



Confucius, Needham and Modern Psychology

Speaker: Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam, Honorary Fellow, ICS

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The presentation by Ravi Bhoothalingam was an attempt to understand the old but valid notions bounded in Confucianism, further propounded in Needham's magisterial work on China, and its relation and influence on 'scientific method' with Chinese characteristics. The speaker analyzed the seemingly contorted 'trilemma' of Confucius-Needham-Modern Psychology through four points of reference: 1) the relationship between Confucius and scientific method, 2) the influence of language on thought processes, 3) the 'mind-brain' dilemma through the centuries old Confucian concepts of 'shu' and 'xin', and 4) the development of 'moral sense' in the human conscience.

The speaker examined the first point of reference by discussing the relationship between Needham and Confucius. He referred to the problematic concept of 'scientific method' through a simple discussion on how to achieve peace in the world through the application of 'deductive logic' and 'inductive logic', and by placing the rational human being at the centre. The proto-scientific manual '*Da Xue*' provides the correct analogy to what Confucius actually meant when founding the basis for world peace: it is not things out there but rather the nature of man that is the epicentre of it all. The question however remains as to what or who is that 'rational individual'? This is where the other points of reference come into play.

Hence, the second point of analysis is the influence of language on the thought processes understood through the Needham-Psychology part of the aforementioned trilemma. Needham's inquiry, though not specifically in the field of psychology, sought to understand the impact of traditional Chinese language on the Chinese individual and its broader impact on 'scientific method' within Chinese society. This was done through the 'Rectification of Names', which briefly put, means that things/humans should be called by their right names. Exploring the reasons behind such a line of thinking, the speaker explained that the effects of language on a human being can be understood through four points: deep early effects (perception) [for eg., the speaker mentioned about how the Eskimoes have 47 different words for snow owing to their intimate experience and knowledge of snow]; broad pervasive effects

(gender, voices); important consequences of naming something correctly; and big differences that result in the formation of concepts of time, space, and writing [some languages change the basis of tense in their language through the logic that the past can be seen but not the future]. Thus, the importance of calling things/humans by the right name becomes an important starting point – a fact well known among those who regularly visit the celestial charts to course out their *modus operandi*. There have been other stalwarts who have looked into the influence of language on human beings. Noam Chomsky put forward the theory of ‘Deep Grammar’ whereby every individual is the same at a certain level. This was later modified by Edward Sapir, who provides the analogy that every computing software provides the faculty to do the same thing but each has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Delving into the main part of the presentation, the speaker moved on to examine the basis for understanding the underlying conditionality of rationality which is constructed through the influence of language on the human being’s ‘moral sense’. Confucius sought to explain it through the concepts of ‘*shu*’ and ‘*xin*.’ The word ‘*shu*’ extolled the now mainstream Christian idea of not doing unto others what one wouldn’t want others to do unto the one. This has a larger bearing on the achievement of world peace with the rational individual being at the epicentre, as proposed in the ‘*Da Xue*’. A recent development along these lines would be the characterization of the ‘Phantoms’ in the human brain categorized as the ‘mirror neurons’ by Dr. Vilayanur Ramachandran. These ‘mirror neurons’ provide a ‘scientific method’ to understand the concepts of empathy that seems to be the bulwark of the concept of the word ‘*shu*.’ With regard to the word ‘*xin*’, the mind (emotional) and the brain (logical) are seen as intimately interrelated. In combination, the two words provide the structural basis for understanding the framework within which the orthodox idea of the rational individual needs to be revamped.

The speaker further explained that the origins of human morality seem to be placed within the Confucian understanding of what the individual should be. In fact, apart from the stalwarts in modern psychology, even Fei Xiaotong had extrapolated the very basis of the Chinese individual. Fei had talked about the individual being immersed in a societal process based on ‘filial piety’ thereby giving way to a Chinese society in which the ‘rule of law’ was not a pre-requisite but was in fact replaced by notions of customs and ‘what is right’. Haidt explained this phenomenon through the Darwinian concept of ‘altruistic behaviour in animals’. The Soviets, on the other hand, believed that each individual could be inculcated with learned behaviour and was not a ‘blank slate’. The larger question remains as to what if the society could be homogenised. An example would be the need for ‘conspicuous consumption’ – though varied in content (as to what is consumed) but still dependent on the undeniable proposition that the human being is concerned with oneself. Such self-interested behaviour exists and persists, albeit within the larger ambit of the ‘ripple effect’ that Fei Xiaotong had talked about. But, the non-self-interested component of behavioural traits cannot be ignored, which is what Confucian and Haidt’s analysis

seems to put forward. The human being is thrown out of its cocoon of simplistic characterization, as propounded by the orthodox believers. This last part, dealing with the idea of 'moral sense' is understood by the speaker through the last dual feature of the trilemma mentioned earlier: Confucius and modern psychology.

Discussion

During the ensuing discussion, a number of interesting questions were raised. The first pertained to the recent Shanghai stock exchange crash and how it could be understood within the trilemma of Confucius-Needham-Modern Psychology. The speaker responded by pointing to the fact that even though the stock markets the world over function within set parameters, it is the response of the Chinese government that one needs to pay attention to. The CPC depended on the age old norm of shaming and naming in controlling the downward spiral of the stock market. So, can this be seen as a result of the societal process that is based on 'customs and norms?' This is similar to the fact that in the U.S., unemployment rates are a political nightmare whereas in Europe the welfare state is the primary political concern. In fact, the Confucian logic was overwritten by the political and economic might of the proponents of the 'scientific method' espoused through the age of enlightenment.

Another important question asked, was in relation to the role of Confucianism in the backwardness of the Chinese society. The speaker responded by saying that one reason to vindicate this accusation would be that the structure of the Chinese society 'chose' so and did not 'fail' to do so. These questions need a re-visitation along the lines of Needham's original enquiry: did the scientific method catch up with Confucius logic? To counter the argument extolling the virtues of Western modernity, one might also argue that there are various forms of modernity. Another interesting question pertained to the issue of inadequate translation of the term *shu* as reciprocity, as pointed out by the speaker during the presentation. Even so, is there any reference to overcoming this issue of reciprocity in the works of Confucius or Needham? Referring to the age-old Confucian concept of '*Li*', the speaker explained that the correct frame of mind in an individual which, when corroborated with communication would result in better outcomes.

Report prepared by Vishal Choudhury, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Ravi Bhoothalingam is Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, and studied Experimental Psychology at Cambridge University, U.K. under renowned scientist and Sinologist Joseph Needham. He serves as an Independent Director on several company boards. After his last assignment as President, Oberoi Hotels, he has traveled extensively within China, Mongolia and Central Asia. His consulting practice focuses on leadership coaching and he is active in India-China business and cultural relations. Ravi is a member of the Joint Study Group for the BCIM Economic Corridor, and sits on the Editorial Boards of *China Report* and *World Affairs*. He is

also Member, Court of Governors of the Administrative Staff College of India, Hyderabad (ASCI) and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, London.

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