

Leading By Example

3. Explain the Confucian idea of Rule by Example and ruling with goodness. What is the Legalist critique of this, and do you think Rule by Example, or Leading by Example, has any validity in today's world? (Be sure to cite specific passages in Confucian thought to explain your interpretation of "Rule by Example" and cite specific examples in today's world.)

Confucianism is known as one of the most influential philosophies throughout Chinese history, lasting even to this day. In many ways, I think the focus of Confucianism is the pursuit of virtue--on both a personal and social level--and creating a functional society through that common pursuit. In order to achieve that focus, it is important that the people within the society are working themselves to move toward virtuousness in their own lives. This rule must apply to everyone--including those who are seen as being above others. If those who everyone else look up to are not themselves pursuing virtuousness and encouraging the common people to do so, then the society will lack the example to follow, and the will to continue forward. Thus comes the Confucian idea of leading by example. And while the teachings of Legalism have their critiques of Confucianism--such as that it does not give sufficient cause for order--the act of leading by example absolutely holds validity in the world today.

The idea of ruling by example is one of the core teachings of Confucius, and I believe that this is one of the most fundamental and universally applicable teachings within Confucianism. This is seen all throughout Confucius' teachings and carried on through his disciples. According to this idea, in order for the people to pursue virtue and do good in their society, they must have leaders who also practice these qualities. So long as the leader rules with goodness, the people will follow suit. This is seen in Confucius' words,

If you desire what is good, the people will be good. The character of a ruler is like wind and that of the people is like grass. In whatever direction the wind blows,

the grass always bends.¹

So, if a ruler desires virtue, the people will pursue virtuousness, but if the ruler is wicked, the people will surely fall astray. The Confucian style of government is to encourage virtuousness among the people by serving as an example to them. The very essence of governing itself, according to Confucius, is to rectify--to make straight or make right. In order to lead the people to be rectified, a ruler must be rectified himself.² A leader who governs through their own virtue is comparable to the north star, which stays in its place, and all other stars revolve around it.³ In other words, by standing firm in their own pursuit of what is right, others will naturally follow. Confucius believed that if a ruler led with virtue, there would be no need for harsh laws and punishments. This is expressed in his teaching: "If a ruler sets himself right, he will be followed without his command. If he does not set himself right, even his commands will not be obeyed."⁴ Thus he stressed that enforcement of strict rules and regulations would be unnecessary under a virtuous leader, because the people will follow the ruler naturally.

This is an instance where the philosophy of Legalism directly opposes that of Confucianism. Han Fei, a Legalist philosopher, wrote,

The severe household has no fierce slaves, but it is the affectionate mother who has spoiled sons. From this I know that awe-inspiring power can prohibit violence and that virtue and kindness are insufficient to end disorder.⁵

While Confucius proclaims that the necessary tool for leading the people is virtue, Han Fei argues that it is power and punishment--law and order. However, Confucius further explains

¹ *Analects* 12:19, Chan, 40.

² *Analects* 12:17, Chan, 40.

³ *Analects* 2:1, Chan, 22.

⁴ *Analects* 13:6, Chan, 41.

⁵ *Han Fei Tzu* ch. 50, Chan, 253.

why a system of law and punishment is insufficient. According to his teaching, while government regulation and strict punishments may deter people from wrongdoing, they still will lack a sense of honor and shame. But if they are led by a virtuous leader, and regulated by the rules of propriety, then they will have a sense of honor and shame, and this sense will naturally guide them to do what is good.⁶ Confucius teaches that human nature is good, and that through the pursuit of education and self-cultivation, people will be led to do what is right, so long as those they are looking up to are encouraging and following such measures. In contrast, Han Fei insists that there are no naturally good people, and even if there is one good person once in a hundred generations, they are not valued by the ruler, as the government is for all, not just the one good person.⁷ Even if a ruler displays virtue, this does not mean that the people will follow the leader's example. Han Fei describes this through the example of children. In the *Han Fei Tzu*, he states,

According to human nature, none are more affectionate than parents who love all children, and yet not all children are necessarily orderly. Although parents' love is deep, why should they cease to be disorderly?⁸

He goes on to explain that the love of kings for their people could never surpass that of parents for their children. Therefore if children who receive the greatest affection from their parents still act disorderly, then how could people under the rule of an affectionate king be expected to practice order? It is humanity that desires no punishment, yet punishment is necessary, so humanity is not adequate for a government.⁹ Han Fei believed that affectionate feelings would only prevent a ruler from enacting the law and punishment that was necessary for

⁶ *Analects* 2:3, Chan, 22.

⁷ *Han Fei Tzu* ch. 50, Chan, 253.

⁸ *Han Fei Tzu* ch. 50, Chan, 258.

⁹ *Han Fei Tzu* ch. 50, Chan, 258.

an orderly society, and so he rejected such things as being unsuitable for governing. This is in direct opposition to Confucius' words,

To master oneself and return to propriety is humanity. If a man (the ruler) can for one day master himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will return to humanity.¹⁰

In Confucius' teachings, the ruler pursuing virtue and thus acting with humanity would cause all others to do the same. The greatest dissension between Confucianism and Legalism is that the former places confidence in the people to pursue virtue and do good, so long as they have a ruler who leads through virtue for them to follow, while the latter urges that setting an example is not sufficient, as people cannot be trusted to act orderly, and so government must regulate through law and punishment to give cause for the people to practice obedience and act with order. Confucianism gives credit to human nature as being good and fit for acting out of virtuousness, while Legalism states that human nature is only bad, and so the only way to cause people to do what is right is through the fear of punishment.

While I certainly believe that some of Han Fei's criticism's hold truth, I still believe that the Confucian idea of leading by example is indispensable to this day. Laws and consequences for breaking those laws are vital to there being any form of order, peace, or justice. However, order without leaders who lead by example is empty, and lacks true morality. In order for there to be a both functional and virtuous society, there must be law and punishment, and a ruler who pursues virtue themselves. Both are necessary. I think a great example of why leading by example is so important can be seen in America today. Especially in such a polarized age where people cling tightly to their political party leaders, it is vital that those leaders pursue the virtue and

¹⁰ *Analects* 12:1, Chan, 38.

goodness that the society as a whole should be pursuing. However, in America, rather than build up relationships, pursue goodness and kindness, and treat others with respect, politicians would rather tear people apart and put others down in order to make themselves appear higher.

Unfortunately, many people take this example and likewise invest their time into attacking others and caring more about being right, or winning the fight, than they care for coming up with solutions or promoting the common good. People can by no means be expected to follow rules or pursue goodness or justice while submitting to a leader who does the opposite.

A very current topic is that of the regulations and guidelines surrounding the present pandemic. Many Americans, largely due to conspiracy theories, politicized media, and a general lack of compassion, refuse to take the necessary precautions to protect others and slow the spread of the virus. I would not think that things such as wearing a mask and social distancing would be such issues that people would fight over, as I would assume most people have the most basic level of humanity necessary to do the right thing to put others before themselves. However, it is no wonder that so many people fail to pursue virtue in this sense, as not even our leaders will take the simplest of steps to help the situation. People cannot be expected to do the right thing when their leaders do not. In the 2020 vice-presidential debate, the moderator asked Vice President Mike Pence the question, “How can you expect Americans to follow the Administration’s safety guidelines to protect themselves from COVID, when you at the White House have not been doing so?”¹¹ Pence responded by saying that over the last eight months it has become clear that the American people are willing to put other people’s health above their own desires and that he and President Trump trusted the American people to make the best

¹¹ Susan Page, Vice Presidential Debate

choices in regards to their health.¹² Firstly, this showed that Pence would not even acknowledge that many people followed his and Trump's example in not following the guidelines. Secondly, he stated that he believed that the American people would make the best decisions on their own, and so he didn't have to follow the rules. He refused to take responsibility as a leader, and so set an example that people do not need to follow the safety guidelines. Why would the people follow their government's rules if the government does not follow them? It is hypocritical.

Throughout history it is clear to see that leaders who lead by example promote much more virtue, goodness, and order within their society than those who shove off the responsibility of being an example and expect others to follow rules that they refuse to adhere to. If a child hears their father swear all the time, why would they listen when he tells them not to do so? If a mother tells her child that it is good to put others before themselves, but only acts selfishly in front of her child, they cannot be expected to live selflessly. Ultimately, actions speak louder than words, and their impression lasts longer. A leader must stay true to their words, and true to the morals that they encourage among their people. As Confucius stated, "The superior man is ashamed that his words exceed his deeds."¹³ I also believe that Legalism is correct in saying that there must be punishments for those who refuse to do the right thing, but nobody should be punished for something not even their ruler follows. What applies to the people must apply to the leader of the people. And so, the act of leading by example is perhaps the single most valid and fundamental principle to this very day. I believe a true leader should not just tell the people how to act but must show them.

¹² Mike Pence, Vice Presidential Debate

¹³ *Analects* 12:29, Chan, 42.

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