

Confucius: The Master Still Echoes

Leôncio de Aguiar Vasconcellos Filho

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Across the centuries, the search for happiness has been a constant. Kings, emperors, and other leaders used to preach to themselves and to their circles a standard they held to be correct. But happiness is nothing, absolutely nothing, other than a stable inner set of positive emotions. And in the art of instilling them, no one succeeded as well as the Chinese philosopher Confucius.

His doctrine consisted, in general, in the existence of a state organization that would govern through kindness rather than force. Hence his celebrated Golden Rule: do not do unto others what you would not have done unto you. The compatibility between a state of kindness and the Golden Rule would be the key to a magnanimous society, together with the search for the inner peace mentioned at the end.

As in every society, its members must perform some function. In the Confucian view, citizens and townspeople should work at what they love, since in that way they would never have to work a single day of their lives.

And if by chance they falter in the conduct of their duties, let them not take it for failure: true glory lies not in the absence of error but in rising again every time we err. As Confucius himself said, it does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you never stop. (A variation of that primary philosophy came from his contemporary Laozi, for whom a long journey begins with a single small step.)

Along that road, difficulties will arise. When they do so through our own fault, let them not be attributed to others: it is not the weed that kills the crop, but the negligence of the one who tends it. And when the interference of others is proven, do not hate, nurse no rancor or anything of the kind. Consider that building the state of kindness demands an example of rectitude, of respect for elders, and of family loyalty — for the "Mandate of Heaven", conferred upon the ruler who follows those principles, binds everyone. That is why, if you hate, you have already been defeated by the one to whom the hatred is directed; and if you set out for revenge, you must not forget to dig two graves.

It is better, as the Master emphasized, to keep silent (for silence is a friend who never betrays), to expect nothing from others (while demanding everything of oneself), and not to act on impulses of hypocrisy: if you see a good man, imitate him; if he is bad, look to yourself.

From Confucius one deduces that the door stands open to all — that is, no one is obliged to leave through windows or other unobvious escapes. It is a metaphor: the search for happiness, in the manner of life described above, is preceded by inner peace, which consists in the deepest meditation. He already understood that meditation makes us tame the mind and, in consequence, the body. Recent scientific studies have associated the practice with the release of endorphins, the hormone of well-being, which spreads through the whole body, diminishing or even canceling impulses of aggression.

Confucius — like his contemporary the Buddha, though the two never met — if he did not exhale that teaching in this manner, did so in another. And with no unobvious escapes.

Leôncio de Aguiar Vasconcellos Filho — Member of the Brazilian Academy of History and Literature.

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