

Disclaimer

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# **The Good Life and Its Correlation with Alcohol Inebriation—A Discussion between Confucius, J.S. Mill and Marx**

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*[CONFUCIUS, MILL, and MARX appear out of thin air in a bar.]*

CONFUCIUS: How, and why, are the three of us even here?

MARX: Beats me. Probably another college student writing their humanities paper trying to play God. I always get zapped to random places this time of year.

MILL: Well, I can't exactly complain about the choice of location... Might as well get what we can out of this while we are here.

MARX: I wholeheartedly agree.

*[They look for a table and sit down in silence, out of place in the midst of loud music and partying. WAITER comes, bearing three mugs of beer.]*

MILL: We didn't order, did we?

WAITER: They're complimentary, sir.

MARX: Huh. These trips really have their perks, it seems.

*[MILL downs a mouthful of the frothy, golden liquid and hums appreciatively. CONFUCIUS takes an apprehensive sip.]*

MILL: Now, this is what I call the good life. Hey, Confucius, what is your ideal life like?

CONFUCIUS: I'll share my thoughts with you on "the good life", so to speak. A good life is a life of virtue. One of the core virtues is humaneness, which denotes the good feeling that a virtuous person experiences when he cares for and shows concern for others. Interpersonal relationships are the core of humaneness, as hinted on by its Chinese character "仁", which is constructed by two parts that mean "person" and "two" respectively. A good life is also a life where one continues to do the right thing no matter what, extricating oneself from the influence of the external environment (destiny and fate being among those circumstances), as it is something that cannot be controlled, unlike one's decision to be steadfast in the face of adversary, truly commit to righteousness ("義" in Chinese) and hold it at the highest esteem, like a gentleman does (*Analects* 17.23). Everything is meaningless without rightness; it makes what one does worthwhile (Cheng 270).

MILL: This sounds terrible, having to deny yourself from enjoyment and pleasure in exchange for "doing the right thing". What's in for the people who choose to live in a virtuous manner?

CONFUCIUS: Saying that a life of virtue equates to suffering is preposterous. Following the Way is desirable, for it brings true happiness and self-satisfaction in a way that material pleasures barely manage to, the latter being fickle and ever-changing while the former holds true for a long time. That being said, I do desire wealth and eminence, but only when they are acquired by legitimate and rightful means; they are as meaningless to me as drifting clouds otherwise (*Analects* 4.5; also 7.15). In other words, I would gladly seize the opportunity to amass wealth, but only if it is possible with hard work and determination (7.11). If it is impossible, I would rather stay poor if that meant retaining a clear conscience (6.9). By following the Way and upholding virtue, one is less susceptible to the lure of material comfort, as he understands fully that mental gratification does not depend on it.

MILL: I sincerely apologize for my unintentional affront. The alcohol's starting to get to me. The points that you have just raised—on virtues of humaneness and rightness, and how following them brings a life of satisfaction—are certainly interesting. It goes without saying that humaneness, which I conclude is a concept synonymous to the integrity of one's character, is instrumental in the welfare of the society, but there is another thing. You believe that man has to suppress themselves and hold themselves with propriety, and that this contributes to human's well being. Is that true?

CONFUCIUS: I would say so, yes.

MARX: Just get on with it, will you, John?

MILL: [*sarcastically*] Yes, sir. Well, I'm going to discuss this topic from another point of view. I believe that humans should be allowed to form their own opinions and thoughts and express them without reserve (III: 1). Men also should be free to carry out their opinions without hindrance, of course, at their own risk and peril. There are limitations to this rule: this is only in the circumstance that said free opinions and actions do not do harm to others.

CONFUCIUS: I imagine that it must be chaotic, the existence of so many differing opinions on the same topic.

MILL: To answer your question, Confucius, mankind is not infallible. Everyone makes mistakes. No one is perfect. No opinion—not even mine, yours, or of dear Karl's here—should be seen as completely true; they are at most one of the many sides of a truth (III: 1). Diversity of human character and lifestyle should be celebrated, instead of being seen as a despicable quality. Humans are born different innately, and so I believe that we should be given a shot to experience different modes of life (III: 1).

MARX: Your statement reminds me of the period in Chinese history before the Qin patriarch united all states into one. The Hundred Schools of Thought were founded in a time when no one regulated speech and thought, the rulers of states encouraging free discussion of ideas and philosophies, some even venturing to recruit the brilliant talent behind them. It was admittedly a time of chaos, but it had brought the birth of some brilliant philosophies that left an impact on the way humans live now, thousands of years later.

MILL: My point exactly. Individuality is not only one of the principal ingredients of human happiness and the chief ingredient of individual and social progress (III: 1); it is also a prerequisite for creativity and diversity. Therefore, one should be given the choice to choose, to plan his life for himself, by using his powers of observation, his reasoning and judgment, his firmness and self-control (III: 3)... If not, how much better would he be compared to an animal, that does nothing but eat, sleep and conceive their offspring? Perception, judgment, the ability to discriminate, our mental activity, all the qualities that are exercised when one makes choices... they are what that makes a human *human*. How else can we live a good life, if we are less than what we should be, are born to be?

MARX: I agree with you, on that being in touch of our human qualities is the path to a good, fulfilling life. However, there is one quality you failed to mention that is arguably the most important of all.

MILL: Pray tell, my brother, what would it be?

MARX: Labor is the most essential nature of humans. Man is a species-being (which means that man sees himself as connected, a part of his species) and labor is the essence of species-life. For labor, the very cornerstone of productive life itself is to man a means to fulfill the need to sustain physical existence, both of individual and species. And the species-character (the whole character of a species) is constituted of free conscious activity. Unlike the animal, of which character is inseparable from its actions, man is a free, conscious being that engages in species-activity when he so chooses. Life

activity is shaped by man into an object of will and consciousness (195). For example, man produces even when he is free of physical need and truly produces in freedom of such need, while an animal produces because there is an immediate physical need compelling it to do so.

MILL: In other words, humans are defined by their ability to work of their own volition.

MARX: Exactly, but what happens most of the time in a capitalist environment is this less than ideal situation, when the entity of labor is ripped out from the worker's essential being, and he feels no sense of accomplishment in his work, but only misery and unhappiness. He "does not develop . . . mental and physical energy but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind" (193). He feels most human carrying out his animalistic functions, while in his human functions he is no longer human. As John has just said, how is this a good life when human is reduced to a lifeless husk of what he should have been? A good life, ideally, is one where man produces without compulsion, without other complications, spontaneous and free.

CONFUCIUS: Both of you put forth good opinions on the elements that constitute a good life. I would like to supplement them with some points of mine if you don't mind. Freedom of expression and labor are both ideal, that is true, but what if making it happen compromises basic integrity? I believe that with regard to worldly affairs, we should "[side] with what is right" (*Analects* 4.10), which not only means to prioritize virtue over everything else but also to adhere to ritual. For example, as Mill has stated,

one should only express his opinions freely when it does not do harm to others.

MARX: I beg to differ. In some cases, being virtuous and doing the right thing only does harm to one's happiness and well-being, going against what you have claimed. As an example, in a capitalist society, workers are forced by their superiors to engage in mindless and repetitive labor, which causes only misery and dejection.

CONFUCIUS: I apologize, for I forget to elaborate that this not only applies to laymen, but also to the higher-ups in society. A virtuous leader should always put the needs of the people in mind. When a leader is virtuous and follows ritual, his subjects will automatically follow him without prompting, like how weeds inevitably bend in the wind. If he is righteous, then none of his people will be disrespectful (13.4). If a benevolent ruler leads in the right direction, nobody will dare to do wrong (12.17). So, in the opposite case where a superior does not assume his responsibility, the workers naturally feel discontented in their jobs and seek to rectify their situation. To conclude, I still stand with my opinion that virtue is obligatory for a good life.

MARX: That is a convincing argument.

MILL: *[interrupts]* Now that we've gotten the serious topic out of the way, what are your thoughts on the consuming of alcohol inebriation? Would it be a part of the good life to you?

CONFUCIUS: A gentleman does everything in moderation—he does not stuff themselves with food when they are eating and is not concerned about comfort when he chooses a dwelling (1.14). In the same vein, he does not drink until he is incapacitated by drunkenness. A gentleman “never [drinks] to the point of confusion” (10.8). He is always in control of his actions, careful of his words (1.14). Some people lose control of their actions and utter gibberish when they are on the precipice of alcohol overconsumption. This is undesirable behavior that could have devastating consequences.

MILL: Always the spoilsport, you and your rituals. Lighten up a little, would you? Personally, I say that being drunk is not a problem at all, provided that no harm is being inflicted on others. As I said earlier, a person should have “perfect freedom, legal and social, to do the action and stand the consequences”, provided that no harm is done to other people (IV: 3). A person is perfectly allowed to drink as much as he wants, get drunk and not be punished for it. However, when this degree of intoxication is the cause of damage, or a risk of damage, to other individuals or the society, he has violated the breach of morality and should be persecuted by the law (IV: 10). For example, a soldier or policeman must be punished should he be drunk on duty, as the intoxication brought by alcohol may hinder him in carrying out his responsibilities to the public.

MARX: Both of you made some good points. Now, I’ll tackle this topic from a sociological point of view. Alcohol is a commodity, as is bread, the means of sustenance for the proletariat. The bread and alcohol industries vie for grain, the main ingredient of production for both. Bread, of course, is more important and in higher demand, but alcohol always prevails in



time of grain scarcity. Why is that so, when bread packs nutrition when alcohol ruins the mind and body? It is because alcohol generates more profit, and the maximization of profit is the main goal of capitalism. As a result, when there is a shortage of grain, workers' access to bread is severely limited. They work, they produce, but they are robbed of their sustenance, the commodity they need most—this is a result of the alienation of labor (Marx 191). Left without choice, the average worker descends into the chasm of alcoholism, not only to mute his hunger but also because he has desperate need of recreation out of work, during the few moments in a day when he is finally himself, to make the next day of labor more endurable (193; also Engels 400). To conclude, alcohol consumption and intoxication were not birthed by choice then, but rather an effect of the conditions under which people try to live their lives (Fairve). When workers are not under exploitative relations that compel them to choose intoxication above nutrition and sustenance, then will the consumption of alcohol truly be a part of the good life. I myself enjoy a pint or two as much as the next man, now that the matter is less complicated.

MILL: I'll drink to that.

MARX: I believe our time is up. Before we leave, let's toast to a good life, shall we?

CONFUCIUS, MILL, MARX: To a good life.

*[They finish their beer and vanish, leaving no traces of their patronage except for three empty mugs.]*

WAITER: That was such an illuminating conversation! After listening to their words, I finally have an idea for my final paper, but before that, I will have to finish my work here first...

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**Teacher’s comment:**

What does it mean to live a good life? Does it mean being wealthy, happy or successful in life? What roles do the human nature and virtue play? Does it mean caring for others and making a better society? Yi Jie’s essay tries to take a careful look at all these questions and compare the views of Confucius, J.S. Mill and Karl Marx about good life and their analyses of human nature. Yi Jie demonstrates her good understanding of all these great thinkers, as well as her ability to apply their thoughts in the discussion of what is the meaning of the good life. This essay is a well-written and thoughtfully conceived dialogue. It shows clear expression of ideas and the knowledge which is well integrated and supported by evidence from our selected texts. (LUI Wing Sing)

