

Chinese Philosophy - Homework 1.

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Dialogue

子路问："闻斯行诸？"

Tzu-lu asked, "Should one immediately practice what one has heard?"

子曰："有父兄在，如之何其闻斯行之？"

Confucius said, "There are father and elder brother [to be consulted]. Why immediately practice what one has heard?"

冉有问："闻斯行诸？"

Jan Yu (JanTzu) asked, "Should one immediately practice what one has heard?"

子曰："闻斯行之。"

Confucius said, "One should immediately practice what one has heard."

公西华曰："由也问：'闻斯行诸？' 子曰：'有父兄在。' 求也问：'闻斯行诸？' 子曰：'闻斯行之。' 赤也惑，敢问。"

Kung-hsi Hua said, "When Yu (Tzu-lu) asked you, 'Should one immediately practice what one has heard?' you said, 'There are father and elder brother.' When Ch'iu (Jan Yu) asked you, 'Should one immediately practice what he has heard?' you said, 'One should immediately practice what one has heard.' I am perplexed, and venture to ask you for an explanation."

子曰："求也退，故进之；由也兼人，故退之。"

Confucius said, "Ch'iu is retiring; therefore I urged him forward. Yu has more than one man's energy; therefore I kept him back."

(Analects, 11:21)

Comments

In this dialogue, Gōng Xīhuá is perplexed by the fact that Confucius answered the same question in two different ways to his two disciples ZhòngYóu (Zǐ Lù) and RǎnQíú. The question is: "Should one immediately practice what one has heard?" Confucius says, the young and strong ZhòngYóu needs to be restrained, thus he tells him to consult his father and brothers first. The aging RǎnQíú, on the other hand, needs to be urged.

In my eyes, this passage represents the emphasis on balance so common in Chinese philosophy. Extremities are always destabilizing, whether it is being too strong and eager to act (ZhòngYóu), or too deliberate and guarded (RǎnQíú). While these categories can be understood to represent the two groups of brave (excellent) and cowardly (under-average), they might also correspond to one's age, young people being too eager, old people being too moderate.

This attitude of Confucius can also be viewed as an example of effective teaching. The ever-growing standardization in our education system fits the average but excludes many. A good teacher, instead of just making students memorize predefined pieces of knowledge, takes all students' needs and abilities into account and delivers a personalized teaching style. My high school math teacher was unknowingly a follower of this Confucian teaching: students full of doubts were encouraged, while the ones with too much confidence kept back.

Another aspect of this passage is the central value of filial piety in Confucian thought. As ZhòngYóu's parents and brothers are alive, they should be an important source of guidance and wisdom in his life. RǎnQíú, on the other hand, cannot consult his father anymore.