

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 19 – Amy Chiou – Social Venture Evangelist

Confucian Natural Teleology in the 21st Century

And now a personal word,

When Amy Chiou talks about the importance of family, I'm drawn to ideas I heard expressed by Professor Owen Flanagan about Mencius, a 4th century Chinese Confucian philosopher.

Recently I attended an academic conference at the University of Chicago on 'Virtue, Happiness & the Meaning of Life.' I couldn't imagine a more invigorating campus to visit and a more captivating combination of topics to explore, well maybe a mash-up conference at Stanford on the Carolina Panthers, Led Zeppelin and Batman comics, but I might never come home from those conversations. The Conference in Chicago gathered academics from across disciplines – philosophy, moral psychology, religion and neuroscience – to discuss self-transcendence: how being connected to causes bigger than our selves is a key part of living a happier and more fulfilled life.

The talks ranged from to the application of Aristotelean virtues in education to narrative psychology to the importance of life story in human identity. I filled the margins of my notebook and asked my share of questions.

On the second day of the conference Professor Flanagan from Duke University gave a presentation entitled Confusion Natural Teleology. Confucius, we know, was a Chinese teacher from the 5th century BC famous for his popular sayings and models of social interaction. Natural Teleology means that our human nature has a defined purpose or an end to be realized.

Professor Flanagan introduced Mencius to the audience. Mencius is the most important Confucian philosopher after Confucius himself. Mencius interpreted and expanded Confucian thought. Mencius asked: what are the qualities required for a good life? He proposed that human nature contains four basic moral dispositions, or what he called 'sprouts,' that can grow into virtues through constant individual effort in the right suitable educational and ethical environment. These sprouts are: compassion that leads to benevolence; shame that leads to righteousness; deference that leads to ritual propriety; and approval and disapproval that leads to wisdom.

Mencius also talked about five basic human relations: between parents and their children; between husband and wife; between the sovereign and his ministers; between old and young; and between friends. These relationships define Chinese society. What matters is the human ties that bind. The Five Classic texts of Confucian thought describe expectations of loyalty, kindness, obedience, righteousness and generosity.

Professor Flanagan concluded with this point: a good Chinese life is a long and prosperous one. It is less concerned with happiness and more concerned with well-being. A good Chinese life is grounded in devotion to one's family, to one's studies, to the following of rites and rituals, and to fulfilling social norms. A good life is supported and cultivated within the structure of family and close friendships.

All of which leads me back to Amy Chiou who leads her own life of self-transcendence. She does it in a thoroughly modern American way, inviting us to venture and disrupt and break the rules of social norms, but toward an end that Mencius would recognize: a virtuous community in which we live long and prosperous lives with our family and friends.

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