Moral Integrity and Social Harmony: As Seen Through the Eyes Of Confucius And Lao Tzu

Religious and political beliefs have influenced humanity since the dawn of mankind, as rulers and kings led civilizations toward the end of the first millennium BCE. The political and religious beliefs of China would undergo a powerful change however, as a new way of thought began to emerge known as axial age thinking: a pivotal era in human development. This quest for human meaning would transform India, China, and ultimately the world. It was during this period that sages and philosophers sought to bring peace back to the warring kingdoms of China by providing rulers and citizens alike with instructions and guidelines for harmonious living. New ways of thinking uniquely transformed societies by providing answers to fundamental questions such as one's place in the universe, while also explaining human relationships to God, the world, the family, and community. Schools cropped up throughout China where sages taught the growing number of disciples who, disillusioned by the war and suffering that surrounded them, sought guidance on a better way to live.

Two very influential teachers of the Axial Age were the great Chinese thinkers, Confucius (ca.500 BCE), and Lao Tzu (ca.300 BCE). It is said that Confucius was roughly a contemporary of Lao Tzu and both thinkers were only separated by a few hundred years. Although they shared a common goal, to bring peace and social order back to feudal Chinese society, their philosophy and approach to obtaining social and personal harmony and were quite different.

Lao Tzu founded the Chinese doctrine written in the Tao Te Ching: “The Unvarying Way.” Concerned about the decline and moral decay of society, in particular hierarchy, Lao Tzu's teachings

---

and philosophy focused on achieving harmony through self-awareness. In order to obtain social order and harmony, the student must become centered in “Wu Wei” or non-action; freedom from desire, ambition, and force. As the individual cultivated the self through Wu Wei, they would discover their relationship to the universe and immortality, ultimately finding the natural balance which resulted in harmony.

Confucius founded the Chinese doctrine shown in The Analects, and Confucianism eventually went on to become the primary religion in China. Confucius was also moved by people's suffering and believed that in order to achieve social harmony, the student must place moral principles before self interest. Social order and harmony was accomplished by following tradition, and remembering one's duties and obligations to society as a whole. Showing loyalty and consideration for one's parents was extremely important, as was looking to elders and parents for guidance.

Confucianism instructed the disciple to adhere to a moral code of conduct as they engaged with the world. Confucius believed that individual integrity and correct moral behavior would create cultural unity. Unlike Confucianism, The Tao Te Ching instructs the disciple to practice detachment. Lao Tzu believed that disengagement would allow the Daoist to overcome their suffering.

Although both doctrines were centered in creating harmony, The Tao Te Ching focused on finding balance and peace within the human psyche, and embodied a spiritual element, while the Analects relied on personal responsibility, ethics, filial piety, and becoming involved with the community—a more practical element.

---

It is in the resolution of political conflict that the values embodied in the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Analects* are in direct opposition. Confucius stressed the importance of adherence to tradition, believing that only those who are well educated should hold offices of political power. He also directed his followers to become involved in government and even attempted to gain entry into public office himself.\(^\text{10}\) Lao Tzu on the other hand, recommended withdrawal from government, believing that the only way to achieve harmony was a return to the natural state of being -- not meeting force with force, but instead focusing on the development of personal integrity and non action. In fact, he viewed government as invasive and the cause of suffering. Government should strive to cultivate non action -- not acting on its people -- avoiding the use of strong will. By governing lightly, people will be less likely to rebel.\(^\text{11}\)

Envisioning a society where all citizens -- whether merchants or kings -- displayed honor and morally correct behavior, Confucianism placed a great deal of importance on education; believing that education would produce individuals of virtue, honor, and knowledge. Following tradition was important as well as leading by example. Confucius told his followers “When we see men of worth we should think of equaling them...”\(^\text{12}\) Confucius encouraged involvement in politics, and maintained that rulers and aristocracy should act in accordance to the rules ordained by heaven.\(^\text{13}\) Lao Tzu viewed political structure much differently. The *Tao Te Ching* placed importance on individual retreat and contemplation. People should seek to refrain from political ambition. According to Lao Tzu, desire, arrogance, and ambition were the very things that contributed to political and social ruin. Lao Tzu explained that “The way things are is to act without thinking of acting; to conduct affairs without…. 

moral conduct, upholding tradition, honoring the family, and striving for loyalty and education, Confucius also gave his followers the power to restore social order, beginning with the self.

Both doctrines emphasize that simple human kindness, honesty, and a connection with nature, the self, and the divine would lead to moral integrity and social harmony. Instead of relying on appeasing the Gods with offerings and sacrifices, both doctrines embodied the belief that in order to create an ordered society, one must first strive to attain personal harmony. Religious sacrifices and offerings could not take the place of moral obligation and responsibility.¹⁴ The doctrines of Confucius and Lao Tzu were moral and ethical codes to be expressed in daily life -- no temples or houses of worship were needed in order to practice either discipline.