

IV topic

Introduction

Once upon in China Confucius said: “Now I understand why the doctrine of the mean can not be put into practice. Clever people, knowing it thoroughly, don’t think it is practicable, while stupid people, unable to understand it, do not know how to practice it. I also know why the doctrine of the mean can not be popularized. Talented people overdo it while unskilled people can not do it.”(The Doctrine of the Mean, translated by Fu Yunlong, Beijing 1996, pp. 11-12) Now Confucius here was, as far as I know, a moralistic philosopher, that is he was concerned with such somewhat clichéd concepts like that of virtue, humanity and etc... And for such a philosopher this, I presume, would have posed a great problem; the doctrine of the mean, or moderation, seems to be an essential virtue, yet it is practically unachievable for the reasons that Confucius mentioned. Thus, what are we to do?

Well, first and foremost, we are not to analyse Confucius’s philosophy as a whole, but rather we are to contemplate about this problem, somewhat disconnected to Confucius’s philosophy. The justification for such a disconnection would be, first, that one cannot become Confucius fully and, thus, such disconnections, based on personal interpretations, are inevitable and, second, that Confucius’s philosophy isn’t relevant to the problem. That is, of course it would provide a deeper insight in what Confucius meant by saying this, however, it tells me nothing about what I mean when I read the quotation. Then, how will I justify my truth? Well, to put it simply, “truth” is a name given to one’s own opinion in unity with the feeling of truth (truth is beauty and vice versa) and, in such a case, justification is a convincing explanation. It is important to note that, despite all of this, I will base my text, for instance, on Taoist philosophy, the counterpart of Confucianism, but it isn’t essential. I am to explain, and the reader is to create her or his own truth. So, without further ado, let us begin!

1.

The first question that we are to ask, before we investigate further into how practical is it to implement the doctrine of the mean, before we investigate any of its implications, is the question of the mean itself. What is the mean? Well, if we were to consider two radical opposites, let’s say every person is good or every person is evil, we would find that neither of them would be a proper or a practical solution, thus, we find a mean between two opposites and use this more practical, moderate solution, in our example that would be that some people are evil and some

people are good. This doctrine, however, has practical meaning which is probably more important than what it means in relation to thought (in a moralistic point of view, again even here it is only my interpretation, it is what you do that matters). For instance, in relation to our previous example, if I think that every person is evil, then I am to mistrust everyone, on the other hand, if I am to think that every person is good then I am to trust them blindly, however, these radical opposites are not the case: some people are good and some people are evil, thus, based on this, there is a level of trust that I should give to a random person, this level is the mean, the moderate solution to the problem.

In light of this concept we then are to ask ourselves why do clever people ought to think that this doctrine of the mean is impracticable? If such people are clever, how can they not perceive the moderate solution to all things, and if they do not understand it thoroughly, which, according to Confucius, they do, what makes them clever? It is rather clear that people of inferior intelligence, lacking the capacity to grasp this practice mentally, cannot systematically put it into practice. All they can do is to put their understanding of the doctrine, which may be far from the truth, into practice. And it is also clear that unskilled people cannot put it into practice, because that is what being unskilled means – not having the capacity to systematically put into practice. But what about people who are intelligent, who are skilled? Confucius says that intelligent people, understanding the concept completely, deduce that it is not possible to put it into practice, and the talented, paradoxically, tend to overdo it. How can the practice of moderation be immoderate? How can this be so? It seems that the concept of the mean, the doctrine is problematic...

2.

The concept of the mean puts forward several problems, different in how they are evident. The first problem, which is the most obvious one, is that, okay, we have two radical opposites, none of which seem to work, but where is the mean between them? With our former example we deduced that some people are evil, and some people are good and, consequently, there is a moderate level of trust which we should give, but what is that level? How do I know that my level of trust isn't just as radical as plainly mistrusting everyone, and that mistrusting everyone isn't actually the most moderate solution in comparison to a more radical idea, such as hating everyone? And, when I say that some people are good and some are evil, how many of them are such and such? Maybe it's only my mother who's good and everyone else is evil, or maybe it's

only my mother who's evil and everyone else is good. Thus, the problem at hand is how do we find this mean that we are searching for?

Well, when we talk about the doctrine of the mean in at least practical terms, we rely on our experience. When we trust or mistrust someone, it depends on what we know about them, how we have experienced them. The problem with our experience is that it isn't always trustworthy. We change our opinions, we err, we are biased and so on... And if this is so, how can I possibly find any moderate solution? As clever as I might be, I can be plainly ignorant about some things, which wouldn't let me find the right mean between two radical ideas. If everyone that I met hurt me, I would be mistrusting, and if everyone I met would love me, I would trust people blindly. These two solutions seem immoderate, only because I presumably know more, but am I not biased in this way to think that the people I met are representative of the real, statistical mean, which would imply a moderate course of actions? Thus, due to the inherent imperfections of our knowledge, it seems that the doctrine of the mean is impracticable.

The other obvious problem with the doctrine of the mean is that not always the mean is the best solution to a certain situation. However, here it is important to notice that there are **two** concepts of the mean. The first one states, closely related to the earlier explanation of the mean, that the mean is the best practical solution, both in terms of ideas and actions. In this case, the mean is always the best thing to practice. The second concept of the mean implies the average between two radical ideas. If I were to say that some people are good, and others are evil, I imply that these two groups are comparable in size, that is, one is not substantially larger than the other. So as not to confuse the reader any further from here now on I shall call this mean "(the) average". In such understanding, radical ideas are those who are similar to the opposites which we are trying to moderate. For instance, saying that everyone is evil, or everyone is evil except for my uncle, practically implies the same thing that almost everyone is evil, and thus, such ideas are equally radical.

Now, if we were to ask if the average solutions is truly always the best, or can it be a radical one that's better, or which of the possible average solutions (the average is not in the strict middle, it is more of an intuitive middle) is the best, then we were to basically ask an earlier question of where the best solution can be find, where is the mean? And, as I said before, since our knowledge is imperfect, since there is always something we do not know, we can never be sure that our mean is the right mean, and that we are not terribly mistake. An intelligent person would

see this, how he or she and the people around him or her fail to act moderately, how they try to moderate two opposites, and fail, how they try to moderate work and rest, and become either lazy or stressed, good and evil, and become either one or the other, trust and mistrust, and again mistrust or trust too much. Seeing this, a clever person would know, that the doctrine of the mean is impossible to practice.

The paradox that a talented person overdoes moderation is, indeed, a trivial one. As I mentioned, there are two concepts of the mean in which we find a solution to the problem. A skilled person knows, that is, has the method, the skill, how to find the mean, in the sense of the average, in all things. This however, can be different from the best course of action. If the president is constantly moderating between various parties, there is no decisive action, which might be necessary to, for instance, protect the country's political or economic interests. This moderation (in sense of the average) is indeed immoderate (in the sense of the mean). Thus, a person who is skilled in a particular way may overdo the practice of the doctrine of the mean, in the sense of finding the average solution.

3.

Now we, like Confucius, understand that the doctrine of the mean is problematic in the sense of finding the mean, knowing this, an intelligent person shall think that the doctrine cannot be practiced and a person of inferior intelligence won't be able to grasp the concept in the first place. Thus, it is practically impossible to put the doctrine into practice, most people wither wouldn't be willing or able to practice it. And likewise, since an unskilled person cannot practice it (that's what being an unskilled person means in this case), and a skilled person can overdo it, that is practice the average solution even when it's not the best solution. Thus, since most people are unable to moderately (in the sense of the mean) practice moderation (in the sense of the average), this doctrine cannot become popular. This is my interpretation of Confucius's saying. However, even though we practically somewhat understand Confucius's idea, we are far from done yet.

Confucius said that "the doctrine of the mean can not be put into practice". However, I believe, that moderation can be practiced, although it is extremely difficult to make it a widespread practice. If there were no such thing as moderation, we wouldn't talk about it, yet there is something that we are talking about. The question at hand then is such: how do we find the

mean, that is, what is the right thing to do? How are we then to practice moderation if one cannot trust one's experience?

4.

The solution to this problem, the problem of moderation, I believe can be found from a more Taoist point of view. But first let us investigate the problem at hand. Our understanding is such that our experience is flawed and, thus, it is impossible to find the right mean. However, I would like to ask you this, if our experience, in the most general sense of the word, unifying both a priori and a posteriori, is so flawed, then how come do we know that it is flawed? We only know that it is flawed because we can remember when we or someone else failed. If we couldn't remember this, we couldn't know this, and then if we couldn't know that something fails, on what basis could we say that it does? Thus, in such a case, we could not know that our experience fails, thus, it wouldn't fail and, therefore, it would be true. If I were to say then that all experience, as it relates to memory, is flawed, I would say a self-contradictory statement, thus it cannot be true. Thus some of my memories are true. What is more, if we now were to analyse experience, as in everything that is experienced now, including you, your consciousness reading this sentence, judging and reflecting, we would see a similar thing: if I were to say that my current experience is false, I would base it on my experience, thus, it cannot be true. Thus, my current experience is true. Thus, my experience, both relating to what is experienced on the whole and what experience lies in memory, is true.

Now, since my experience is true, I can no longer say that moderation, in the sense of taking the right stance, is impossible. However, this does mean that the way I moderate will depend on my experience. Nevertheless, this does not imply that such moderation is untrustworthy, quite the opposite, our experience is the most trustworthy thing we have; indeed, it is the only thing we have. Furthermore, this means that we always know what the right thing to do is, because it is whatever is based on our experience. If we believe in determinism, which I do, this implies that there is always only one thing that we can do, although we are not necessarily aware of what it is, this is, of course based on our experience, and, since whatever we do, due to determinism, is discretely based on our experience, and whatever is based on our experience is the right thing to do, this means, that we cannot do anything which would not be right. Thus, we are in a constant position of being moderate.

5.

If we, however, are in a constant position of doing what is right, then how come there exists a concept of what is wrong? And, what is more, if there does not exist a concept of what is wrong, in contrast to what thing does it arise? That is, viewing things from a Taoist standpoint, opposites arise mutually and are impossible without each other. As the ancient Chinese Taoist sage Laozi said, when people know good as good, evil arises. The argument for such a view would be psychological, if good was a property constant to everything, we could not discern it from our experience and, thus, it could not exist for us. Thus, my question is such, how are the concepts of right and not right at all possible?

Wrong is experienced in the present, yet it refers to the past. That is my solution. As I mentioned before, we know that something is wrong only by comparing the truth (which is experienced in the present as a property of reality, referring to the reality at present) to what is remembered. If I remember anything being not truth in the meaning “true” has currently, then I say it is “false”. When my actions were inadequate, that is false in a specific manner, I say that I erred. The past can be wrong or right, but the present is always right.

6.

The present is always right, however we still have our will even with determinism. If not, these words that I say shall at least be a part of what is determining you and, thus, I still maintain my will as a manifestation of interdependencies in determinism. That is, I am a unity of particles, my will is determined by them, but I am still free, since I am the nature that constitutes me, I am my particles. That we have our will means that we still can do things. The question is, what are we to do to practice the doctrine of the mean?

A popular answer for this would be that it should be deduced by reason. However, I do not totally agree with it. Here is important the Taoist notion of underlying unity in all things, which can be clearly seen in the Tao Te Ching and in the Zhuangzi. The universe is a whole with Tao as its unifying principle. Therefore, the concept of the average is flawed, since it implies being between two radical opposites, there is no unity. Furthermore, the problem with using one’s reason is that it is implied that there is something that we are not using. Something that it is unallowed to use, something unjustified. Often feelings are said to be irrational because of their fickle nature, having different feelings we do different things in different situations, however, the same can apply to our reason. Our opinions change and our reactions in different situations differ, because we learn, our experience changes. We have feelings because it was given to us by

evolution, because they are beneficial to us. Furthermore, truth is a feeling, in the sense that it is an experience, and it is remarkable to note that one of the criteria of truth for Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, is beauty. Truth is beautiful. Beauty is truthful. Thus, feelings are a part of us and, hence are important in discerning any truth, including that of what actions would be considered moderate.

The ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi asked, how can a sentence be said and not allowed, how can a way be walked and not exist? Indeed, it cannot. The present truth is always true. Thus, it is irrational to mistrust a truth found only because it seems irrational. A truth is found for a reason, and there is more to us than the rational self. What I am saying is this: one ought to use every faculty of the self possible if one is to discover the truth. Why? Because we already do, and not doing it only means to defy this in a superficial manner. Doing this, one does not defy oneself and integrity is preserved. Furthermore, I believe that such mode of acting is what Laozi calls *wu wei*, or effortless action, since I believe that effort comes from doing something which is unpleasant and thereby going against your feeling of what (pleasant) and wrong (unpleasant), which would be impossible to do when one acts being truly and wholly self.

Conclusion

We have seen that the concept of moderation lies in the concept of what is right to do. At first glance it would seem that moderation is impossible since our experience is flawed, however, upon closer inspection we see that “wrong”, what is flawed only refers to the past. Experience cannot be false in the present. Therefore, moderation, or finding the mean is possible. This moderation is determined by our experience and depends on it. Still, despite determinism, one has the capacity to do and, thus, moderation is achieved via action. I suggest that when searching for the truth, when trying to be moderate, one ought to not only trust one’s reason, but also one’s intuition, whatever is present, and to be wholly self, thereby practicing effortless action.

To sum up, despite what Confucius said, moderation is possible, although it indeed might never become popular.