* 12.19). So, if the rulers love the subject

of social relationships, politics, and, by extension, their subjects, the people will also love it, and social harmony will follow. Moreover, the subject of politics does not dilute over time as familial ties do, not to mention that one stems from internal passion while the other stems from obligations. Maintaining love for the former would certainly be more approachable in the long term, resulting in a longer period of peace.

CONFUCIUS That is a most intriguing perspective, Plato. I cannot disagree. It seems I should re-evaluate my preachings and devise a ladder of politics as you have for love. This has been a most enlightening evening. I have gained much.

PLATO Likewise. Good night.

References

- [1] *In Dialogue with Humanity*. 5th ed. Office of University General Education. 2023.