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The Paradox of Proper Order

The Paradox of Proper Order is an issue stemming from the fragility of the Confucian concept of ingredients needed to create a flourishing society. Before addressing this issue, we will first explore the Confucian idea of proper order itself, which was founded to prevent war after a period of administrative disarray (Yao 2000, p. 41). We will discuss how it applies to personal lives, the government, and society, as well as issues relating to the Proper order's method of political thought and practice.

Proper Order is a Confucian moral concept founded in East Asia on how life or society should be directed. It addresses both ways in which to optimize material and moral potentiality. The term used to define bettering oneself on a personal level is "self-cultivation." This concept of order not only applies on the personal level, but also within government and family lives. Its importance stems from the need for a civilized society where all individuals will be successful in their lives, free of moral or material chaos (Magagna Lecture 10/12). We will now discuss the themes which define proper order: relating to humans, being humane, being a beneficent hierarchy, and having virtuous leadership.

In relating to humans, one of the main ideas found in proper order is that it puts humans first. The idea sees human interest as one of the more important factors in daily life and rule (Magagna Lecture 10/12).

Similarly to this, one can find proper order strives to be humane. Humaneness could also be described as being righteous, with the belief that although humans all develop differently through unique experiences, every human is still inherently the same (Yao 2000, p. 93). For example, people of different classes should treat each other with consideration and civility. Lawmakers should take into consideration the needs of civilians over distant ignorance (Magagna Lecture 10/12).

In relating to a beneficent hierarchy, a hierarchical societal structure should make sure to give mutual benefits to other, different levels of hierarchies rather than harm, in which leaders should provide some sort of support to subjects such as food security or loans (Magagna Lecture 10/12). This idea suggests that hierarchy is important for the maintenance of societal order, and that society would not reach its full capabilities without it. Interestingly, this idea also implies that rather than subjects blindly following orders from higher authorities, they should be convinced by their leaders that these orders will in turn benefit the subjects themselves, and not just the ruler. This shows support to overthrow corrupt governments who do not appeal to their subject's needs. This relates to the story in which an official asked Confucius how the government should increase their power, and Confucius replied that they should provide for the people materially, and afterwards, they should educate the civilians (Magagna Lecture 10/12). This shows the Confucian significance of a beneficent hierarchy, where if a government wants to be stronger, they should convince their subjects through stability of food and education. Although conflict involving war is sometimes inevitable, the good government would choose to avoid war through morality and charisma, rather than enacting unjust laws on its people (Yao 2000, p. 91).

Lastly, virtuous leadership refers to maintaining a balance between the leaders and the subjects, in which all parties are expected to “play their part” in a sense. It is important to keep a balance between the needs of everyone in society, and leaders should be chosen based on merit, in which the leaders would demonstrate the ability to be a good leader. This not only applies to positions such as political leaders, but can also be seen in familial dynamics between parents and children. Although familial merit is not necessarily an important character for the family unit, the concept of the parental status should be given by the action of being a parent, not just by name. Additionally, the family unit is perceived as a fundamental factor that leads to harmony in the state and government (Yao 2000, p. 52). In a sense we can see that the people do not only rely on the government for a successful society, but also the government relies on its families to raise a fully cultivated familial unit. The importance of trust between individuals and society can be illustrated in the episode where Confucius is asked what he would give up between weapons, food, and trust. In this occasion, Confucius stresses the importance of trust in a society as it is more important than food and weapons (Magagna Lecture 10/12). Confucius argued that a government without the people’s trust will not be able to achieve material nor moral success, as without merit, proper order will go into disarray.

Analyzing the areas which proper order is necessary, we can see its importance in society to ensure the safety of people and trust in their state, society, and locals. The trust between the state and institutions requires a concept called co-participation, where governments would provide partial help to its citizens, while local institutions would provide the other half of needs (Magagna Lecture 10/14).

Despite the appeal of proper order, it is difficult to perfectly obtain this structure of society. It is important to note that proper order is not a black or white concept, and can have

grey levels of the concept, for example an imperfect society may still have some level of proper ordering to it.

An issue with Proper order is that the characteristics of proper order are difficult to achieve. It is subject to destruction from human greed and competition, and it relies on no corruption - politically, economically, culturally, etc. We will now further analyze the Paradox of Proper order in its different levels in the self, family, and state.

Analyzing an individual themselves, Mengzi, who is considered the first period of Confucius thinking (Yao 2000, p. 25), argues that people are born with the potential to be good, but can develop a corrupt character if they are left undeveloped (Yao 2000, p. 180). This could also be described in reverse where one may be born evil but cultivate their character to become good. The general idea shows that through experience and work, one could essentially learn the correct moral principles to contribute to the creation of proper order. Thus, self cultivation and personal responsibility is a start of where proper order can be developed. The issue with this, as we can especially see in the idea of virtuous leadership, is that individuals will ideally work hard in a merit based society to achieve their full potential. However, this can lead to individuals to go too far in their quest to be their best and merely end up destroying themselves in the process. This reveals the paradox in which proper order cannot be achieved if not done enough, yet an individual could also go too far in their practice of "self cultivation." Confucius argued if an individual does not act responsibly, they are virtually taking advantage of their positions which will cause chaos (Yao 2000, p. 54). This can be witnessed in a higher level, where a ruler decides to ignore a starving nation, to a familial level where a child may choose not to contribute to their responsibilities to their family.

In regards to the paradoxes of proper order in a merit based society, the government positions became open to individuals who passed the civil exam. This exam included topics in Confusian ideas. Although this promotes learning of morality and proper order, many scholars will thus study these ideas only for personal gain. Confusian learning becomes only a means to an end which may tie back to the concept of creating disarray when going too far in their pursuit for proper order, or not enough (Yao 2000, p. 55).

Another paradox we shall analyze is the proper order within a government. As mentioned in the idea of a beneficent hierarchy, governments should provide benefit to their citizens rather than coercion, and if they prove to be incapable or corrupt, they should be overthrown. The general concept of a hierarchy could be dangerous as people who are not of better status will likely grow in-compliant and desire to move up in society. Additionally, it can be difficult to successfully run a lasting society without corrupt higher ups, especially in a bureaucracy (which was the common form of government in east asia at the time). The idea of overthrowing a government sounds simple, however the process and needed restructuring is a long and painful process. For example if one uses their economic status to get their own way this could destroy the proper order economically. An example of a corrupt government is the Zhou dynasty, in which the rich feudal society became self interested in property, and created military clashes. This left many people with nothing whereas the wealthy prospered, thus creating chaos which Confucius identified as stemming from the government disregarding morality and creating inhumane laws (Yao 2000, p. 41).

As we can see, human rationality is powerful, and due to human's self interest and interest in people they care for, people can take things too far thus creating disarray in one's personal life, society, or government (Magagna Lecture 10/12). This natural instinct contributes

to the fragility of proper order which could be toppled due to competition and corruption.

However, some Confucian scholars (such as Mengzi and Xunzi) believed in the cultivation of the self, which could in turn be reflected through family, society, and government (Yao 2000, p. 93-99). In which one could influence their society and government, merely by being a good person to one's family (Yao 2000, p. 43).

Bibliography:

Magagna, Victor. Lecture 10/12. UC San Diego, 12 Oct. 2020, Online Zoom Meeting. Lecture.

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