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What Knowledge is of Most Worth? Considering the Neo-Confucians in the Contemporary Debate Between Moral and Intellectual Learning

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Highlights

- The perennial debate regarding the relative usefulness of various forms of knowledge, especially between the theoretical and practical and the intellectual and moral, lies at the heart of education in both past and present times in both the West and China (de Bary, 1988, 2004, 2005, 2015).
- Neo-Confucians remain relevant in the 21st century and can help us to understand and elucidate contemporary debates in education—specifically, to answer the question Spencer asked nearly a century and a half ago: "What knowledge is of most worth?".
- Mencius, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, Xu Ai, and Kang Youwei advocated for a type of learning that would strongly resonate with John Dewey (1938) and Paulo Freire (1970, 1978). Foundational philosophies of education, particularly in the United States, have drawn heavily on 20th century European-American thinkers; this article attempts to correct this myopia and broaden perspectives.

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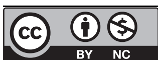

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In 1860, the English polymath Herbert Spencer wrote "*What knowledge is of most worth?"* a treatise expounding upon the worth of various forms of knowledge. For Spencer, a startling disconnect existed between theory and practice. For example, he remarked that schoolboys used their "Latin and Greek to no practical purposes," and that the erstwhile average student "in his shop, or his office, in managing his estate or his family, in playing his part as director of a bank or a railway, … is very little aided by this knowledge he took so many years to acquire" (Spencer, 1860).

In my own work, I have trained undergraduate and graduate students to become social studies teachers in secondary schools. Regarding social studies specifically, Spencer observed a foundation based on a robust study of history, not only merely top-down but also bottom-up. However, more integral is applying this history in the understanding of "social phenomena" and the knowledge that these are "phenomena of life … the most complex manifestations of life," which "are ultimately dependent on the laws of life—and can be understood only when the laws of life are understood" (Spencer, 1860:63). In my work as a teacher-educator, I attempt to not only walk this line between history and social studies but also incorporate the theoretical and practical elements of an effective teacher. It is worth considering how this tension continues in the philosophy of education.

This perennial debate over the relative usefulness of various forms of knowledge, especially between the theoretical and practical and the intellectual and moral, lies at the heart of education in both past and present times in both the West and China (de Bary, 1988, 2004, 2005, 2013). In this article, I aim to demonstrate how important educational philosophers, namely the Neo-Confucians, remain relevant in the 21st century. Specifically, I will delineate how they can help us to understand and elucidate contemporary debates in education and answer the question Spencer asked nearly a century and a half ago: "What knowledge is of most worth?"

In *The Analects*, Confucius (1979) considered the role of education and suggested that moral learning should take primacy over intellectual pursuits. As he noted, "a young man is to be filial within his family and respectful outside it. He is to be earnest and faithful, overflowing in his love … If after such practice, he has the strength to spare, he may use it in the study of culture" (Confucius, 1:6). Moral cultivation is far more essential than intellectual learning, for, as Confucius saw it, a moral nature is more central to the development of fraternal and filial courteousness, as well as to the eventual attainment of individual excellence. However, the problem cannot be resolved so simply, and the debate has continued throughout classical Chinese philosophy as it relates to education.

The preeminent Confucian disciple Mencius (1970) greatly complicated this issue. He reformulated excellence not only as the virtue and benevolence that one innately possesses but also as a process that demands the manifestation of this virtue and benevolence in active civil leadership. This, in turn, enriches people and enhances their well-being. Like the pole star, "which occupies its place while the host of other stars pay homage to it," the noble person, as defined by Mencius, is similarly conceived (Confucius, 2:1). Here, the emphasis is on the noble person who does not merely serve their fellow humans but leads them and serves as a teacher in the pursuit of moral virtue. In such a formulation, intellectual pursuits become increasingly valued because good governance requires careful intellectual study and is not as intuitive as humaneness.

Mencius proceeded to enhance the original formulation of Confucian thought by demonstrating the necessity for intellectual cultivation. He affirmed that a constant and steadfast mind is necessary to bring order to state affairs. Although conceding his own lack of intelligence, the ruler will hope that his minister, wise in the intellectual sense, will "assist [them] and be clear in giving instruction, so that, while not clever, he may endeavor to carry it out" (Mencius, 1A:7). It is evident that having moral instincts is not unto itself adequate to lead the populace. Mencius put it bluntly by suggesting that "goodness alone does not suffice for the conduct of government" (Mencius, 4:A1). The right intentions do not necessarily develop solutions that engender the betterment of the populace; only a keen and perceiving mind is sure to succeed in this task. To accomplish this, the ruler must have proper models to emulate. Specifically, the sage kings Yao and Shun, whose deeds are recounted in the Confucian classics, served as exemplars of good governance. Similarly, for all individuals in civil society, the education "provided in schools, which should include instruction in the duty of filial and fraternal devotion," was an essential component in seeing that such practices were fulfilled in daily life (Mencius, 1A:7).

The emergence of the Daoist tradition—held by some to be a direct response to Confucianism—and later, the Buddhist tradition, reinvigorated larger questions about the nature of the world and what humans can ultimately know about it. At times, their discourse focused less on the proper type of education than on esoteric and nonrational transmissions of knowledge (de Bary, 1988). The carefully constructed Confucian value system, questioned and strengthened through Mohist and Daoist critiques, existed for nearly half a millennium before the arrival of Buddhism; Confucian moral ideals were not about to be easily supplanted by an emergent spiritual tradition. Through its dissemination into Chinese society, Buddhism was forced to reconcile its own teachings with the underlying latticework of Confucian values. A path of integration, rather than dramatic upheaval, proved to be a more appropriate course.

Perhaps most famously, Mouzi—playing the role of a Buddhist apologist in his work *Disposing of Error*—argued in his seminal tract that Buddhist and Confucian traditions are not completely irreconcilable (1999, pp. 421–426). One can be a devoted practitioner of both, never having to

sacrifice one for the other. According to the *Stanford Philosophical Encyclopedia*, "Neo-Confucianism originally developed as a Confucian reaction against Buddhism. Ironically, though, the Neo-Confucians were deeply influenced by Buddhism and adopted many key Buddhist concepts, including the notions that the diverse phenomena of the universe are manifestations of some underlying unity, and that selfishness is the fundamental vice" (2019, p. 3). In some ways, Neo-Confucianism represents a synthesis of Confucian and Buddhist philosophical values, although the precise levels of their respective influence remain a matter of debate (Chan, 1962).

Regardless, the return of a predominantly Confucian philosophy of education in the Neo-Confucian period reemphasized the debate between moral and intellectual learning. First propounded by the Cheng brothers, Hao, and Yi, in the 11th century and later recapitulated by Zhu Xi in the 12th century (de Bary & Bloom, 1999, p. 690), the so-called Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism advocated for the essentiality of intellectual learning. Cheng Hao described the malleability of the mind and noted that if individuals "were willing to learn, they could change" (Cheng & Cheng, 1999a, p. 691). Intellectual cultivation is the key to this realignment to the Way, and only those at the extremes of knowledge have difficulty completing such a task. Those who are the most intelligent are in close proximity to the Way; thus, it is difficult for them to perceive any other mode of living, whereas those who are the most ignorant cannot contemplate the right course of action whatsoever. The method of achieving harmony with the Way lies in the "Investigation of Things," which includes "reading about and discussing truth and principles," "talking about events of the past and present," and "settling affairs in the proper way" (Cheng & Cheng, 1999b, p. 696). Such processes involve the use of the intellect, and in employing such faculties, one effects their refinement and cultivation.

The eminent works of the sage Zhu Xi advanced a concept entitled *mind-and-heart*, which placed special emphasis on human intellect and consciousness. For him, humaneness was not an innate sentiment of the human heart; rather, it was rooted in the human mind, which can deviate between selfish and selfless acts. The underlying basis for humaneness lies in the notion of impartiality, which can only be achieved through the rectification of the mind, which, although filled with passions and desires, can instead be used in the service of the common good, or *gong*.

On a practical level, Zhu Xi incited the canonization of Confucian tradition, as well as the perception of the Four Books as a single entity comprising the core of the classical Confucian tradition. The establishment of a canon defines intellectual learning as a value and, specifically, the aspects of this set of knowledge that are of particular merit. His curriculum mandated a set of core classes in the humanities, with room left for technical specialization in practical sciences. Thus, a student would, through theoretical training, become skilled at good governance and also acquire the practical tools to implement the necessary plans. Despite his emphasis on intellectual training, Zhu Xi appreciated the value of moral conduct in education. However, he did not discuss moral cultivation

as a process of growth and development but rather as a value "inherent in human nature" and a pre-existing qualification for admission to higher education (Zhu, 1999, p. 739). He was more concerned with the theoretical aspects of morality, such as "knowing the eight kinds of good conduct," and hardly mentioned assessing the ways in which individuals implemented these skills into practice in their daily life (ibid.).

Contrary to Zhu Xi's intellectual slant, Wang Yangming's approach to education advanced a new formulation of the learning of the *heart-and-mind*. He emphasized moral education and asserted the innate aspect of human goodness, as well as the concept of noble sagehood as a universal ideal. Like Zhu Xi, he noted that the spontaneity of the human heart causes it to serve as a precarious instrument. On its own, the heart has great difficulty perceiving the correct moral calculus. However, unlike Zhu Xi, he perceived intellectual learning as obscuring the true aim, causing the individual to "unnaturally strive for fame and profit" (Wang, 1999b, p. 844). He stated that, by pursuing academic disciplines, one studies "textual exegesis, memorization, recitation, and literary embellishments," all of which fragment the "mind of the Way" (ibid.). Such intellectual pursuits are but a distraction from the true moral nature, which, as difficult as it is to perceive, becomes even more opaque when one's mind is focused on auxiliary pursuits. Unlike Zhu Xi, who spoke of the "investigation of things" as the means by which one could achieve an understanding of the Way, Wang Yangming advocated developing the one moral principle of "loving the people" (Wang, 1999b, p. 845).

In practical terms, Wang Yangming's educational program encouraged moral cultivation. In a curriculum proposed in April 1518, he advocated the need for youth to be taught "filiality, brotherly respect, loyalty, faithfulness, ritual decorum, rightness, integrity, and the sense of shame" (Wang, 1999a, p. 852). Intellectual learning was not considered valuable because it did not necessarily transform students into functioning members of civil society. Such learning was an amoral affair, with students whipped and tied up by their schoolteachers so that the "youngsters look upon their school as a prison and refuse to enter" (Wang, 1999a, p. 853).

Merely understanding "the mind of the Way," that is, acquiring knowledge from a moral perspective, is insufficient and should be set apart from acting upon the acquired wisdom of virtuous conduct. According to Xu Ai, a prominent disciple of Wang Yangming, intellectual learning is a passive process that, if left static, contributes nothing to society. He cited the example of a son who "knows that the parents should be served with filiality and elder brothers treated with respect, but … cannot put these things into practice" (Xu, 1999, p. 850). Only when intellectual learning is actualized is luminous virtue manifested, when concepts and theories are implemented for the betterment of a greater society. This principle of unifying knowledge and action involves the reconciliation of these two values into a single substance.

In the final estimation, moral and intellectual learning are complementary values that, if practiced together and in proportional quantities, reinforce one another. Moderation is key to finding

a solution, for when one value is overdeveloped while the other is considered expendable, then an individual resembles a cart with two wheels of unequal size. Instead of progressing in a teleological fashion toward becoming an educated person, one is restless, confused, and without direction. Moral learning, at the expense of becoming ignorant of the affairs of the world or the manner in which it operates, allows one to understand what ought to be done to end suffering but not how to accomplish it. Similarly, intellectual learning can be a stifling proposition, especially if one does not understand its moral ramifications.

This was true for Kang Youwei, who noted that scholars "filled their homes with the books that they had written, but in the end" wondered "[W]hat was the use of all this?" (Kang, 2000, p. 261). So immersed in his studies, the young Kang Youwei was in a state where "his intelligence and comprehension became confused" (ibid.). Li Zehou reiterated this point by noting that knowledge is inherently connected to practice. He wrote "that ethics is entirely reduced to the self-conscious action of the individual" (Li, 2000, p. 580). Knowledge of a moral path is only valuable when it is put to good use in daily life. Li even noted that Mao Zedong carried on the same tradition of ethical practice as urged in Confucian and Neo-Confucian thought. He noted that both "establish the subjective will and a sense of moral responsibility" (Li, 2000, p. 581).

It is worth considering how both Confucius and the Neo-Confucians addressed the issue of moral versus intellectual learning many centuries before Spencer took up the topic. This is particularly relevant in light of continued debates in both the 20th and 21st centuries regarding the actual role of moral and intellectual learning in schools at all levels: elementary, middle, secondary, and tertiary. Dewey (1938) and Freire (1970, 1978), arguably the two greatest educational philosophers of the 20th century in the West, would likely be amazed to find that their ideas had already been advocated by Mencius, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, Xu Ai, and Kang Youwei decades and centuries before they put pen to paper.

However, until very recently, both Confucians and Neo-Confucians were unfortunately excluded from conversations concerning the philosophy of education in the West. I experienced this at the first American Educational Research Association meeting that I attended in 2014. At a special interest group meeting devoted to the influence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in education, a Chinese-American scholar noted that both Confucians and Neo-Confucians, among other non-Western voices, had been excluded from the conversation. Although it was obvious that they had important ideas to contribute to the philosophy of education, they were not included in a real or systematic way, making only token appearances at best. Scholars such as Tan (2017, 2018) have recently compared the writings of Confucius and Paulo Freire. She has done an excellent job in this endeavor, although no evidence exists that Freire directly drew on or was influenced by Confucius' writings in his own scholarly output.

Still, Tan (2017) argued about the ways that Freirean philosophy understands the notion of "humanization," which, for Freire, is the antithesis of dehumanization, and finds a close analog

in the concept of *ren*. Both humanization and humaneness articulate the emancipatory power of a moral person to use education for liberatory and emancipatory actions. These are not simply empty rhetorical gestures; rather, both philosophies see the power of education in solving complex problems in their times and dismantling oppressive social and governmental structures that lead to the dehumanization of individuals and communities. In this way, both embody the opening words of *The Analects*, which asks for unity of the theoretical and practical and of the intellectual and moral, when the following rhetorical question is asked: "[T]o learn, and at due times to practice what one has learned … is that not also to be a noble person?" (Confucius, 1:1).

Although the Neo-Confucians and Paulo Freire have been considered philosophically kindred spirits, the work of Behuniak (2019) cataloged the ways in which the preeminent American educational philosopher John Dewey was more directly impacted by the philosophy of Neo-Confucians. Although nearly every American teacher and teacher educator is familiar with John Dewey, few are familiar with his long stay in China and the deep and lasting legacy of Chinese culture and Confucian thought in his own philosophy of education. Thanks to the connections of his former student Hu Shih, Dewey arrived in China in May 1919 and spent nearly two years there, learning the ways that Confucian and Neo-Confucian values aligned with his own progressive pedagogy. Dewey referred to this period as the "most interesting and intellectually the most profitable thing I have ever done" (Behuniak, 2019, p. 59). While in China, he gave lectures on the challenges of modernization and "encourage[d] China to retain all that is worthy in its own heritage while selectively adopting Western approaches" (Behuniak, 2019, p. 77). In the realm of science, for example, this meant adopting Western ideas around the scientific method but not divorcing science from moral and ethical conduct.

As noted by Mei Yibao, who studied with Dewey at Columbia in the 1920s, Dewey "was so in step with Chinese tradition and history that [he] was referred to by us students as the American Confucius" (Behuniak, 2019, p. 79). Dewey saw great resonance in both the ideals of the Confucian educational system and the ways in which they had been altered and diluted by the late Qing dynasty at the turn of the 20th century. He noted that if students in China "find themselves limited to their textbooks, instead of finding in these books the key to richer and more meaningful living . . . if they cannot use their knowledge to enable them to understand the life of their society and to contribute to its improvement, their schooling is a waste of their time and of the money which supported the school" (Behuniak, 2019, p. 68).

It is important to note that although strong resonances and similarities are evident between Confucian and Deweyan philosophy, scholars have noted that their ideas about moral education differ (Sim, 2009). Differences between Deweyan and Confucian philosophy were noted as early as 1919, at the original welcome banquet held in honor of Dewey's arrival in China, in prepared remarks by the chancellor of Beijing University, Cai Yuanpei (Yang, 2016, p. 1). A more significant

critique of the various philosophical similarities and differences pertains to John Dewey's precise degree of direct knowledge of and engagement with Confucian and Neo-Confucian writings. In general, it seems that much of his knowledge of Confucianism was mediated and shaped by the Chinese disciples of Dewey's own educational philosophy (Behuniak, 2019; Peng, 2007; Yang, 2016). This last point certainly represents an area for further scholarly research and investigation.

What this generally means for scholars in the West who engage with the philosophy of education, and teacher-educators more broadly, is that if they wish to develop a robust cultural understanding around education and understand the nuanced importance of moral education as perceived by Paulo Freire and John Dewey, then engagement with seminal Confucians, such as Mencius, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, Xu Ai, and Kang Youwei, must be an inevitable part of the experience. Further, they will learn that notions of moral education and the learning of the heart and mind in unison do not constitute a new fad, nor a cultural turn of the current century but rather an important and perennial conversation that has taken place in China for thousands of years.

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