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CHAPTER 1

Hammurabi and Moses: Law as a Mirror of Civilization

What do the laws of a society tell us about the lives and beliefs of the people who write, enforce, and obey those laws? What was the chief difference between the law codes of these two leaders, and what caused this?

Early civilizations were both fragile and gradual. We often make lists of their qualities as if they were chemical compounds or recipes: take several Neolithic farming villages and a river valley; add a group of nomadic herdsmen; stir briskly with bronze weapons. Blend in language, writing, a system of class differentiation with warriors and priests at the head of the list, and simmer until cities and civilization emerge. Garnish with trade and conquest before serving.

Of course, it did not happen that way. The ideas, customs, and material things that constituted early civilizations came together slowly over centuries. Only after the fact, when the cities with their kings, priests, beliefs, shops, and soldiers were all in place, do we speak of a particular civilization. And this complex social, political, and economic creation was both strong and weak, strong enough to engage in wars of conquest, weak enough to be destroyed by the death of a powerful leader, or by a famine caused by a drop of two degrees in the average annual mean temperature.

While it lasted, each great early civilization was held together by power and traditions: the power of political and social elites and the traditions which are embodied in the great religious and philosophical value systems that mark all major civilizations. These traditions that gave meaning to political and social institutions—to family life, education, government, and the marketplace—are reflected in a civilization’s laws.
We see such reflections in two early, but very different, civilizations in the ancient near east: the Babylonian and the Hebrew. The first developed in the early part of the second millennium B.C.E. in the Tigris and Euphrates valley, while the second came together around the thirteenth century B.C.E. when Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt east into the Sinai Desert. The most famous ruler of the Babylonians was Hammurabi, who ruled from 1792-1750 B.C.E. After long wars in which he conquered the older Sumerian cities such as Larsa, Erech, and Ur in the southern part of Mesopotamia, Hammurabi published a list of 300 laws by carving them into a black basalt pillar seven feet high and two feet in diameter, which he erected near the site of the modern city of Baghdad in Iraq. Moses claimed to have received at least some of his laws directly from God while the Hebrews wandered through the Sinai desert after leaving Egypt. Nearly all the Hebrew laws are recorded in their holy book, the Torah (the Law), which makes up the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament.

Although both Hammurabi and Moses are famous as lawgivers, scholars are quick to point out that Hammurabi’s famous “Code” was not really a modern collection of laws, nor were the laws in it particularly new. The same is true of the “laws of Moses.” In both cases, the laws and traditions ascribed to these men were derived in part from earlier traditions. Hammurabi’s Code is a collection of time-honored Mesopotamian legal principles developed earlier in the Sumerian cities. Many of the laws in the Mosaic, or Covenant Code of the Hebrews found in Exodus, borrow heavily from Hammurabi’s code; others, especially those in Deuteronomy, were developed in the late seventh century B.C.E., long after the Hebrews had left the desert and established themselves in Palestine. Hammurabi and Moses became symbols of the traditions and values of their respective civilizations; Moses, in particular, became a nucleus around which legends formed.

It was easy for legends to form because so little was known about the lives of Hammurabi and Moses. Hammurabi was an active ruler who spent the last fourteen years of his reign in continuous warfare, attempting to control the people along the Euphrates River. He wanted “to make justice appear in the land, to destroy the evil and the wicked [so] that the strong might not oppress the weak.”1 We know the familiar story of Moses told in Exodus: how the infant was found by the Pharaoh’s daughter in a basket made of
bulrushes (the same story is told of an early Mesopotamian king); how the adult Moses killed an Egyptian, then fled to Midian, where he became a shepherd and the son-in-law of a Midian priest; how God called him from a burning bush to lead his people out of Egypt; and how he did this, probably during the reign of Pharaoh Rameses II (1304–1237 B.C.E.).

It is interesting that Moses is presented throughout this book as a fully human person on whom God “imposes” his will. This reflects the unique relationship between God and humankind in the Hebrew tradition. The Hebrew God was so different from humans that his image could not be drawn nor his name spoken or written in full except on special occasions, yet he made agreements with a weak and fallible people. Other ancient peoples, unlike the Hebrews, often depicted their gods in human or animal form rather than seeing humans as made in the image of God. The book of Exodus also shows Moses to be a man passionately concerned with social justice and what we call today “national liberation.” No non-scriptural source of that time speaks of him, and so our knowledge of Moses is limited by what scriptures tell us about Moses as the leader, prophet, and liberator of his people.2

The actual lives of these men are less important than what the laws ascribed to them tell about the lifestyle of their peoples. The laws of Hammurabi as well as those in the Old Testament tell us much about what the Babylonians and Hebrews considered important; reading them allows us to look into their law courts, temples, businesses, homes, and even their hearts and minds. We can see how their values differed from ours, as well as how they were similar. In the final analysis, the laws of the Babylonians, a commercial, city-oriented people who worshipped many gods, differed significantly from those of the Hebrews, a pastoral people who worshipped a single deity called Yahweh.

Initially, however, the similarities between the laws of these two peoples are more striking than the differences. The most famous feature of Hammurabi’s Code is its emphasis on the law of retaliation (lex talionis). This demands, in the words of laws 196 and 200, that “if a man has put out the eye of a free man, they shall put out his eye. . . . If a man knocks out the tooth of a free man equal in rank to himself, they shall knock out his tooth.” Law 209 states “If a man strikes the daughter of a free man and causes her to lose the fruit of her womb, he shall pay 10 shekels of silver.” In the oldest Hebrew
laws, those of the Covenant Code found in Exodus, we read: “When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage . . . the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman’s husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judge determines. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” In this case, the Hebrew laws seem to be a clear summary and paraphrase of the earlier Babylonian statutes.

Hebrew and Mesopotamian laws dealing with lying are also similar, the law in Hammurabi’s code reading crisply: “If a man has come forward in a case to bear witness to a felony and then has not proved the statement he has made, if that case is a capital one, that man shall be put to death.” In Deuteronomy 19:16–19, someone who wished to accuse another of wrongdoing has to “appear before the Lord,” that is, the priests and judges, who “shall inquire diligently, and if the witness . . . has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. . . .” Two verses later, we find the lex talionis repeated again: “Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” Hammurabi’s laws and those of Moses dealing with people being placed in slavery as payment for debts are also similar, although the Hebrews required such people to serve six years in order to earn their freedom, while the Babylonians specified three. It was interesting that in both cases a man could place his wife or child in temporary servitude in payment for his debt.

Rules dealing with marriage are also similar in the laws of Hammurabi and those of Moses. In both societies, controlling sexual relations was very important. This is understandable if we realize that here, as in most early societies, marriage was, first and foremost, a legal contract aimed at the production of children and the safeguarding of property rights for both parties. A Babylonian woman brought to her marriage a dowry, which was designed to protect her and her children from arbitrary action by her husband more than it was intended to enrich him. This is clear from several divorce laws which state that, in case of divorce, sanctioned if the woman were barren, the husband “shall give her money to the value of her bridal gift and shall make good to her the dowry which she brought from her father’s house.” Hebrew divorce law was less protective of the wife. A man could divorce his wife if he had “found some inde-
cency in her”; he had only to “write her a bill of divorce and put it in her hand and send her out of his house.” In both societies, a barren woman could avoid divorce by allowing her husband to have children by a “slave-girl.” This practice, followed by the Hebrew patriarch, Abraham, and described in the book of Genesis, shows the importance of child-bearing. Abraham came from this area south of Babylonia and lived several centuries before Hammurabi. Hebrew laws allowing children by slave women are similar to Hammurabi’s, which derive from earlier Sumerian traditions. The importance of properly caring for children in Hammurabi’s society is clear in several laws which gave a woman the right to live with another man (“enter another man’s house”) if her husband had left her for an extended period of time without adequate support. The husband, who might have been a prisoner of war or on a business trip that took longer than planned, did have the right to reclaim his family when he returned. However, if the woman had been amply provided for and still entered another man’s house, the judge was required to “convict that woman and cast her into the water.”

This last provision raises the question of sexual fidelity in marriage, a problem as old as humankind and one that people in traditional societies had to deal with because important questions of inheritance were at stake. Both societies were generally harsh in punishing infidelity. “If a woman has procured the death of her husband on account of another man, they shall impale that woman,” reads law 153 in Hammurabi’s code. “If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die,” according to Deuteronomy 22:22. As we might expect, each society condemned not only adultery but also homosexuality, violating “betrothed virgins,” and incest. In Hammurabi’s code, a man was banished for having carnal relations with his daughter and could be “cast into the water” for “lying in the bosom” of his son’s fiancée. A son and his mother were burned for sleeping together after the father/husband’s death. Hebrew law included long lists of persons whose “nakedness” was not to be “uncovered.” The list included all members of the immediate family, as well as aunts, uncles, sisters-in-law, half-brothers and -sisters, grandchildren, and, finally, for good measure, “any beast.”

This prohibition against bestiality highlights a difference between Hebrew and Babylonian marriage laws. Unlike the subjects of Hammurabi, the people of Moses were concerned with more
than just keeping lines of inheritance clear. In both Leviticus and Deuteronomy, there is a concern with morality and holiness, as well as with property rights. Many of the statements in Deuteronomy end with the words “so you shall purge the evil from Israel.” Violations of these laws are called “defilements” in Leviticus and are considered abominable because they affect the community spiritually as well as socially; Yahweh would look unfavorably upon the Hebrew community if such individual defilements were allowed to exist unpunished.

Differences between the laws of Hammurabi and those of Moses become clearer as we look at statutes relating to agriculture. Babylonian lands were honeycombed with irrigation canals and dikes, whose upkeep was crucial to the welfare of the entire Mesopotamian area. Therefore, it is not surprising to read that, if a farmer were lax in maintaining the irrigation canals on his land, thus allowing water to break through a dike and flood a neighbor’s field, he would have to replace the lost crop. If he could not afford to do this, “he and his goods” would be sold to pay the debts to his neighbor. Hammurabi’s code also assumed that most land was rented out and provided very specific protections for the landlord if the rented land was not properly cultivated. Hebrew society in Palestine, by contrast, was largely pastoral with few large cities. Most land was owned by individuals and not rented out, and the people, in general, were poorer. The law of Moses, therefore, says little about landlord-tenant relationships but much about the responsibility of farmers toward the poor. Land was to lie fallow every seven years so that the poor could gather the residue from such fields, orchards, or vineyards. The Hebrews were also told not to clear their fields or vineyards entirely, but to leave a strip around the edge “for the poor and for the sojourner.”

No such humanitarian injunctions are found in Hammurabi’s code, indicating not only that Babylonian society was more centralized, urban, wealthy, and highly structured, but also that the Hebrews consciously tried to temper justice with mercy. Hammurabi’s code also naturally reflects the complex, differentiated social structure of the densely populated Mesopotamian region. Slaves are one of three groups of people mentioned in the code. There were two other major classes—aviti, or free men, and muskena, or those dependent upon another. Men in the last group were sometimes called “villeins” or “subjects.” They were
similar to modern sharecroppers or tenant farmers. They were clearly submissive to others, either to their upper-class landlord or to the king—since much of the land was owned directly by the government. The eyes and teeth of villeins were not worth as much as those of free men. Law 201, for example, specified that one who knocked out the tooth of a villein pay one-third maneh of silver; law 198 required that the broken bone or the eye of a villein be paid for with one maneh of silver. While this was a considerable sum (slightly over a pound of silver), it was better than losing an eye, which is what would happen to you if you put out the eye of a free man.9

Justice, therefore, had a clear relationship to class standing in Hammurabi’s kingdom. Class differences even affected the cost of medical services. Surgery cost a free man ten shekels (2–3 ounces of silver), a villein five, and a slave only two—if the patient lived. If the patient was a free man and died during surgery, the surgeon could lose his hand; if the victim of poor surgery was only a slave, the surgeon had only to replace the man with another.10 These penalties, class bias aside, were deliberate attempts to encourage efficiency. And, in a society where a single broken dike, bad harvest, or unprotected city wall could mean disaster, harsh measures taken to ensure efficiency were understandable.

The government’s attempts to control daily life rivaled that of modern authoritarian states and the penalties for inefficiency were severe in this society. Consider the ale-wife who would be put to death under law 109 if she failed to turn in felons who frequented her ale-house, or the builder (law 229) who knew he would be executed if a house he built fell down, killing the householder. Efficiency was important to the shipbuilder, who was forced by law to guarantee his work.11

The Hebrew Torah, on the other hand, has no such rules, since the semi-nomadic pastoral nomads of Palestine did not have commercial house builders or a maritime industry. Hammurabi had inscribed dozens of laws on his pillar which have no parallels in the laws of Moses: sixteen laws defining the duties of soldiers, constables, and tax collectors; eleven dealing with physicians; twelve regulating the activity of merchants (including wine sellers); six each concerning the obligations of house builders and boatmen; one dealing with the collision of ships; and over a dozen regulating wages and prices.12
These last—those regulating wages and prices—are detailed and famous. Wages for tailors, carpenters, potters, jewelers, blacksmiths, leather-workers, and brick-layers were all fixed by law. Modern economists frown on wage and price fixing, claiming that it stifles private initiative, encourages black market activity, or, at best, causes shortages of goods and services. While we do not know how strictly the wage and price laws in Hammurabi’s code were followed, we do know that the Babylonian economy had a large amount of state control but also a strong “private sector.” Since much land was owned directly by the king, many of the villeins or tenant farmers were, in effect, government employees. Yet the Babylonians developed a form of capitalism “by providing interest as an incentive for investing capital.” One section of the code limits the interest rate to 20 percent on loans of grain or silver. Hammurabi even wrote measures regulating conduct among business partners, merchants, and their salespeople, and grain bin owners and their customers.

We might naturally ask how such elaborate laws were enforced. Soldiers and police can try to enforce laws, whether they are fair or not, but for laws to last as long as these it is necessary for decisions of judges to be backed by some moral authority which both parties in court can respect. No pre-modern legal system works without religious sanction, and when we look at the authority behind the laws in the Babylonian and Hebrew civilizations we can better understand why the Old Testament laws had a more profound moral effect on human history than those devised by the Mesopotamians and codified by Hammurabi.

Earlier we noticed that the Hebrew laws concerning agriculture were marked by a humanitarian emphasis not found in their Babylonian counterparts. This concern for the less fortunate is clear throughout the Torah. In the earlier laws found in Exodus, the followers of Moses were told twice: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” One of these passages continues: “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.” Later, in Leviticus, the Hebrews are warned not to oppress their neighbors, including the deaf and the blind, and to “not be partial to the poor or defer to the great.” In Deuteronomy 10:17–19, the sanction for all of these warnings becomes clear:
For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the
great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and
takes no bribes. He executes justice for the fatherless and the
widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.
Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land
of Egypt.\textsuperscript{14}

From at least the time of Moses, the Hebrews believed in a sin-
gle, all-powerful God, Yahweh, the “God of gods and Lord of
lords.” In their early history, the Hebrews accepted the fact that
other people worshipped other gods; they simply believed that their
god, Yahweh, was more powerful. This belief, sometimes called
henotheism, evolved into full-scale monotheism, the belief that there
exists only one god for everyone. But, even before Moses, the He-
brews believed that their laws, starting with the Ten Command-
ments and ending with a host of regulations governing the details of
everyday behavior, were given to them directly by Yahweh. And, as
these passages from the Torah indicate, Yahweh not only sought
justice for his people; he loved them as well.

Nowhere in Hammurabi’s code, for example, do we find a law
telling a businessman not to charge interest when he loans money
to the poor and adding: “if you take your neighbor’s garment in
pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down; for
that is his only covering, it is his mantle . . . in what else shall he
sleep?” And, as usual in the Torah, this injunction is followed by
the enforcing statement: “And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am
compassionate.”\textsuperscript{15} In other places the word \textit{compassionate} is re-
placed with such words as \textit{faithful}, \textit{just}, and \textit{holy}.

Of course, Hammurabi’s code, despite the modern sound of
many of its provisions, was not a “secular” document. Hammurabi
himself clearly believed in the existence of the gods and in a moral
universe which their actions sustained—with his help. He ended
his code by asking the gods to curse anyone who would change his
work. He asked Ninlil, “the great mother,” to destroy the land,
ruin the people, and “pour out the life-blood” of any future ruler
who would change the Code. Shamash, “the great judge of heaven
and earth,” was called upon not only to kill such a man but “to
make his ghost thirst for water in the world below.” Ishtar, “the
lady of battle and conflict,” was asked to leave the armies of any-
one bold enough to change the laws “a heap of corpses on the
plain.”\textsuperscript{16}
Although Hammurabi ended by calling upon the gods, his code is remembered not as a great moral document but, rather, as one of the first great legal statements of the notion that the injured should receive compensation, and harsh punishments should be used as a deterrent to crime. These Babylonian principles found their way into Hebrew law and later into other legal systems; they are found in the laws of many modern nations.

Though they did borrow heavily from the Mesopotamians, the Hebrews passed on a different legacy. While the Mosaic code is followed in detail today by only a small number of Orthodox Jews, the general moral principles of the Torah, especially the Ten Commandments and the concern for the poor and oppressed, have become an integral part of the laws and political practices of many modern nations. Just as some of our modern civil laws giving people the right to sue for personal injuries might be said to have descended from Babylonian laws, so, too, do many of our laws protecting the poor remind us of the principles of the Old Testament.

Perhaps this is why, even today, when we hear the phrase “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” we “know” it came from “the Bible.” Given all the borrowing he did in putting together his code, Hammurabi would probably understand—and let us escape with only a small curse for misunderstanding the origin of the lex talionis.

Notes


5. Driver and Miles, Laws, II, 55; Deuteronomy 24:1.

6. Driver and Miles, Laws, II, 53–57; Being “cast into the water” in Hammurabi’s code refers to a trial in which a defendant would be bound and thrown into the river: if he or she floated, he or she was deemed innocent; if the person sank, he or she was considered guilty—as well as dead, verdict and sentence being determined nearly simultaneously.


10. Ibid., 79, 81.

11. Ibid., 45, 83, 85.


Further Reading


CHAPTER 2

Zoroaster and Buddha: Explaining Suffering

Why does evil exist in the world? The "Western" Zoroaster and the "Eastern" Buddha answer this question quite differently. What are some implications of their answers for our understanding of world history?

Why do people suffer? Why does evil exist in the world? These questions, asked by millions of people throughout human history, have helped inspire most of humanity’s great philosophies and religions. While the questions are simple, the answers which thinkers have given to them are often complicated—and certainly varied.

During the sixth century before the birth of Christ, several important attempts were made to explain suffering and evil. Chinese sage Kung Fuzi (Confucius, 551–479 B.C.E.) believed that suffering was caused by people’s failure to love and respect one another properly. The system of ethics he devised to remedy this lack of mutual respect helped mold Chinese civilization for over two thousand years. In this same, very creative period, other men offered religious answers to the problem of suffering. Two notable seekers of truth were Zarathustra (ca. 628–551 B.C.E.), a Persian nobleman and founder of a religion known as Zoroastrianism, and Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 560–480 B.C.E.), an Indian known later as the Buddha and founder of Buddhism. These two men offered specific and very different answers to our questions about suffering and evil. Their ideas also deserve our attention because their respective philosophies represent two ways of looking at the world—one of which can be called "Western" and the other "Eastern."

It may seem unusual to refer to Zarathustra, or Zoroaster (the Greek version of his name, by which he is usually known), as a Westerner, since he was born not far from the modern Iranian capital of
Teheran in what many today call the Middle East or Western Asia. Yet, in Zoroaster’s day, the Greek cities were on the Western fringe of the civilized world and the Persian Empire itself was considered the East by those in the Mediterranean world. Zoroaster was probably a priest and a member of the Spitama clan in Persia. His early life was apparently ordinary, but about age twenty he left home (which may have included his three wives and six children) and began to wander the countryside, seeking Truth. After ten years of wandering, he had a vision of an angel, Vohu Manah (Good Thought), who told Zoroaster that there was only one God, Ahura Mazda (the Wise Lord), and that Zoroaster was to become his prophet. During the next several years, Zoroaster had other visions in which other messengers of Ahura Mazda appeared to him to reveal God’s message. The newly anointed prophet began to preach immediately, and he was persecuted and ignored for ten years. Finally, he converted his cousin Maidhyomah to his new faith. They then journeyed East to Bactria [modern Afghanistan], where Zoroaster won over King Vishtaspa and his court. From that point, Zoroastrianism spread more rapidly among the Aryan peoples in the Persian Empire. At times the new religion was spread by war, and it was during one of these wars, we are told, that the seventy-seven-year-old Zoroaster was killed while tending the sacred fire at an altar.

It is hard to know all of Zoroaster’s teachings with certainty. Many early writings were lost and his doctrines were greatly changed in later centuries, but a series of hymns, or “Gathas,” generally thought to be the work of the prophet himself, suggest that this man was one of history’s first monotheists.1 While most people at this time believed that there were many gods, Zoroaster declared firmly that Ahura Mazda was the only one. He credited this God with creating the world and all the good things in it; Ahura Mazda wished all to live a life of “pure thought, pure words, and pure deeds,” and he judged men after their death on how well they had succeeded.2 Those who followed Truth during their lives would go to Heaven, while those who followed the Lie would be sent to Hell.

The existence of a Hell in Zoroaster’s religion tells us, in the words of one scholar, that “although Ahura Mazda is supreme, he is not unopposed.” In Zoroastrianism, the Good Spirit, or Spenta Mainyu, analogous to the Holy Spirit in Christianity, is opposed to the Bad Spirit, or Angra Mainyu. This evil spirit is very much like
Satan in traditional Christian theology; he is a “prince of darkness,”
the very embodiment of lies, cowardice, and all other forms of mis-
ery. Ahura Mazda allows people to choose between himself and
Angra Mainyu.\(^3\) By their free choice, men and women can both
save themselves and advance the cause of goodness and truth in
the world. In the final analysis, the world would be saved; Ahura
Mazda would win a last great victory over the Evil Spirit—even
Hell would finally come to an end.\(^4\) Humans could bring this final
judgment day closer by living a life of goodness and purity and by
deeds which spread the goodness of Ahura Mazda in the world in
which they lived. The moral life involved struggle and choice—
here rather than in the hereafter.

If all this sounds much like the world view preached by Chris-
tianity, as well as by Judaism and Islam, for that matter, you should
note that many scholars see important connections among these
four Western religions. Some believe that the Jews adopted some
basic ideas about good and evil, Heaven, Hell, and final judgment
from the disciples of Zoroaster while the Judeans were held captive
in Babylon during the sixth century (586–539 B.C.E.). These new be-
liefs were then inherited by Christians and Muslims, both of whom
accept basic Hebrew beliefs contained in the Old Testament, or
Jewish Bible. This explanation of the Zoroastrian origins of basic
Western religious ideas is convenient. Unfortunately, there is no di-
rect evidence that it is true.\(^5\) While similarities clearly exist in the
way Zoroaster and the major Western religions explain evil, no one
is able to say exactly who took what from whom—or when this
happened.

What we can say is that Zoroaster’s explanation of evil and suf-
ferring, however it may have been modified by his own Persian fol-
lowers and however it may have been adapted, or even influenced,
by the Jews, has had a powerful impact on Western thought. All
major Western religions since Zoroaster’s day have highly valued
four things: (1) the role of the individual person; (2) the material
world in which we live; (3) time and human history; (4) the role of a
supremely powerful, transcendent Creator God. All four were im-
portant in Zoroaster’s fight against evil and suffering. Let us briefly
examine each in turn.

For Zoroaster, individuals were more than helpless victims of
suffering. While he believed in few rituals (veneration of fire as a
symbol of truth and of water as a symbol of purity were central
ones), Zoroaster did assert that good deeds would be rewarded, and he called upon his followers to be aggressive in resisting evil. One of the most prominent good deeds mentioned in the Gathas is concern for cattle. The Bactrians, people whom Zoroaster converted, were a pastoral people who survived on simple forms of agriculture and on cattle-rearing; their enemies were nomadic warriors from the north, who often invaded their settlements. Thus, it is not surprising that Zoroaster called these tribal horsemen the “followers of the Lie” and declared virtuous any action that promoted agriculture, made the earth more fruitful, or protected sheep or cattle. Good deeds might be simple deeds for sixth-century rural Persians, but virtuous human actions were important to the salvation of the world.

Since human actions were essential for the defeat of evil, the material world where such actions take place was also important. Zoroastrianism, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam after it, was a world-affirming religion. The battle between Good and Evil was fought on earth, in the human soul but also in the home, field, or shop. Zoroaster did not believe in torturing the flesh, or in other forms of monastic self-denial. His followers were not supposed to escape from the world in order to bring themselves closer to Ahura Mazda; they were to help Ahura Mazda by living a life of virtue in the world.

Given this affirmation of humanity and the world, it is logical that Zoroaster would regard measurement of time as important. Although Zoroastrians do not see God intervening in human history in the ways described in the Old Testament, they do believe that the world and time itself will end with the last judgment, or the Final Rehabilitation, as some Zoroastrian scriptures refer to it. In the distant but foreseeable future, the power of the Evil Spirit over humanity will be ended.

This will happen because of the ultimate power and beneficence of an all-powerful God. However important the ethical choices we must make, Ahura Mazda will have the last word: “In immortality (or eternity) shall the soul of the righteous be joyful, in perpetuity shall be the torments of the Liar. . . . Thine, Mazda, is the Dominion, whereby thou canst give to the right-living poor man the better portion.”7

In summary, then, evil for Zoroaster was not caused by the omnipotent Supreme Being, but only permitted by him. The Spirit of Evil was a necessary consequence of free choice. If people were to
be free, they had to be free to choose evil. But, if people could choose evil, they could also choose good. Suffering was caused by Angra Mainyu, aided by his followers on earth; it was painful but temporary. This explanation has at least two logical flaws: it does not explain why innocent people suffer, nor does it tell us why an all-powerful, good God would give evil such free rein in the first place. These logical flaws have been the subject of intense debate by religious philosophers through the centuries. Judged by the general directness and practical tone of Zoroaster's words in the Gathas, he was not much interested in such metaphysical abstractions. In that respect, at least, he was much like his Indian contemporary Siddhartha Gautama, who otherwise lived in a very different thought-world. Gautama's value for us is that he tried to answer just those two questions that Zoroaster left unanswered.

Like Zoroaster, Siddhartha Gautama came from the upper class. His father was ruler of a small state in northeastern India (now Nepal). Gautama's status as a nobleman was important in helping explain why he became interested in the problem of suffering. Although there are many legends about the birth and early life of this young prince, the most frequently repeated one tells us that Siddhartha's father was warned by a Hindu priest that the young man would become a famous religious leader instead of a ruler if he ever became acquainted with old age, illness, death, or the ways of a begging monk. Not wanting this to happen, Siddhartha's father tried to shield him from such things by providing him with a life of luxury. The young prince was married at sixteen and lived in a beautiful palace surrounded by young, beautiful people. One day, so we are told, Siddhartha had to leave the palace grounds and, despite his father's precautions, happened to see an old man. He asked his driver what sort of creature this was and was shocked when the driver explained old age. On three other journeys, he saw an ill person, a corpse, and a wandering monk.

After seeing these things, the sensitive prince determined to leave his fine home, his young wife, and his infant son. For six years, beginning at about age thirty, Gautama wandered through India, attempting to discover truth and tranquility by living the life of an ascetic, one who denies oneself the pleasures of the flesh, especially eating, in order to better concentrate the mind. After years of severe fasting—one legend has it that the soon-to-be Buddha ate as little as one grain of rice a day for a time—Gautama was no
closer to the knowledge he sought. Finally, he stopped fasting and sat down under a tree on the banks of a river, vowing to remain there until he understood truth. In the course of one night, according to an early Buddhist scripture, Gautama achieved Enlightenment, a state of mind and soul in which he understood the nature of good and evil and was freed from the temptations and illusions that beset other men.

After this awakening, the Buddha, a term that means awakened or Enlightened one, went into the nearest town (modern Benares) and preached his first sermon in a deer park to a handful of his former companions, who had left him earlier when he stopped fasting. This Deer Park Sermon sums up the essential message of the Buddha as described in the Four Noble Truths: all existence is suffering; all suffering is caused by craving or desire; suffering can be ended by eliminating desire; and the way to end suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. The steps on this path include right views, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. Travelers on this path follow a standard moral code which forbids lying, stealing, killing, and other forms of violence and combine this with an emphasis on meditation designed to help the individual gain “panna,” or wisdom.

What was this wisdom that the Buddha preached throughout northern India until his death forty-five years after his Enlightenment? Although Buddhism has become a major world religion in Asia in the twenty-five centuries since Buddha’s death, it is important to distinguish—just as it was in the case of Zoroaster—the original teachings of Gautama from those of his followers, many of whom tried to turn him into a god, the Lord Buddha. This is not something Gautama would have appreciated, for it was a fundamental conviction of his that humans, and not any divine power, were responsible for evil. Buddha did not speak of God or sin. Evil came simply from people’s desires for things they could not obtain. God or gods do not punish us; we punish ourselves by our own greed and craving. Because of this very human explanation of evil, the Buddha has been called an atheist by some: for example, by a main character in Gore Vidal’s novel Creation. Although Buddha may not have been religious in the sense in which most of us understand this term, he did share a goal with Zoroaster and other religious teachers—the overcoming of death. The way he proposed
we do this reveals his debt to Hinduism, as well as the basic difference between his philosophy and that of Zoroaster.

All Hindus believe in reincarnation. The individual soul is reborn, or reincarnated, many times before it reaches release (moksha), or salvation. Good actions cause one to be reborn higher in the social, or caste, system; bad actions cause one to be reborn in a lower social caste, or perhaps even as an animal. This happened according to law, not grace: one’s deeds (karma) advanced or retarded one’s attempt to escape from the wheel, or circle, of life. The goal of Hinduism is to eliminate death by stopping rebirth. Emancipation comes for the individual when his or her soul is merged into the world-soul (Brahman) and is no longer reborn. Buddha accepted this basic teaching. His philosophy differed from that of classical Hinduism by making salvation (which he called Nirvana) accessible to all, not just to members of the higher castes of priests, warriors, and merchants. He also espoused a “middle way” between extreme physical self-denial and excessive attachment to the world.

Buddha’s “middle way” is really one of great psychological sophistication—if we accept his suppositions. If we believe with him that the physical, material world is really one of illusion (maya) and that everything that exists is impermanent, it makes sense for us to stop craving or desiring material things. But Buddha went even further. He said that the individual soul, or self, was also impermanent. Therefore, to reach Nirvana and end all suffering, one had to “extinguish” the individual ego, or self. One student of Buddhism explains this mystifying process by which an individual self is “extinguished” and enters Nirvana as follows:

Imagine an illimitable ocean in which there are innumerable vials [bottles]. Each vial is filled with sea-water belonging to that very ocean and each is composed of a substance that gradually thickens or dissolves in response to circumstances. Under suitable conditions, it dissolves altogether, whereupon the water it contains becomes indistinguishable from the rest of the ocean. Not one drop of water ceases to exist; all that is lost is its apparent separateness. In this analogy, the water in each vial represents a so-called individual being and the gradual thickening or dissolving vial symbolizes his mental and physical characteristics . . . [which are] born of Avidya (greed) and nourished by the force of karma. . . . Once [these] have been dissolved, the being’s “separate” identity ceases.9
How different all this was from the teachings of Zoroaster! Buddha believed struggle of any kind was part of the problem; man had to "let go" of attachments to all things and all ideas (even to the idea of nonattachment) in order to be Enlightened. The Persian prophet, on the other hand, saw struggle—as long as it was against the Evil One—as a positive good. Buddha, like many of his Hindu predecessors, saw the material world as a place to escape from; for Zoroaster it was a place where the salvation of each individual had to be worked out by life-enriching, world-blessing deeds. The single biggest difference between these two seers was the way they understood time. Zoroastrians had but one chance to achieve Heaven and avoid Hell; Buddhists could take many lifetimes to reach Nirvana. Zoroaster, like all Western religious leaders, saw time as finite. Humanity and the world would end, either sooner or later, but at some foreseeable point. Buddhists and Hindus saw time as virtually endless; for them the universe was created and recreated over vast periods of time known to Buddhists as kalpas. When someone asked Buddha how long a kalpa was, he asked the questioner to imagine a man wiping a mighty mountain peak once each century with a handkerchief. That mountain would be worn away before a kalpa had passed.10

We can imagine these two famous teachers engaging in a debate. Buddha would smile tranquilly while pointing out to Zoroaster that his God, Ahura Mazda, was playfully cruel in giving people only one chance at salvation. Zoroaster, who disliked paradoxes as much as Buddha enjoyed them, would sternly charge the Buddha with being just plain silly in denying the reality of the material world. The two would agree only that men and women ought to live a good life, and avoid evil in order to achieve salvation. On how to do this, there would be fundamental, dare we say eternal, disagreement.

Of course, a debate such as this could never have taken place, even if the Buddha had lived closer to Zoroaster and had not been nine years old when the Persian leader died. Debating itself is a Western device; it assumes that Truth can be discovered through rational discourse. Buddha would have found debating itself useless, for he believed that ultimate Truth could be discovered only through what we call intuition and meditation. Metaphysical speculation and rational argument were of little value to him.

Much of the history of what we call Eastern civilizations makes more sense to us if we understand the values of the Buddha and his
followers. The lack of emphasis that many Eastern countries have historically placed on material progress, for example, makes greater sense if we understand Buddhism. The fact that Western nations were the first to pursue material progress and industrialization aggressively also follows logically from the world-view of Zoroaster. If you find, however, on finishing this essay, that the tenets of Zoroaster make more sense to you than do those of the Buddha . . . but if at the same time you are intrigued, even strangely attracted, by the psycho-logic of Buddha’s view of the way to eliminate evil, be thankful! Living in the interdependent world of today, you have more paths to Truth open to you than could be found in the wildest dreams of either Zoroaster or Buddha.

Notes

1. The fourteenth-century (B.C.E.) Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten and the thirteenth-century Hebrew leader Moses are both examples of monotheists before Zoroaster.
3. John Noss, Man’s Religions, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 336-339. Because of the importance of the Evil Spirit in Zoroaster’s teaching, some scholars believe that his religion was really dualistic instead of monotheistic, that he believed in two gods of equal power, one good and the other evil. The more common opinion, however, is that Zoroaster himself believed in one Supreme Being, but that Persian priests (Magi) centuries after his death made the religion dualistic by stressing the power of Angra Mainyu (called Ahriman in later Zoroastrian writings). For more on this, see James W. Boyd and Donald A. Crosby, “Is Zoroastrianism Dualistic or Monotheistic?” Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 47 (1979): 557–588; Mary Boyce, A History of Zoroastrianism, vol. I (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 193–196.
7. See the hymns or Gathas (Yasna 45 and Yasna 53), quoted in Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism*, 371, 389–390.


**Further Reading**


**Vidal, Gore. Creation.** New York: Ballantine Books, 1982. Well-written, if lengthy, historical novel, starring Zoroaster’s grandson, which discusses the great ideas of the creative sixth century before Christ.


**Zaehner, R. C. The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs.** New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. After the various encyclopedias, Zaehner’s works are the best on this subject.
CHAPTER 3

Confucius and Plato: A Few Really Good People

What is the best way to create a strong society? Can people be led by moral example because they are basically good—or do they need a philosopher-king to help them control the evil within themselves?

What is the best way to create a strong society? History offers many answers. Hammurabi of Babylon, as we saw, believed in harsh laws, while Jesus of Nazareth saw love as the key. Most of us have ideas that fall somewhere in between. Given the many different answers to this basic question, it is striking how similar were many ideas of the ancient Chinese sage Confucius (Kung Fuzi or “Master Kung,” 551–479 B.C.E.) and famous Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 B.C.E.). Both believed that a good society or state had to be led by men of superior virtue and wisdom. Both generally distrusted laws because they made people devious and merchants because they fostered greed. Neither favored democratic self-government, but both believed in the existence of absolute moral truth and in the possibility that humans could live in peace and harmony. Both focused attention on the individual, but neither believed in “individual rights” in the way we use that phrase, but rather stressed individual duty.

Before we explain these similarities by saying that “great minds think alike,” we should note several important differences between these two philosophers. While both believed that only those who were already virtuous could create a well-ordered, peaceful political community or state, Confucius and his followers were convinced that all human beings were basically good, or could be nurtured to be so. Plato begged to differ; he thought most people were far too easily deceived by tyrants or greed. They needed to be controlled, either by their carefully educated “betters” or by laws.
Naturally, these differing views of human nature resulted in different versions of the ideal government. Confucius emphasized human behavior in general, while Plato stressed the importance of the behavior of a carefully educated ruling class. While Confucius was more interested in the relationship of individuals within a community, Plato was more interested in universal truths. Both believed that education was necessary to produce a wise ruling class—but Confucius believed education could do this in and of itself while Plato’s system almost creates a closed ruling caste of leaders. This is something worth noting since caste is usually associated with the “East,” “democracy” (broadly defined) with the “West.” Their views have been widely studied and have affected the lives of millions over the centuries. Yet their insights, however universal in nature, also reflect the unique features of their respective civilizations.

Confucius was the son of a minor nobleman during the “Period of Warring States” in ancient Chinese history. From about 1050 to 770 B.C.E., the Zhou emperors held together the various Chinese states using a feudal system of government in which loyalty to the rulers was based on marriage alliances and other personal contracts between them and various noble families. This delicate system of mutual dependence and harmony had collapsed by Confucius’ day, and he took it as his mission to show people how it—and political unity—could be restored. Confucius married at age nineteen and had three children, but “his relations with his wife and children were without cordiality.” As a young man, Confucius took a minor administrative position with a noble family in his home state of Lu and later worked intermittently for the ruler of Lu as a minister, taking fifteen years off to study the history of the Zhou rulers and educate himself in the noble arts of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, arithmetic, and calligraphy [art of drawing characters used in Chinese writing]. When Confucius realized that the ruler of Lu was more interested in dancing girls that in the serious business of governing, he resigned and spent the rest of his life as a teacher, trying unsuccessfully to find another ruler who would appreciate his advice. He died at the age of seventy-three, after transmitting to many students the message that China could be strong again if the values and virtues of the past were restored. During the next two generations, his disciples compiled his teachings in a book known as the Analects (“Sayings”). “No book,” wrote a recent translator, “in the entire history of the world has exerted, over a longer period of time,
a greater influence on a large number of people than this slim little volume.” Other Confucian ideas are contained in works written by his students and followers, including *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Great Learning*, and *Mencius* [the name of one of his disciples].

Hardly the stuffy or severe person often depicted in legend, Confucius was physically strong and a good hunter and sportsman, who spent much of his life traveling at a time when this required considerable stamina. He taught his followers that civilization depended on virtue, and especially on the virtues of “humanity” (*ren*, translated as “human-heartedness,” “love,” or “benevolence”) and “propriety” or “correct behavior” (*li*). In its simplest form, *ren* means to treat others with humaneness and respect, as you would like to be treated. (There are three statements of the Golden Rule in the *Analects*.) A person with *ren* would show his or her respect for others by proper behavior or civility. *Li* is not mindless bowing to others but a whole set of customs that brings order to our lives and helps us show our love for our fellow humans. The formal aspects of Confucian etiquette are important ways to convey our attitudes. “Authority without generosity, ceremony without reverence, mourning without grief—these I cannot bear to contemplate,” Confucius said. A good society would exist if people were honest with themselves and caring toward each other.

While Confucius believed that all could develop through education the virtues of *ren* and *li*, he generally described these as the qualities of a “gentleman.” Although Confucius understood that most leaders of society would be aristocrats, he did not believe that only the members of the upper classes were, or could be, virtuous. With the proper education, anyone—providing he was male—could develop the wisdom of a true leader or sage. One became a “gentleman” by education in history and literature, not by birth, and the true leader, whatever his background, should lead by moral example. To influence people, “approach them with dignity and they will be respectful. Be yourself a good son and kind father, and they will be loyal.” He believed that “when their betters cultivate civility [*ren*], the people are easily led.”

It is clear that Confucius envisioned a society in which human relationships—especially those within the family—were more important than laws. Any summary of the ideas of Confucius will mention the importance of the duties of children toward their parents and family. It will also mention the importance of the Five
Relationships described in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, those between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, and friends. If all involved in these relationships behaved properly and with full human respect toward the other party, society would be orderly. An orderly society is a well-governed one, but here the knowledge, sincerity, and wisdom of the ruler was as important as his behavior. This is made clear in a passage from *The Great Learning*, which points out that ancient rulers, wishing to “order well” their states, had to first “regulate” their families. This required that they “first cultivate their personal lives.” They did this by being sincere and trying to extend their knowledge through “the investigation of things.” Once “things were investigated,” their “knowledge was extended,” their wills were made sincere, and their personal lives were improved. This led to the proper regulation of their families and “when the family [was properly] regulated, the state [was] in order and there [was] peace in the world.” The Chinese believed there was a moral order in the universe. A good leader, reflecting this moral order by living a just and proper life himself, would more easily win the trust of his subjects. If his life were balanced and harmonious, there would be harmony in the country. All this did not mean that a good ruler could ignore the crops or disband the army; it simply meant that these things were not enough—the successful ruler also had to set a moral example that others were able to imitate. Confucius’ follower Mencius put it bluntly in his advice to a ruler who asked him how to govern:

You’d better get back to basics. If mulberry trees are planted on plots of one acre, people in their fifties can wear silk. If you do not pull men away for battle during the breeding times of your livestock, people in their seventies can eat meat. . . . Pay careful attention to education, teaching the Justice of filial piety and fraternity, and the grey-haired will not be seen in the streets carrying heavy burdens on their backs.

The emphasis by Confucius on the importance of human relationships became popular in part because Chinese society already put much emphasis on the family. Early Chinese religion, like that in many other early human societies, involved intense respect for and veneration of one’s ancestors. Within three centuries of his death, Confucius’ ideas, modified to stress the importance of loyal subjects and to deemphasize such things as the moral duty of intellectuals to criticize unjust rulers, had become the ruling philosophy
of the Han dynasty. And the moral gentlemen of Confucians became the bureaucrats of the Chinese state for the next sixteen centuries. Bureaucrats tend to value rules for their own sake, and this is why many people—in China and elsewhere—came to associate li with ritual for its own sake, instead of seeing it as a manifestation of ren. After several centuries of what came to be called State Confucianism, no “gentlemen” would speak as bluntly to a ruler as Mencius had done. When the ideas of creative thinkers become the official policy of a government, they become more influential because they are backed by state power. However, they can also lose some of their original “edge.” This happened to the ideas of Confucius over the centuries as millions memorized his words to pass state civil service examinations but far fewer tried to live them in the way he must have intended.

Whether Plato’s ideas on government have been misinterpreted in the centuries since his death is harder to determine, if only because everything written by this “father of Western philosophy” has been the subject of extensive discussion and debate. Plato’s political and ethical ideas seem more complex than those of Confucius, at least to those of us with a modern Western education and biases. Yet Plato’s understanding of human nature, and consequently of the ideal state, were as influenced by the events in fifth-century Athens as Confucius’ ideas were by the disorder of the Warring States period in China.

Like Confucius, Plato was born into an aristocratic family. His father claimed descent from the last of the kings of Athens and his mother was related to sixth-century leader Solon, who established some of the first democratic institutions in the city. Plato grew up during the Peloponnesian War, which saw the Athenians replace their democratic government with an oligarchic rule by a group one known as the “Thirty Tyrants.” These were in turn overthrown by democratic forces after Athens lost the war to Sparta. This democratic government, however, fearful of internal enemies after Athens’ defeat, put Plato’s teacher, Socrates, to death in 399 B.C.E. for “corrupting the youth,” that is, asking too many questions. Both by family background and by virtue of his experiences as a young man, Plato was familiar with different types of government. Growing up in such a troubled time, it is perhaps not surprising that he devoted much of his life—and a major book, the Republic—to trying to determine the best form of government.
Also like his Chinese counterpart, Plato spent time traveling but most of his life teaching. While in his twenties, he traveled to Egypt, Italy, and Sicily. In two visits to the city of Syracuse in Sicily in the 360s, Plato tried unsuccessfully to tutor the ruler, Dionysus II, in hopes that he would become the ideal “philosopher-king” Plato described in the Republic. Plato had already purchased land near Athens and established a school, the Academy, where he taught young men his principles of ethics and government, “to educate citizens for statesmanship.” This school, which some call the first university, remained in existence for nearly 900 years. During his long life, Plato wrote many philosophical dialogues, lengthy written conversations in which Plato’s ideas on the nature of morality, truth, beauty, and justice are put in the mouth of his teacher, Socrates. The Republic, one of the longest dialogues, contains Plato’s picture of the ideal state and of the virtues and education of the people who were to govern it, led by a philosopher-king.

Before we can understand why Plato thought that philosophers—literally “lovers of wisdom”—made the best rulers, we need to appreciate his belief that society or the state should be organized to reflect our basic human nature. In the first place, like most thoughtful Greeks of this period, Plato believed that only in the city-state, or polis, could a human being find fulfillment. Second, Plato believed that each human soul consisted of three parts, a rational part, a part containing our desires or appetites for pleasure and wealth, and a part he called the spirited part, which contained a person’s love of honor and desire for victory. Each part of the soul then corresponded to one of the three social classes in Plato’s political community. The spirited part was best represented by the military class, or soldiers. The general population of “producers,” or craftsmen and merchants, represented the desires or appetites, and the rational part of the soul was most active in the ruling class of “guardians.” In a harmonious state, just as in a harmonious individual, all of the parts must work together. For this to happen in a well-governed state, the rational part must control the other two.

In their wisdom, Plato’s guardians resembled the group that Confucius called gentlemen. Yet they are different from the ruling class in China in at least one important respect. They understand ultimate or universal Truth (the idea of the Good) in a way that others cannot, even if the others are educated. To make this point, Plato wrote an allegory [a story in which the images or facts sym-
bolize something else] of a cave. In the Republic, Plato asks us to imagine a cave in which prisoners are chained, from the neck down, against a wall facing the rear of the cave. Behind them is a fire and between the fire and the prisoners is a path along which the guards walk back and forth, carrying cutouts of animals and people; some guards are talking as they do this. The prisoners, who have been chained there from birth, see the shadows which the figures cast on the rear wall and mistake this for reality. If one of the prisoners was freed and dragged (since he would be afraid of the unknown) to the mouth of the cave, he would see the sun, something more “real” than the fire because it is the source of the fire. If that same prisoner, once he adjusted to the light and overcame his bewilderment, were sent back into the cave to tell the other prisoners that they were mistaking shadows for reality, they would not believe him; in fact, says Plato, they would probably try to kill him for telling such tall tales, disrupting their lives and challenging their accustomed beliefs.13

In this allegory, the images on the rear wall of the cave represent what most humans take to be truth or reality: talking, moving shadows. The sun represents ultimate Truth or the ultimate Good, the source of all lesser “truths.” In Plato’s ideal state, the ruling class of guardians, led by a philosopher-king, would govern because they were the only ones who had seen the sun or, as Plato put it, they “had knowledge” while others “had beliefs.” Their natures, in which the rational part of the soul dominated, meant that they were “made to practice philosophy and be political leaders, while others shouldn’t engage in philosophy and should follow a leader.”14 The guardian class was also put in control of the state in Plato’s Republic because they had a specialized education and social life which prepared them for their leadership role. Plato’s instructions for the education of his guardians goes far beyond anything that Confucius had in mind for his gentlemen.

Members of Plato’s guardian class had to be reliable, courageous, and good-looking (since this was a reflection of inner worth). They would be raised in an environment in which women were equal to men, even to the point of fighting on the battlefield when necessary, and exercising naked together in the gymnasia. Men and women would share wives, husbands, and property, but guardians could mate only with other members of their class. That way, only “outstanding” children would be produced. Otherwise,
Plato wrote, “our breed of guardians will become tainted.” It was also permissible for members of the guardian class to tell “helpful lies” to the lesser members of the community if this was necessary “for the good of the community,” for example, to get people to fight foreigners. The education of guardians would focus on physical training and on the liberal and fine arts, including music and math. They were to avoid literature, drama, and poetry which contained fantasies. Guardians had to be trained in dialectic [philosophical argument] and had to learn that the five senses were unreliable, and that all real truth was universal in nature and, thus, beyond the senses. The lifestyle and education of this group was justified if we understand that rulers really were different from other people. As Plato put it,

God included gold in the mixture when he was forming Those of you who have what it takes to be rulers (which is why rulers have the greatest privileges), silver when he was forming the auxiliaries [common soldiers, merchants, etc.], and iron and copper when he was forming the farmers and other workers.

Plato’s specifications for his guardians left him open to later charges, especially by twentieth-century authors, that he was elitist to the point of being totalitarian. It was almost as if he were advocating a closed caste system in contrast to the more open or “democratic” system of Confucius, in which anyone could become a “gentleman.” Some have even said that the ideas in the Republic foreshadowed the practices of Hitler’s Germany. Those who try to defend him against these charges point out that Plato’s rulers were hardly like modern dictators. Since they really did know Truth and Justice, philosopher-kings would behave justly. It has not been an altogether convincing defense. On the other hand, we should remember that Plato was describing an ideal, or utopian, state and was doing this as a way of highlighting for his readers the importance of reason. It is also true that Plato did modify some of his views later in life, when he wrote the Statesman and the Laws. In these works, he decided that the views in the Republic were too utopian. In the Laws, he suggested that it was better for people to rely on laws than on the moral leadership of a guardian class. The philosopher-king became a legislator who enforced numerous rules governing in detail the
lives of citizens. It was a “second-best” solution for him, but, by that time, he was less interested in helping the select few acquire ultimate knowledge and more interested in molding the character of all citizens of the state.\(^1\)

The fact that the views of each of these ancient thinkers have been both disputed and misunderstood by later ages—in more ways than we can discuss here—is itself a tribute to their profound impact on succeeding generations. Whatever else we might say about them, they did raise a standard of human perfectibility for their respective societies, and they did so by challenging the “commonsense” notion that things had to be the way they always had been—or had appeared to be. Each argued that life could be better, both more reasonable and more moral, if we trusted our senses less (Plato) and really believed in the human capacity for love (Confucius). There was a significant difference, however, in how human improvement was to be achieved. Confucius had faith that all men and women could behave humanely toward each other, and he believed that, if they did this, the society they would create through their ritual acts of propriety toward each other would ennoble all within it. Led by the gentlemen of knowledge and virtue, the Chinese could create a society that, if not perfect, was at least in harmony with the forces that governed the universe.

Plato had less faith than Confucius in humans’ ability to create a perfect society. After all, most people in any community, he believed, were destined to live their lives mistaking shadows for reality. People were certainly able to use their reason to control their desires but they were not, as a rule, willing to do so. Therefore, in the Republic at least, he proposed that the only way a society could approach anything like perfection would be by giving power to the few who were able to use reason, leave the cave, and understand the Ultimate Good.

Perhaps Confucius had too much faith in his fellow humans, and Plato too little. Perhaps they were both right, and both wrong. One thing is certain: for good or ill, we cannot understand Chinese thought and behavior without understanding Confucius, and Western philosophy makes little sense unless we start by discussing the ideas of Plato. And to be a truly educated citizen in the twenty-first century, we need to know both of these thinkers.
Notes

3. Since there are many translations of both the Analects and Plato's Republic, passages in these works are generally divided by numbers, like chapters and verses in the Bible. See Analects, 5.12 (chapter 5, passage 12): "I would not want to do to others what I do not want them to do me"; this is also repeated in 12.2, and 15.24. All passages from the Analects are taken from the translation by Simon Leys referred to above.
4. Analects, 6.27.
5. Analects, 12.16 and 14.41; see also 12.19–20.
9. See Analects, 13.15: In responding to the question: "Is there one single maxim that could ruin a country? [Confucius said] The only pleasure of being a prince is never having to suffer contradiction. If you are right and no one contradicts you, that's fine; but if you are wrong and no one contradicts you—is this not almost a case of 'one single maxim that could ruin a country'?”
10. See chapter 5 of this book on Thucydides and Sima Qian for a brief description of this conflict.
12. See Republic, passages 435–442. All references to Republic are from the translation by Robin Waterfield (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996). See also Sahakian, Plato, 80.
15. Ibid., 535a–b, 456–460. See chapter 7, "Women, Children, and Warfare" in Waterfield's Republic for Plato's description of relations between the sexes in the guardian class.
17. Ibid., 415a.
18. See R. Brambrough, ed., *Plato, Popper, and Politics* (Cambridge: W. Hef-fer & Sons, 1967) and T. L. Thorson, ed., *Plato: Totalitarian or Democrat?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963). While Plato’s views on such things as communal property and sex were shocking to many—in his day as well as ours—it is anachronistic (out of place chronologically) to blame him for the excesses of twentieth-century Hitlers and Stalins. If nothing else, the fundamental goal of Plato—how to promote the good life—contrasted with the fundamental goal of the modern totalitarian dictators, which was power.


**Further Reading**


Plato. *Republic*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996. Perhaps the most readable translation of this work; there are many others available. Also has a useful introduction.