

**Socratic Knowledge, Christian Love, Confucian Virtue and Buddhist Emptiness:
Guiding Principles for Education**

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Abstract

Socrates' view of knowledge, Jesus' conception of love, Confucius' idea of virtue and Buddha's path of emptiness provide valuable insights and guiding principles to help us achieve a well-rounded education. Each of these individuals caused a transformation in the individual and collective lives of their followers and their respective societies that have endured until today. Their lives and truths provide principles, lessons, concepts and goals that could serve as an antidote to many of the problems facing education and society. For example, Socrates called for a re-examination of our accepted knowledge in the search for greater and deeper truths, Jesus for a transformational love and faith that transcends the limitations of self and this world, Confucius for education that goes beyond learning to virtuous action, and Buddha for an eightfold path to overcome suffering. These exemplars, representing some of the most diverse and influential individuals and traditions in history, teach how selflessness and detachment, developed through knowledge, love, virtue and emptiness, are instrumental to education and life. Each taught a form of the golden rule and other guiding principles for education that will be presented and briefly.

The public, media and government seem increasingly concerned about the role education plays in our society and in improving individual and collective lives. The Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association are developing Common Core State Standards to be applied throughout the United States. This effort is the latest in a series of attempts to develop common standards that all could be used to measure all students. These standards reflect the current emphasis to make students college and career ready, be internationally benchmarked, be evidenced based and develop high-order skills. The US Department of Education is promoting this effort and others with unprecedented amounts of funding pushing for reform on several fronts.

Modern reforms have increasingly focused on the material and economic welfare of the individual and society as important goals of education. Numerous policies, commissions and reports have tied the called for higher standards and excellence in our schools to economic interests. These reports and policies seem to have largely ignored the central role that fundamental principles, which have been addressed by the great teachers and wisdom traditions, must play in the revitalization of the fortunes of our world.

As politicians and leaders search for the next iteration of the common standards and curriculum for their nation's schoolchildren, it is worth looking to those individuals who have influenced civilizations and thinking for centuries and whose teachings and standards form the bedrock upon which civilizations have flourished and our emerging world civilization is built. Unless the foundational issues of our present needs are effectively addressed, there can be little hope for building toward a productive future in this transitional age, economic or otherwise. As the world changes and a global culture evolves, what the societies of this unfolding world civilization do to prepare the young for the future will greatly affect their success in creating meaningful and useful lives so they can contribute to a new world economic, political and social order.

Every society depends upon capable and virtuous citizens to progress. Tradition, culture, philosophy and religion have played a vital role in developing a knowledge base for what was to be passed on to the young. Modern society is facing rising tide of selfishness, irresponsibility, hopelessness, meaningless, depression and the multitudinous other forms of social and moral degradation (Seligman, 2002; Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

A proper education is essential to accomplish human happiness and welfare, and is vital to rescuing this bewildered generation from possible self-destruction resulting from excessive materialism and a sense of entitlement. Twenge and Campbell argue that we are in an epidemic of narcissism that can be counteracted by such things as practicing gratitude, friendship skills and focusing on others. "Understanding the narcissism epidemic is important because its long-term consequences are destructive to society" (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 4).

It takes effort and discipline to be good rather than be controlled by lusts, passions or societal pressures (Haidt, 2006). As the researchers above describe, the qualities needed for collective and individual well-being are quickly eroding in our Western materialistic culture. The six characteristics that morally mature person habitually displays are at odds with the materialistic and narcissistic values today: 1. respects human dignity, 2. cares about the welfare of others, 3. integrates individual interests and social responsibilities, 4. demonstrates integrity, 5. reflects on moral choices and 6. seeks peaceful resolution of conflict (Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development Panel on Moral Education, 1988).

Greatest Teachers of All Time

Most cultures have some historical exemplar to whom they look for guidance. The founders of religions offer an obvious example of individuals who have had an incomparable influence on their followers and the cultures that emanated from their being and teachings. The Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic, Christian and Islamic cultures are examples of religions that have arisen from charismatic individuals such as Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

The founders of great philosophies have also had major influence on the thinking, values and cultures of many civilizations. Such people as Lao-tzu, Confucius, Mencius, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Avicenna are examples.

Most of these individuals are shrouded in historical uncertainty. What we know about them and their teachings has been largely reported after their death by those who knew them. Therefore,

we can have little certainty of what they actually did or said beyond trusting the sources that report about them. Over time, with varying memories, translations and interpretations of the original speaker's words, our certainty of who they were and what they said is further challenged. Even the very existence of the most famous and influential among us can be questioned (Jaspers, 1962b).

What is less open to question, is the tremendous influence these individuals have had on those who have subscribed to their teachings. Part of that record starts with their initial followers, devotees or disciples who largely are responsible for what we know of their teachers. If we were to ask these great teachers what the foundational guiding principles of education should be and by what standards should individuals and society be judged, what would they tell us?

For purposes of this paper we will confine our consideration of this question to two of the most influential founders of religion—Buddha and Jesus--and two of the most influential philosophers of all time--Confucius and Socrates—representing both East and West. From these four have come some of the greatest philosophical and religious principles that have profoundly affected our world and thinking today (Jaspers, 1962a, 1962b).

Buddha is representative of the great Eastern religions and is arguably the most influential individual in Eastern civilization, whereas Jesus is representative of the great Western religions emerging from the Abrahamic and monotheistic tradition that have had undoubted sway over much of Western civilization. Likewise, Confucius could rightly be regarded as the philosopher who has had the greatest influence on Eastern thinking, as is Socrates for the West.

The influence of each of these men is still seen throughout the world. The power of their lives and words continues to move minds and hearts, though they were apparently relatively insignificant among their own people in their own time. In fact, they were mostly considered such a threat to the people and authorities of the time that they faced persecution and even death at the hands of those they sought to enlighten. As they were mostly illiterate and did not write down their ideas or life story, our knowledge of them and their teachings came from their followers who recorded their words and lives under varying circumstances.

By their lives and words they set standards and principles for all humanity and have influenced great thinkers and leaders to come after them. Though each of them addressed broad areas of life and living, and could be looked to for a model and philosophy of life or for a guiding purpose and direction, we will focus our discussion on Socrates' ideas of knowledge, Jesus' teachings in relation to love, Confucius' thoughts about virtue, and Buddha's teachings on emptiness.

Socratic Knowledge

Of these four figures, Socrates' life and teachings may be better known to the world because his main chronicler, Plato, was himself a gifted thinker and writer who could dedicate the time and talent to recording Socrates' dialogues and the circumstances surrounding them. So much so is this true, that many would put Plato in a higher position of authority and influence than Socrates. We will not debate the merits of this argument here, but will treat the teachings that Plato attributes to Socrates as Socrates', and treat the other writings of Plato (1956a, 1956b) as largely

influenced by Socrates. Aristophanes and Xenophon are also considered primary sources for information on Socrates. In like manner, we would consider Plato's followers as influenced by Socrates' teachings and life as well. Among those, Aristotle is regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of all time. For purpose of this discussion, it is not crucial who the author is, but rather the content of the teachings and life ascribed to Socrates.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states: "The philosopher Socrates remains, as he was in his lifetime (469–399 B.C.E.), an enigma, an inscrutable individual who, despite having written nothing, is considered one of the handful of philosophers who forever changed how philosophy itself was to be conceived" (Nails, 2010. p. 1). Socrates was not a founder of a religion, but he is held in veneration comparable to those who are, like Buddha and Jesus (Nails, 2010).

He felt he had a divine mission to question unrelentingly in his search for knowledge of the true and good. When Socrates tried to find someone wiser than himself to resolve his perplexity over the Oracle of Delphi's claim that he was the wisest person, he questioned the wise men of his day--the politicians, the poets and the artisans—and found their pride, fear and attachment to their own limited knowledge were barriers to truth. He was wiser partly because he knew he was ignorant.

Socrates called for a transformation in thinking and spent much of his time in dialogue that challenged his audience to search deeper for the truth and to know themselves better. In these dialogues recorded by Plato (1956a), Socrates forced his listeners to re-examine knowledge that they took for granted. He believed people must be aware and accept what they did not know before they could learn something new. He felt that truth would reveal itself if one persevered in searching for it through questioning, but one can only progress in this search if he first acknowledges his ignorance. This becomes increasingly challenging in our age of narcissism and entitlement (Twenge, 2009).

In *The Republic*, Plato (1956b) explores many topics, including justice and propriety that we will examine in more depth in Confucius's teachings on virtue. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Socratic knowledge is explored through the analogy of forms in the allegory of the cave. Chained to a cave wall so that all they could ever see were shadows, the prisoners of the cave believed these shadows to be reality. When one of the prisoners breaks free from these bonds, he sees the source of those shadows, recognizing his previous limited and faulty view of reality. As he ascends, he learns that these too are just forms and at each stage realizes greater, fuller, more real truth. The ascent from the cave can be compared to our process of moving from illusion to reality, from ignorance to fuller knowledge. We must give up our former limited knowledge before we can obtain a more accurate and complete view of the world. He taught that people will not learn unless they want to learn, as the freed prisoner learned when he tried to show the chained prisoners the light and rose up against him.

Socrates felt that one must use more than reason in coming to knowledge, that self-knowledge is comparable to the knowledge of God, and that man can only approach the divine through leaving behind earthly passions and acknowledging his own ignorance (Guthrie, 1969). As such,

Socrates' principles of knowing continue to have vital importance in human learning and welfare and could serve as a valuable guiding principle for education.

Christian Love

Each of these four individuals addressed the topic of love. For each of them "human love was universal and unlimited" (Jaspers, 1962b, p. 92). Of these four, Jesus' (4 BCE-30 CE) teachings explored love in revolutionary ways and he gives it a central place in his teachings. The concept and application of love is explored, examined and extrapolated throughout the four gospels and the New Testament, which record the teachings and life of Jesus. There are several meanings of love and various ways of translating these terms. For example, the Greek word *agape*, which refers to a pure and higher love, is sometimes translated as love and sometimes as charity. The English term love often fails to make these subtle distinctions, as it is used to describe a wide range of ideas.

For Jesus, love was the essence of his teachings and a concept he enlarged and deepened. Perhaps most revolutionary, was how he expanded the circle of love to include one's enemies and taught that we should turn the other cheek if attacked. This idea was and continues to be a radical calling to humankind. Jesus extended the meaning of love in other ways: And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them." (King James Bible, Luke 6:31-32)

When asked what his most important teachings were, he replied:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (King James Bible, Matthew 22:37-40)

In this answer, he identified love as the essence or essential element in all his teachings as well as those of the other prophets. Using similar language, Jesus further defined love as a version of the golden rule: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." (King James Bible, Matthew 7:12) He taught that God is love, and that love of God, free of self and the world, is an important standard upon which we will be judged. He taught that this physical world is nothing when compared to the spiritual world; therefore, we should resist the temptation of attachment to this world to obtain true wellbeing.

The faith that comes from loving God leads to a heavenly condition and a freeing of worldly cares. Through faith all things are possible. It implies a trust in and contentment with the will of God. Through love, individual will conforms to God's will, which is seen as true nature and reality. He exemplified faith and embodied love, which gave him and his teachings the power to transform our world.

The explanation that St. Paul gives to the place and importance of love in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 is perhaps the most complete and cited of Jesus' definitions. Love or charity is described as

patient, kind and never ending. It is not envious, boastful, irritable or resentful and does not insist on its own way or rejoice in wrongdoing. Love bears, believes, hopes and endures all things.

All things are conditioned upon love, and Jesus' teachings create a framework for love to develop. These teachings on love are a great antidote to the selfishness, narcissism and entitlement we find growing today and offer educators and education a critical guiding principle. His education calls for a transformation of the heart, that combined with the transformation of the mind through the knowing of Socrates, can guide educators today.

Confucian Virtue

Whereas Jesus' teachings were ultimately focused on a relationship with God and eternal life, Confucius' teachings were focused on relationships with others and living properly in this world. Confucius' (551-479 BCE) influence on the East is comparable to Socrates in the West. Though he did not consider himself a prophet or divine sage, or, even a good man and true gentleman about which he taught (*Analects* 7:33; 14:30), he has been venerated as each. He was interested in improving the human condition in this world and saw a virtuous life as a key to it.

Confucianism is an ethical code that contains moral, social, political and philosophical teachings, though some argue it also is a religion. Virtue was the key to effective leadership and is a moral power. He taught that humans can improve and move toward perfection and regarded morality as the most important subject in education (Riegel, 2008). He felt that through individual and collective efforts people could cultivate virtues and morality. The best source of Confucian thought is the *Analects* (Confucius). The following teachings from the *Analects* (Lunyu) convey teachings on virtue:

"To devote oneself earnestly to one's duty to humanity, and while respecting the spirits, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom." (*Analects* 6:20)

"He who governs by means of his virtue is, to use an analogy, like the pole-star: it remains in its place while all the lesser stars do homage to it." (*Analects* 2.1)

"If the people be led by laws, and uniformity among them be sought by punishments, they will try to escape punishment and have no sense of shame. If they are led by virtue, and uniformity sought among them through the practice of ritual propriety, they will possess a sense of shame and come to you of their own accord." (*Analects* 2.3)

The virtues of Confucianism have developed over time as they have been explicated and emphasized by various scholars. The key virtues emphasized have been such things as humanity, righteousness, ritual, knowledge, integrity, loyalty, filial piety, honesty, kindness, forgiveness, cleanliness, bravery, gentleness, goodness, respect, reverence, frugality, modesty and humility. Most scholars would agree the key virtues of Confucianism are *ren* (*jen*), *li* and *junzi* (*chun-tzu*). These terms have broad meanings and have been translated as different terms.

Ren is translated as humanity, inward ideals, complete virtue, reciprocity, goodness or benevolence, and is the fundamental virtue of Confucian social and moral philosophy. *Li* has

been translated as propriety, reverence, courtesy, ritual or ideal standard of conduct. *Junzi* describes the true gentleman who lives according to the highest ethical standards displaying the virtues of self-respect, generosity, sincerity, persistence and benevolence.

His philosophy could be summarized as compassion, which might be most succinctly expressed in what some feel is perhaps the earliest statement of the golden rule: "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you" (*Analects* 15:23). Reciprocal propriety is the ultimate principle of human action and the keynote of Confucianism.

He believed that righteousness, propriety and filial piety were fundamental virtues of humanity. Relationships were central in developing these virtues. He believed that problems developed when people failed call things by their proper names, to see reality as it is. That our innate goodness, virtues and character can and should be cultivated through education, along with discipline and self-reflection, is a Confucian principle that can help guide educators and education today.

Buddhist Emptiness

Buddha (c. 563-483 BCE), the awakened one, was raised in the northeastern Indian subcontinent in wealth and luxury, but left this behind in his search for truth. He practiced ascetic self-denial, but later adopted the middle way between self-mortification and worldly ambition as the path of salvation. As Buddha's teachings were not written down until three to four hundred years after his death, the authenticity of the accounts of his life and words are more questionable than the three other individuals we are discussing here. In spite of this, his life and teachings have had and continue exert a tremendous influence.

Buddha's Four Noble Truths are a foundation of his teachings: life involves suffering, suffering is caused by craving, suffering ends when craving ends and the elimination of suffering is the result of following the Noble Eightfold Path: right views, aspiration, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration/meditation. The emptiness of all phenomenon is a core Buddhist belief, though different schools of Buddhism will view it differently. Buddhist emptiness (*śūnyatā*) suggests

the absence of an eternal, independent, self-causing, invariant, essential self-nature (*svabhāva*) or selfhood (*ātman*) in any thing or person. Whatever existed did so by virtue of a perpetually changing web of causes and conditions that themselves were products of other causes and conditions (Lusthaus, 1998).

Buddha's teachings suggest that a realization of this emptiness, especially of the self, is a condition that leads to wisdom and inner peace.

"One of the most important philosophical insights in Buddhism comes from what is known as the theory of emptiness. At its heart is the deep recognition that there is a fundamental disparity between the way we perceive the world and our own experience in it, and the way things actually are. In our day-to-day experience, we tend to relate to the world and to ourselves as if these entities possessed self-enclosed, definable, discrete and enduring reality. For instance, if we examine our own conception of selfhood, we will

find that we tend to believe in the presence of an essential core to our being, which characterizes our individuality and identity as a discrete ego, independent of the physical and mental elements that constitute our existence. The philosophy of emptiness reveals that this is not only a fundamental error but also the basis for attachment, clinging and the development of our numerous prejudices. According to the theory of emptiness, any belief in an objective reality grounded in the assumption of intrinsic, independent existence is simply untenable. (Dalai Lama, 2005, p. 46)

Emptiness is a path to wisdom, love, virtue and inner peace. Emptiness is related to Socratic knowledge, in that it challenges our presuppositions about what we think we know and what is true. It is an attempt to see things as they are, empty of adding or taking anything to or from it. It is related to Jesus' description of love, in that it is an overcoming or emptying of the desires and attachments such as selfishness, impatience, anger and greed. Confucian virtue is more easily achieved in a state of emptiness, realizing all things are interrelated and mutually dependent, enabling one to not only think and feel more clearly, but to act more virtuously in harmony with all as one better perceives the proper relationship with others.

Buddhist emptiness can be encouraged in schools and the principles that surround and support it taught. The Buddhist concept of karma, the idea that actions come from intent and have consequences, is a guiding principle for science and education. The Buddhist understanding of causes and cessation of suffering would be helpful.

The cessation of suffering through the Noble Eightfold Path offers many principles, which would be applicable to the schools. Education is a process of developing a correct view of reality, not as it appears to be. Attaining this insight allows seeing the true nature of all things and our relation to them. Developing an ethical and moral disposition so that truth and service are guiding principles is also important, and much needed in modern education. Disciplining the mind so that continuous improvement is a practice, awareness a desired state and being able to concentrate and meditate deeply on the issues of life an acquired skill are also valuable factors in a holistic education.

Combining Socrates, Jesus, Confucius and Buddha in Education

Socrates' view of knowledge, Jesus' conception of love, Confucius' idea of virtue and Buddha's path of emptiness provide valuable models and standards for guiding education. Even though each expresses learning and development with a different emphasis, they all served as agents of change and education that have had a profound impact on the civilizations and countless masses through their lives and teachings. If we look to the core of their teachings, they contain basic guiding principles for education. Socratic knowledge, Christian love, Confucian virtue and Buddhist emptiness all contribute to a well-rounded education.

These principles can also be considered the goals of education and life. Their ideals go beyond our limited conceptions of education to include the ultimate purpose and reality of humanity. As such, they could provide unifying concepts for the peoples of the world and a unifying goal for education. A study of their principles, lives and teachings should be a part of every education.

Each taught a form of the golden rule, which has served as a guiding principle and ideal of societies and education. Each of these individuals caused a transformation in the lives and morals of humankind. Socrates called for a re-examination of our accepted knowledge in the search for truth, Jesus for a love that gives one a new life, Confucius for education that goes beyond mere learning to virtuous action, and Buddha for overcoming self through right thought, effort and action. All combined knowledge, love, virtue and selflessness in such a way that it transformed our world. All acknowledged their own limitations and lived lives that exemplified their teachings. All can serve as lights to guide us on our present pursuit to improve education and find guiding principles of education.

Their concern was not mere knowledge, but for a transformation in thinking, feeling and action. Their answers to life's great questions were meaningful, inspirational and practical. All four spoke to the inner reality from which all action is clothed with meaning (Jaspers, 1965b). Many people know what is right, but do not possess the volition to act upon that knowledge. These educators required not only a change in thinking and feeling, but also supplied a motive force to translate that knowledge and feeling into action.

Change can come from a number of sources. The human values and spiritual principles of these great teachers, which are vital sources of guidance and motivation for change, can engender in others and ourselves solutions and the will to remedy problems that currently beset individuals and society. Socrates, Jesus, Confucius and Buddha can again be instrumental in activating and directing the needed change. They can effectively address the suffering of both individuals and societies. Their teachings offer an antidote to the corruption, immorality, selfishness, hatred and prejudice in our world. They answer the life giving questions of whom and why we are and what and how we should live. Educators can help their students to apply these answers gradually to improving their lives.

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