

Morality Today in America: *Mutatis Mutandis*

by

Ina Lei

College of Staten Island

October 14, 2011

Morality Today in America: *Mutatis Mutandis*¹?

Ina Lei

Going Gold and Growing Greed

Growing up in a developing Asian country for two decades, coming to America for me was like taking an express to a brave new world and opening, a novel (not just a new chapter) into my young adulthood. Under the impression of the mass media, to me America was the heaven on earth in which the *Big Apple* was located on the highest level and on top of the *Big Apple* sits the golden bull from the Wall Street. While embracing the golden bull epitomizing the realization of my American dream, working in the Wall Street for a former little *Red Pioneer* like me meant to conquer the most affluent capitalistic country.

Corporate Corruption and Capitalistic Crime

There is nothing wrong to go for the gold in itself, however, the means to that end or the price paid for achieving that goal may be too risky sometimes. Remember the famous Gordon Gekko proclaim as articulated by Michael Douglas in the movie *Wall Street*? That is, "Greed is good". Indeed, given that becoming rich is the *modus Vivendi* of the Wall Street, being greedy would be best possible *modus operandi*. As a faithful follower of Wall Street tycoons, digging as much gold as possible became my philosophy of life as well, and being insatiable of money-making was also ingrained into my daily operation during the first few years of my life here. At that economy-booming time, I was working as a receptionist in a lower Manhattan company and living in a basement cell of a high-rise building so that I could get close to those rich people and vicariously enjoy their happiness. To my surprise, they were hedonistic but not happy, had a lot of money but no meaning. But why?

¹ *Mutatis Mutandis* is a Latin phrase which means "the necessary changes having been made" (Webster's College Dictionary, 2011).

In the race to the top level of the corporate ladder, a zero-sum game is what people imagine to play in which corruption oftentimes operates as a game changer. In order to survive and thrive, an employee may have to compartmentalize his or her personality and uses part of it to play the game by the unethical rule. Along the same line, on the road with full of slippery slopes to the gold mountain, an executive may have to suppress his or her social conscience in order to unfairly distribute the common good---a capitalistic crime that has been denounced in the ever-expanding *99 Percent* or *Occupy Wall Street* movement. Indeed, if an important part of one's personality is misused, how can one lives one's life to its full extent? Similarly, if one's conscience (the moral eye) is covered, how can that person seek truth, decency, and other intangible *sine qua non* for a good life? Now the question is, how come these brightest (may not be the best) people lack of moral principle to guide their career or put their life on a morally-justifiable track? The answer is that they did not receive any moral teaching in schools while their parents were either too busy or too confused to teach them either. If the brightest people did not learn morals in school or by themselves, how could other people?

Education Equity of Moral Meaning

The major reason that public schools in this country do not and cannot teach moral values is due to the predominance of ethical relativism. Given the diversity of American culture, there are so many trends of moral thoughts. Among them which ones should be instilled into our school children's minds has been a perennial controversy. The compromised solution to this controversy is to teach nothing related to morality. However, there are other approaches to resolve this issue, which could be better. For example, in Singapore where common curriculum is implemented in every school character education is compulsory. A core of the character education curriculum includes teaching the representative contents of every main moral

traditions. It should be noted that students in Singapore are not passively instilled with moral ideas. After they are exposed to different types of moral thoughts, students reflect on those thoughts while exercising their critical thinking to compare and them from which hopefully they would be able to develop their autonomous moral reasoning. The rationale underlying this moral education model derives from Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984), which should shed special light on the future direction of moral education here as well. To that end, Kohlberg's pedagogical approach to moral development is summarized in the following.

Kohlberg believes that the best way to stimulate students' moral thinking is through a Socratic style of dialogue in the classroom, where students attempt to resolve a moral dilemma by discussing all sorts of ethical solutions. The teacher's task in this context is to facilitate discussion and scaffold it so that students would be able to attend to the ideas at a higher moral level and then incorporate them into one's own thoughts. Since the teacher only sets up a value-free structure for students' moral learning without imposing any specific content, there is no reason for moral relativists to boycott this type of approach. On the other hand, the assumption that students come to class with some kind of moral knowledge may not always be true, especially in the case of younger students whose moral vacuum needs to be filled with moral contents. For that purpose, the traditional method of teaching morality to children should be used as a complementary approach as briefly explained below.

As a childhood educator myself, I have read numerous story books written for children in this country. These books can be generally characterized by three F's, namely, fiction, fantasy, and for fun. In contrast, the story books that I read when I was young in my homeland as well as the ones that my daughter read now in her weekend Chinese culture school are full of historical

facts and fables, which are adequate for moral teaching. For example, the 24 stories of filial piety are legendary and presumably can shape the moral fiber of impressionable children.

Interestingly, one of the stories, viz., (*Hua*) *Mu-Lain* has been adapted to a popular Broadway show as well as a well-received Disney movie. From *Mu-Lain*, American children would learn how to become compassionate rather than egocentric or selfish, and how to solve the moral dilemma in which one's love of one's own father is in conflict with one's love of one's own country. Granted that American education policy is evidence-based, perhaps we can conduct empirical studies to find out whether the inclusion of moral fables into children's curriculum can improve pupils' altruistic behavior and enhance their ethical reasoning. If empirical evidences indicate the beneficial effects of the aforementioned moral teaching, why can we adopt this approach?

From *Gellshaft*² to *Gemeinschaft*³, Traditional but not traditionalistic⁴

With the rapid changes of our society led by the Web 2.0 revolution, social interactions take a different format and traditional virtues need to be reframed in light of the new context, as Harvard Professor Howard Gardner (2011) pointed out in his new book *Truth, beauty, and goodness reframed: Educating for the virtues in the twenty-first Century*. Inasmuch as this book echoes my earlier voice, I am even more pessimistic about the young generation's moral development than Gardner does⁵, if necessary changes of moral education will not be made (à la *mutatis mutandis*) soon. Obviously, a social system in the 21st century cannot be organized by

² According to Webster's *Gesellschaft* means "a society or group characterized chiefly by formal organization, impersonal relations, the absence of binding norms, and a detachment from tradition and sentiment".

³ Opposed to *Gesellschaft*, *Gemeinschaft* is more like a community in which members are closely connected with each with a strong sense of common mission as well as compassion, and an attachment to traditional and sentimental concerns (cf. Webster's).

⁴ Sociologists (Bellah et al., 1985) use the term "traditional" to label the "living faith of the dead" whereas "traditionalistic" for "the dead faith of the living".

⁵ With my outsider's perspective, I can see more blind spots of American education system than Gardner can.

the *Gesellschaft* orientation, particularly if it is dominated by rugged individualism as American society. Instead, *Gemeinschaft* should be the way to follow since its focus on human connection and compassion could fill in the current ethical vacuum and dissipate the prevalent desolation prevalent today in America. In the process of adopting a *Gemeinschaft* orientation, discretion is required for accommodating moral traditions. In short, we should be selectively rather than blindly assimilating moral traditions and disseminating moral knowledge to the new comers.

As explicated in the award-winning book *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*, being traditional means to enliven our ancestors' wisdom that still fits our contemporary society, whereas being traditionalistic means to practice whatever that ancestors passed on to us without examining its practical value. In spite of my cultural bias, an updated version of the try-&true neo-Confucianism as a pan-cultural philosophy of life or worldview is recommended here to function as a guiding principle in re-conceptualizing traditional virtues in a post-modern era. Not until American educators become in line with this vision and start to revolutionize the system, I wouldn't claim that *mutatis mutandis* appears on the morality today in America.

References:

- Bellah, Robert N., Madsen Richard, Sullivan, William M., Swidler, & Ann, Ti, Steven M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. New York: Van Nostrand.
- Gardner, Howard (2011). *Truth, beauty, and goodness reframed: Educating for the virtues in the twenty-first Century*, New York: Basic Books.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence (1984). *The psychology of moral development*. New York: Harper & Row.