



Young People and their Career and Life Development: Discussing Aristotle's Virtues, the Confucian Idea of Practical Wisdom, and Transformational Giftedness

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Abstract

Virtues, practical wisdom and transformational giftedness are central ideas in philosophy and psychology which are also considered in the Confucian tradition. Wisdom and giftedness are seen as virtues that individuals grow into through personal experiences and unique perceptions of the world. Three main themes reflect the spirit of this philosophy: to keep going resolutely despite knowing the task is impossible, the oneness of knowing and acting, and a tension between altruism and love of self. This essay introduces these concepts and proposes that these are virtues for self-development, career development, and for making the world a better place.

Keywords: Practical wisdom, transformational giftedness, Confucianism, virtue, self-development, making the world a better place

Wisdom is a complex concept that can be used in various ways, including explaining the pursuit of knowledge that is aimed at attaining a common good by balancing the interests of individuals, others, and society (Reis et al., 2023; Sternberg, 2019). Among various accounts of wisdom, practical wisdom (phronesis), is defined as “a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods”, an idea discussed as a virtue of the character by Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./2009). Virtue, in this context, is a state of character that is associated with moderate choices and determined by the practical wisdom available to any reasonable human being. The moderate (mean) level refers to the nature of the virtue of character that has the pragmatic function of becoming good, where either excess or another defect is

argued to destroy virtue of character. An example from Aristotle is of “properly proud” being the moderate level of honor (the mean, appropriate), but “emptily vain” is the excessive version and “unduly humble” is defective. Further, to live a better life, Aristotle encourages people to have knowledge, choose particular behaviors for their own sake, and behave from a position of an “unchangeable good virtue” of character.

Another notion of wisdom is related to the concept of intelligence. But rather than the traditional understanding of human intelligence in terms of cognitive functions, of interest to this writing is the triarchic theory of human intelligence (Sternberg, 1984) that emphasizes people's application of intelligence in daily life and asserts the role of environmental adaptation, selection,

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and shaping. This aspect of a psychological theory of intelligences comes close to the idea of practical wisdom.

Confucianism is a philosophy founded by Confucius, a thinker, educator, and spiritual leader, influential in ancient and current Chinese thought and civilization, as well as regions beyond, especially across Asia (Chang, 1980; Wu, 2006). Ideas of wisdom are a cornerstone of the Confucian philosophy and among Confucianism's influential doctrines, the doctrine of Ren stands out, referring to a lifelong striving by humans to be the most genuine, sincere, and humane person he or she can become (Li, 2003). Stressing the power of nurture on individual development, Confucianism asserts Ren is the self-cultivation and self-perfection process that every human being can seek and achieve through single-minded endeavor and persistent practice (Smith, 1973; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Related to this effort-centered doctrine is the belief that people by nature are born to be good and their own will is to be good, and that these goals can be achieved through education and learning (Wu, 2006). The 13th-14th century literary masterpiece in trimetric verse, *San Zi Jing* (The Three Character Classic), presents these Confucian principles of diligence, preservation of goodwill and benevolence, indoctrinating followers of Confucianism to achieve high actualization of the principles in life and become a genuine, virtuous and humane person, a sage (Lee, 1996; Smith, 1973; Wu, 2006).

Giftedness too is a complex concept. The conception of giftedness can be dated back to Plato although more recently the concept has emerged mainly in discussions about standards of achievement (Pfeiffer, 2018; Sternberg, 2020; Sternberg et al., 2021). Distinct from standards-based conceptions (e.g., giftedness as high scores on IQ tests), the concept of transformational giftedness comes from the study of two contrasting styles of leadership: the transactional style that leads through the use of rewards and punishments, and the transformational style that aims to enlighten and support the development of

the self, colleagues, and the organization (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Sternberg, 2020; Terman, 1925). Under the latter rationale, people with transformational giftedness by nature appeal for a positive and transformative change in the world rather than a tit-for-tat interaction that is structured around exchange of resources (Sternberg, 2020; Sternberg et al., 2021).

In my reading, the existing literature links Confucianism to practical wisdom and transformational giftedness, yet overlooks the nature of their direct relationship with personal experiences. A recent ethnographic study I conducted addressed this gap in the literature by conducting a) an ethnographic interview with a Chinese girl who was being raised in Confucianism and b) a panel discussion with Chinese women to observe how practical wisdom had been influenced at the individual level to realize their transformational giftedness (Liu, 2024). Thematic analysis and grounded theory method were used in analyzing the data. Three main themes emerged from the ethnography that reflect the spirit of this philosophy. I discuss each theme below.

To Keep Going Resolutely Despite Knowing the Task Is Impossible: To Grind an Iron Pestle into a Needle

The first manifestation of the spirit of Confucian philosophy is to engage in the effortful process of learning. Although the process of self-development and self-actualization is full of hard work, and people know deeply about this tough road, life-long learning is still required and the pursuit of quick results and the circumvention of endeavors is to be looked down upon (Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Wu, 2006). One of the most widely disseminated idioms in Chinese society is that it is possible for you to grind an iron pestle into a needle as long as you work really hard, reflecting that even if you know that many things or tasks are not possible, you have to have the perseverance to finally achieve a breakthrough, making the seemingly impossible possible. The same logic applies to the resolute pursuing necessary for the achievement of good

virtues of character such as benevolence, kindness, tolerance and genuineness, even though knowing each of these is hard and even impossible to become (Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Wu, 2006). In addition, despite a current society where the sense of responsibility to contribute to society and the sense of duty to be civic-minded are missing, one should keep going resolutely to own and realize one's transformational giftedness. Put differently, one should work to make the world a better place despite knowing the task is tough and to some extent, impossible.

The Oneness of Knowing and Acting: Thought without Learning is Perilous

Confucianism focuses on self-actualization and an effort-centered philosophy of learning and success (Chang, 1980; Freeman, 2004; Wu, 2006), and the interdependent relationship between studying and thinking is captured in the saying, "Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous." (in Lun Yu, *The Analects*). This precept demonstrates the indispensable unity of knowledge and practice. Besides, the oneness of knowing and acting has a long-term view in the sense that a learning mindset, continuous practice, and persistent voluntary hard work are required throughout the whole life of an individual (Wu, 2006)—an idea somewhat more than today's popular term, life-long learning. Turning to the idea of Aristotle's virtues, people's practical wisdom also requires them to act from and according to their virtue of character and reason, where justified reason supports and guides actions. Similarly, in the context of modern psychological thought, practical intelligence and transformational giftedness may be seen as a combination of knowledge and continuous effort to adapt, select, and contribute positively to the world (Sternberg, 1984; Sternberg, 2020; Sternberg et al., 2021).

A Tension Between Altruism and Love of Self: Being Concerned is Inescapable

In considering the philosophy of Confucianism, and particularly the deep ideas of practical wisdom and transformational giftedness, being concerned is ineluctable for human beings living in the real world (Liu, 2024). People are indeed selfish when considering themselves, their interests, values, resources, benefits from others, and society (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Sternberg, 2020; Sternberg et al., 2021). However, despite such realistic obstacles in people's daily lives, Confucianism, Aristotelian ethics, and transformational giftedness still advocate for people to make a positive contribution to others and society, not to only selfishly live a better life but attempt as well to make the world a better place.

End Note

The above ideas are arguably virtues for self-development and self-development is undoubtedly a life-long learning journey to make a better self cognitively, virtuously, pragmatically. This life-long journey requires one to keep working hard and practicing based on past experience and updated knowledge. In making the experience happen, gaining, reflecting on and revising these experiences, it is also indispensable to hold good virtues and make the experiences moral and positive for the self and society.

Likewise, these virtues can shed light on one's approach to career development. The pursuit of career success, within this philosophy, would not only be the pursuit of an individual's economic and material gains to live a better life but also a moral actualization of regulating oneself in accordance with one's own virtue of character, reason, knowledge, and whole heart, being altruistic and conscientious to others and society as a whole. Only with such incremental individual endeavors, can the world become a better place for all living in it. In addition, career development is a process of self-education, educating oneself to be a more professional expert in

a given domain and a greater person as a whole. Both the nature and the nurture of a gift are important. A gifted nature may lead one to a brighter direction of career and an efficient way of career development, but it is the nurture that cultivates the person using, for example, a tremendous, solid and single-minded effort, and making career development substantive, step by step. Some young people including me are confused and lost making choices at the crossroads of every life stage—on graduation from high school, under graduation, postgraduation, even PhD and higher—but the practical insight could be that development cannot get one there in one step, that it is a gradual process. On top of this is the effort to be truthful to oneself, one's chosen profession, and society.

Finally, I would argue that the ideas of practical wisdom and transformational giftedness are essential for making the world a better place. Even while it is widely acknowledged that this century is full of

crises—military confrontations, epidemiological challenges, social problems, a weak global economy, a lack of belief, trust, and connection among people globally—having a firm spirit to keep going resolutely is the first step. Achieving the oneness of knowing and acting by learning more and acting more is a further step, and the wisdom to practice practical wisdom and actualize one's transformational giftedness is the third.

Finally, it is true that all cultures and doctrines within them evolve all the time through the way people in the culture comprehend and practice the doctrines. I acknowledge that critics of traditional and orthodox Confucianism have not been mentioned in this essay, and new constructions of Confucianism have not been examined. But still, this essay may be useful to confront and re-examine popular constructs and theories, specifically in career guidance, career counselling, and efforts to support individual's livelihood planning.

About the author

Xiangjun Yvonne Liu, self-identifies as a global citizen having studied in mainland China, Hong Kong, New York, London, and currently, Oxford. Her interest in the morality of children and adolescents across cultures was ignited by her psychology-philosophy background, personal experience, "the starry heavens above... and the moral law within..."

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