

CONFUCIAN ETHICS: THE QUINTESSENTIALITY OF LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Confucianism being a Western term, has no counterpart in [Chinese](#), is a worldview, a social ethic, a [political ideology](#), a scholarly tradition, and a way of life. This Chinese philosophy did not begin with Confucius but only found expression in him, as a transmitter who consciously tried to reanimate ancient tradition to attain the new. The paper demonstrates that to act ethically is not originally part of man, therefore he must learn. And through the five basic relationships, father and son: affection, filial piety and respect; husband and wife: separate gendered roles; elder brother, siblings and younger: order, propriety; ruler and minister, subject: righteousness, justice and loyalty; friend and friend: faithfulness and fidelity, the society can form and maintain harmonious social relations, civil order, and good government. Using the historical, expository and analytical methods, the work establishes the standard path for good social relationship and leadership.

Key words: Confucianism, social relations, ancestor reverence, ethics.

Introduction

Confucianism, a Western term that has no counterpart in [Chinese](#), is a worldview, a social ethic, a [political ideology](#), a scholarly tradition, and a way of life. Sometimes viewed as a [philosophy](#) and sometimes as a [religion](#), Confucianism may be understood as an all-encompassing way of thinking and living that entails ancestor reverence and a profound human-centred religiousness. East Asians may profess themselves to be [Shintoists](#), [Daoists](#), [Buddhists](#), [Muslims](#), or [Christians](#), but, by announcing their religious affiliations, seldom do they cease to be Confucians.

Although often grouped with the major historical religions, Confucianism differs from them by not being an organized [religion](#). Nonetheless, it spread to other East Asian countries under the influence of Chinese literate culture and has exerted a profound influence on spiritual and political life. Both the theory and practice of Confucianism have indelibly marked the patterns of [government](#), society, [education](#), and [family](#) of East Asia. Although it is an exaggeration to characterize traditional Chinese life and culture as Confucian, Confucian [ethical](#) values have for well over 2,000 years served as the source of inspiration as well as the court of appeal for human interaction between individuals, communities, and nations in the Sinitic world.

The story of Confucianism does not begin with [Confucius](#). Nor was Confucius the founder of Confucianism in the sense that the [Buddha](#) was the founder of [Buddhism](#) and [Jesus Christ](#) the founder of [Christianity](#). Rather, Confucius considered himself a transmitter who consciously tried to reanimate the old in order to attain the new. He proposed revitalizing the meaning of the past by advocating a ritualized life. Confucius's love of antiquity was motivated by his strong desire to understand why certain life forms and institutions, such as reverence for ancestors, human-centred religious practices, and mourning ceremonies, had survived for centuries. His journey into the past was a search for roots, which he perceived as grounded in humanity's deepest needs for belonging and communicating. He had [faith](#) in the cumulative power of culture. The fact that traditional ways had lost vitality did not, for him, diminish their potential for regeneration in the future. In fact, Confucius's sense of history was so strong that he saw himself as a conservationist responsible for the continuity of the cultural values and the social norms that had worked so well for the idealized civilization of the Western [Zhou dynasty](#).

In this paper, we are looking at the ethics of Confucianism. First, we shall consider the basis of ethical thought in Confucianism. Second, we shall also consider Confucian ethics which is the main thrust of this work. Third, the basic human relationships which are also critical in this work shall be discussed and then the conclusion comes last.

The Basis of Ethical Thought in Confucianism

The discussion begins with explanations of the *xi*, *zhi*, *li*, *yi*, *wen*, and *ren*. Chong (2007:1) contends that *xi* relates to one's capacity to “instill in oneself certain virtuous habits”. However, the most interesting definition of *xi* is, 'the original good, evil or nothing' that man is born with. In Confucianism, *xi* does not contain any original 'goodness or badness'. Therefore, Confucius believes that people must learn to act ethically since it is not an original part of their nature. Although each person has the same capacity for learning to act virtuously, each person proceeds at their own pace through practice. Consequently, the concept of *xi* provides a starting point for the learning of ethics, virtue, truth, and morality.

Zhi is the natural substance of which a person is made, but it is not an innate human attribute. The individual acquires *zhi* through education (Chong, 2007, p. 1). The meaning of *zhi*, as “native substance” or “basic stuff”, relates to the 'building of substantial character traits' the individual is cultivating through learning and practice (p. 18). Similarly, as with *xi*, human beings are not born with moral goodness or badness. The desire for building moral character depends on the individual's self-motivation and whether his behavior is in accordance with the qualities of *li* (propriety or etiquette) (2007, p. 2). In the West, the concept of *li* is taught at 'finishing schools' that train young people how to act 'properly' and understand the moral and ethical rules of the culture. These schools promise to complete a young adult's education by teaching them the necessary social skills (*li*) for personal advancement in societal life. There is a question, however, about the effectiveness of this type of education as it relates to Confucian ethics and the acquiring of *zhi*. Although the individual is learning propriety and etiquette at a 'finishing school', these 'proper' behaviors can be easily mimicked by the individual. Consequently, this type of learning affects the individual's outer behavior, but does not develop his inner value system or moral nature. In Western schools, many students will 'sponge-up' the prescribed information for purpose of appearances, but the student's

inner world remains untouched. Therefore, the effectiveness of this teaching method for learning *zhi* characteristics is highly questionable. Additionally, if the assimilation of *zhi* is not genuine within the individual, the expression of *li* is hollow and without meaning. Unfortunately, most Western schools use teaching techniques that present new knowledge to the student, and have an expectation that the student will repeat the same information back to the teacher for approval. This short-sighted teaching system does not affect the core beliefs of the student, and does not improve his moral conduct. Therefore, attaining the attribute of *zhi* is imperative for the individual wanting to develop a meaningful form of *li* within his belief system.

Li also refers to certain rituals within a hierarchical social order, and everyone understands their responsibility to the community. Practicing *li* not only shapes character, but motivates the individual to “behave, desire, feel, and act in required ways” (p. 2). There is an inference that an individual acquiring *li* has a sense of fairness or equity. An example of an individual who does *not* have *li* is a Courtroom Judge who follows the letter of the law, and does not allow for special circumstances when rendering an opinion. These Judges do not have a sense of equity, and therefore, they render their decisions based on the literal interpretation of the law. Other Judges, however, *do* take into consideration the various circumstances connected to a dispute, and render an opinion based on the 'spirit' of the law. These Judges have a sense of ethical fairness, and have the ability to express their qualities of *li*. There are also institutions and organizations where individuals have an opportunity to express their qualities of *li* in accordance with their positions and responsibilities.

According to Chong (2007:3), *Yi* translates as “morality”. However, from this simple definition, there are other meanings such as right action, duty, and righteousness. According to Lau, *yi* is an essential concept in Confucianism, “*Yi* is the standard by which all acts must be judged while there is no further standard by which *yi*, itself can be judged” (p. 3). Lau explains that the object of all learning is *yi*, and all rites, and rules of conduct are based on *yi*. Therefore, *yi* is the ethical set of moral principles that underlies Confucianism. *Yi* represents the perfection of morality, and *li* is the expression of *yi*. The *yi* principles of right action, duty, and righteousness are constantly being practiced through *li*. By harmoniously performing *li*, an individual is creating beauty and balance in his life.

Wen is described by Chong (2007:2) as “the icing on the cake or something that one does at leisure”. These activities include music, poetry, and art that express virtue within the community. However, Confucius is critical of Chinese culture and believes that the arts are lacking virtue:

Surely when one says, 'The rites, the rites,' it is not enough merely to mean presence of jade and silk. Surely when one says 'music, music,' it is not enough merely to mean bells and drums...." The master said, "What can a man do with the rites who is not benevolent? What can a man do with music who is not benevolent? (Waley, 1938)

Confucius believes that one should not participate in a 'creative pursuit' unless virtue is being expressed (p. 29). He wants moral themes embedded in the manifestation of creative forms. As a modern example of this phenomenon, during in the 1960's a form of music called 'bubble-gum' referred to songs that were meaningless and written for the sole purpose of

making money. These 'hit' songs were profitable for the music industry, but did not advance the state-of-the-art continuum in the musical genre of *Rock N' Roll*. Consequently, the cultural effects of such music were temporary and offered nothing of any societal value. Since Confucius believes that promoting virtue is the purpose for musical expression, he would not approve of 'bubble-gum' music. He *would* approve of music that has an authentic message and raises the consciousness of the community. Staying with our example of 1960's music, there are musical albums such as *Sgt. Pepper* (Beatles), *Tommy* (The Who), *Highway 61* (Bob Dylan), and *Bookends* (Simon & Garfunkel) that are recognized as musical milestones, and include songs that contain meaningful *wen* (expression of values) for this generation. These albums continue to have lasting effects on American culture, and are influencing the writing of today's modern music. There are countless other types of music reflecting the human condition at various times in history. Since music is a universal language, it is an effective vehicle for expressing emotion, virtue, and morality. Confucius understands that artistic expression is an opportunity to teach (and remind) people of the perennial virtues which are sometimes forgotten. Consequently, through the expression of the arts, the community maintains its ethics, compassion, benevolence and morality.

Ren is considered the highest virtue in Confucianism (Chong, 2007, p. 27). *Ren* is referred to as “the loftiest ideal of moral excellence, the most difficult of attainment, and the highest development of the individual's distinctive nature” (p. 24). *Ren* is also associated with benevolence, love, humaneness, and the summation of all the other virtues. As examples, a few individuals possessing *ren* include Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, Krishna, Buddha, Lao-Tzu, and Confucius. An individual acquiring *ren* is mastering the way of virtue, morality, compassion and love. This individual is reaching the highest levels of moral perfection in a specific aspect of life. Accordingly, in every discipline there are a few people who are role-models and inspire others to achieve greatness. It can be said that Michael Phelps is achieving *ren* in swimming; Albert Einstein in physics; or Tiger Woods in golf. There is an element of genius in each of these individuals that helps them attain this super-human level of *ren*. Additionally, practice, patience and perseverance are needed for anyone who is striving to reach the highest levels of *ren*.

Confucian Ethics

Confucian philosophy has had a definitive impact on East Asian thought and culture. Indeed it is the common and central element in the otherwise diverse world views of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and other East Asian societies. It is not the only influence, of course. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are the famous “Three Teachings” of Chinese thought and similarly Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shinto are the three major influences shaping Japanese culture. Taoism and Shinto are the original spiritual traditions of China and Japan, respectively, and Buddhism, which spread across Asia from India, is a rich and diverse tradition that is also crucial to an understanding of East Asian thought. Confucian ideas, however, have had the greatest impact in shaping the culture, the day to day personal, social, and political lives of the people of East Asia. Confucius lived from 551-479 BCE, but the “Confucian” principles reflect and unify even older Chinese traditions.

The Confucian tradition is aimed primarily at forming and maintaining harmonious social

relations, civil order, and good government. The ancient Han Dynasty (206-220 BCE) provided the original basis for the Confucian model of good government and also of state protocols. Indeed Confucius emphasized the importance of the earlier classical traditions, and particularly of classical learning. He championed sustained education with an emphasis on idealized role models as essential to social virtue. The idealized role models are the mythic Sage-Kings: the wise and benevolent rulers of the ancient past.

Confucian discipline, and cultural socialization, focuses on intense and difficult academic study, and this study focuses on idealized models of goodness in government, culture, and society. What really distinguished the later Confucian model of government in particular was its organization into a system of education that was necessary for all public officials. Confucianism became the official State ideology of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) and as early as 165 BCE an official examination system was introduced as a requirement for official government positions. Importantly, the examination system introduced a meritocracy that required years of disciplined academic training and also shared, public standards of intellectual achievement and expertise. The new political system was based on merit rather than “noble birth” and political influence.

Without denying the obvious advantages of wealth and influence, the resulting system replaced a more classic system of feudal nobility with elements of a more egalitarian meritocracy, thereby introducing more competence, ideological consistency, and also stability into the overall system of government. In addition as a qualification for office, this system of education aimed at, and institutionalized, a shared conception of virtue into a vast and diverse nation state. Over time the core cultural value of self-development, and in particular intellectual and moral development, and a conception of Nobility rooted in virtues of character came to be shared by the educated and uneducated alike.

Confucian thought provided a clear model of virtue and excellence, and a shared communal goal to become Jun-zi (the ideal Confucian person). An additional pre-Confucian influence is a deep “Natural Law” tradition. In the Shang Dynasty moral and political authority was attributed to “The Lord on High.” This is a model of authority that is derived from personal power. During the Zhou (Chou) Dynasty that followed (1050-256 BCE), however, “The Mandate of Heaven”, as the source of social power and order, replaces talk of the “Lord on High.” The Zhou justified their rise to power by emphasizing the corruption and tyranny of the previous Shang Dynasty, and in the process, popularized the idea that there are moral constraints that limit and authorize the power of the rulers.

The idea of the “Mandate of Heaven,” unlike “The Lord on High,” is a Natural Law conception of moral authority; it includes at its core the idea that virtue and benevolence are prerequisites of political authority and of the right to rule. Natural law standards of right rule become necessary for the right to rule. This introduced the idea of a Moral Law that is above the rulers, and it thus introduced into the ancient Chinese system of government the idea of the “rule of law,” with no person above the law, in place of the “rule by men” through the

power of coercive law. In the West, the Catholic Theologian and Saint, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74 CE) is widely known for his version of Natural Law. Human Law, he argues, if it is to have any true authority, must be subordinate to a higher Moral Law that is revealed by reason to be inherent in the nature of things. We must distinguish the mere counterfeit laws that are simply the coercive commands of a sovereign power from Laws properly so called, that oblige in conscience because they represent the good of the community and are promulgated by a person (or persons) charged with the care of the people. The conception of the moral law as both the basis of and guide to sovereign political authority is the first part of Natural Law theory. The other half is the naturalistic understanding of the higher moral law itself. For Aquinas, the naturalistic understanding of morality is based on Aristotelian philosophy and Catholic theology. The moral content of Confucian Natural Law is rooted in its Taoist elements and equally in its conception of the family as the model for properly ordered human relationships. We will first take a brief look at the Taoist ideas that influenced Confucianism and then, in the next section, we will focus on the Confucian conception of the nature of the family and Five basic relationships.

Basic Human Relationships

Taoism is based on Lao-tzu's, *Tao Te Ching*, the Classic of the Way and its Power, written in the 6th or 4th Century BCE. Lao Tzu is supposed to be a royal archivist disillusioned with court life who set off for the western mountains. He was stopped along the way by a frontier guard and questioned on the reason for his travels. His mystical and highly illusive teaching, the *Tao Te Ching*, is said to be his response. Although the true origin of Taoism is lost to history, it developed along with Confucianism during the “Warring States Period” from 403-221 BCE. The central idea is that of the *Tao*, which means simply The Way. The *Tao* is the universal all inclusive power that is the source of the eternal cycle of being and non - being, of existence and non existence, of creation and destruction, of life and death. Living in accordance with The *Tao* involves recognizing and harmonizing with Nature itself. In practice this is understood as living in harmony and balance with the natural world, and the natural hierarchies, built into all things. The *Tao* is reflected equally in the physical universe and in the vitality of living organisms. In the *Tao*, the microcosmic body mirrors the macrocosmic universe.

Why we resist an extensive exploration of the metaphysical mysteries of Taoism, a brief sketch of the basics will be helpful in understanding Confucian naturalism. First, according to Taoism, *Ch'i* is the essential vital substance of all things. *Chi* is manifest in two complementary forces *Yin* and *Yang*: Yin represents feminine, dark, moist, inert/passive, cold, soft, and cloudy. Yin substance is conceived of as heavy and sinking down. *Yang* is masculine, bright, dry, growing/active, warm, hard, and clear. *Yang* substance is light and ascends.

All things consist of both yin and yang in various proportions. In the human realm, Taoism emphasizes the equal importance and centrality of the feminine *Yin*, and the importance of a balance of feminine *Yin* and masculine *Yang* in all things and thus all people. On the other hand, although it can thus easily embrace the necessity of feminine virtues, it also identifies

the feminine with passivity and body, and masculinity with activity and intellect –which provides the classic philosophical basis for gender inequality, East and West. Although yin and yang constitute the basic binary relation at the bottom of all being and becoming, basic Taoist metaphysics also posits Five Elements (or Five Phases) which are manifestations of Yin and Yang. The Five Elements are:

- i. Fire (greater yang),
- ii. Wood (lesser yang),
- iii. Metal (lesser yin),
- iv. Water (greater yin),
- v. Earth (balanced yin/yang).

Although such a simple explanation is hardly helpful in providing a sense of the explanatory role of these concepts, the basic idea of a balance of complimentary forces, elements, and substances is at the heart of Taoism, Confucianism, and, of course, Chinese and Tibetan traditional conceptions of health and disease. On a final note, Taoism also maintains that the person has two types of soul: The *hun* soul is made of *yang* and is identified with the spiritual and intellectual self and ascends at death.

The *p'o* soul is identified with the bodily animating principle and descends and is absorbed into the ground at death. This dualist metaphysics of the person, from a philosophical point of view, is especially congenial to the contemporary conception of brain-death as the irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness. Nonetheless East Asian countries, and especially China, have been the most resistant to the redefinition of death as brain-death. The explanation for the slow acceptance of brain-death is not to be found in the metaphysics of the self; it is rather in the Confucian conception of filial piety discussed below. The reach of Taoism in Chinese society is broad. Taoism emphasizes health through inner balance, and its practice often emphasized the pursuit of longevity and even a striving for immortality. Taoist concepts serve as the philosophical and conceptual basis of traditional Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture. Ironically, the endless experimentation in search of an Elixir of Immortality led to the early Chinese discovery of gunpowder –the great elixir of mortality. Taoism also is the medical-spiritual basis for the wide daily practice of T'ai Chi. It also provides the philosophical basis of the martial arts of Shao-lin and Wu-tang. The art of Feng Shui “wind and water”, which involves the auspicious location of things including graves, buildings, cities, even furniture so that they are in harmony with the environment, is a direct reflection of Taoist ideas of balance and harmony; and so too is the unique and exquisite nature of Chinese Fine Arts, especially landscape paintings, calligraphy, and poetry. Taoist ideas are the soul of Chinese medicine and deep Taoist sensibilities are reflected in the aesthetics of daily life and high art of the Chinese people. Taoism however is not just metaphysics and aesthetics, the *Tao Te Ching* was in fact a treatise on government and statesmanship. Recall that Lao Tzu is supposed to be a royal archivist disillusioned with court life. Government and society must also reflect the Tao, or society will not be harmonious and well-ordered. For Taoism the key to good government is taking no action contrary to the

deeper nature of things. This is the core Taoist ethical concept of *Wu-wei*, which is a fundamental principle of non-interference with Nature (which is the Tao). *Wu-wei* involves a principle of engagement with others, and the world, that is essentially receptive rather than confrontational; that is indirect and accommodating; that is essentially flexible and fluid in its responsiveness, rather than fixed, rigid, or uncompromising. The ideal of *Wu-wei* is one of an effortless, even spontaneous, action that is thoroughly integrated with, and thus makes full use of, the forces already in play. The universe has a deep normative order and so human action is best when it is attuned to this order. Conversely, when one is faced with disorder, the goal is to reinforce the inherent natural tendency towards balance and harmony. An essential part of this flexibility involves accepting and even embracing one's fate or destiny. One should accept success with humility and loss with calm and patience. This however is not understood in a passive fatalistic way. When it comes to the Tao that shapes our lives, we must first accept the limits of the human will and the will's essential connection with the rest of nature. From this perspective, active engagement and willful action must always work with nature to achieve harmony and maintain inner peace; we cannot willfully impose order, no matter how hard we try, on an otherwise recalcitrant nature. Asian holistic environmental ethics, of course, reflects these ideas.

The same principles hold for good government. Social harmony cannot simply be imposed on an unruly people through the sheer force of coercive power. The ruler must be in harmony with the society, and thus must rule so as to advance the common good of the people; and this in turn requires being attentive to the interests and concerns of the people. The good of a society, like all things, involves a proper balance of its elements, and this constitutes the inner harmony of the society. The good ruler must first discern the proper balance of elements and then work to encourage and facilitate the natural harmony of society. When so ruled, the nation will flourish and the ruler will have served essentially as a conduit between the People and the *Tao* – or in Confucian thought between the people and the “Mandate of Heaven.” In the spirit of Taoist *Wu-wei*, the Confucian ideal ruler, the perfect Sage-King, does not need to rely on the force of punitive laws to maintain social order, because the societies institutions have been so well-ordered that the parts are functioning in harmony and the people are themselves virtuous. Indeed, significant disorder and crime are signs of disharmony in society and of a lack of virtue in the people. The problem can only truly be solved by reforming institutions and reshaping the practices of the people; punitive criminal law is often necessary as a check to ever greater disorder, but like the amputation of a limb, it is never truly a cure for what ailed the republic.

By focusing on society and good government, we have moved back into the province and particular focus of Confucian thought. Taoism is universal in scope, deals with the deeper nature of all things, and even the eternal itself, and it is thus deeply metaphysical, and even mystical. Confucianism is narrowly focused on human social life and good government, and thus it is essentially practical and “this worldly” in its orientation. Although Confucianism is originally embedded in a Taoist metaphysics, Confucian philosophy is itself unconcerned with the abstract essence of things. Yet it does nonetheless presuppose and take for granted in important ways the basic ideas of nature and harmony that are the core of Taoism. We turn now first to the specifics of Confucian Ethics, and then to its broader model of relational, non-

rights based, non-individualistic ethics.

Let us summarize the points so far:

Confucian philosophy emphasizes self-development, both (i) academic study that trains the intellect, requires discipline and restraint, and that provides idealized models of virtuous rule (the Sage-Kings which are the wise rulers of the distant past), and (ii) moral development which emphasizes and internalizes the virtues of character, and that is focused on becoming *Jun-zi*; that is the ideal Confucian person.

Confucianism was institutionalized through a system of education and examination that was a necessary requirement for public officials. The examination system increased the level of competence of the officials, created a shared national culture, and opened the ranks of governments, in principle and often in practice, to all classes of society. Academic study thus becomes a clear path to social advancements, and it was also valued in-itself as essential to becoming *Jun-zi*, the ideal person.

Good government essentially involves promoting and maintaining social harmony. The key to social harmony is the discernment and wisdom of rulers in designing the social institutions that encourage the natural virtues of the people. It follows, quite naturally, that Confucian morality includes all of the customs, manners, habits, conventions, and indeed all of the ordinary behavior of daily life. In Confucian philosophy this is characterized as the following of *Li*,

which is protocol, etiquette, propriety, and ritual.

Most simply, *Li* is simply acting in accordance with conventionally recognized right behavior. Following *Li* involves self discipline, inner calm, and an internalization of good habits. Acting rightly is not always easy and indeed can often require discernment. *Li*, of course, also includes the appropriate behaviors of rulers and subjects, and thus the principles of good government and citizenship. Waley (1938) hinted that an interesting and related Confucian doctrine is the Rectification of Names: “Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son” and the state will also be well order.

Persons who manifest *Li* fulfill their role specific responsibilities and display characteristic virtues. A teacher, for example, has a specific role which includes distinct responsibilities and excellences of character, and students also have specific responsibilities and distinct virtues. When students and teachers both realize their natures, when each is what it is, the class is harmonious and successful. We must each be what we are, for society to flourish.

The other Prime Virtue of Confucian thought is *Ren* (or *Jen*), which is benevolence and humaneness. The cultivation of *Ren* is essential to human virtue and excellence. *Ren* and *Li*

are intimately connected: *Ren* as humanness and benevolence guide and shape social conventions and the principles of propriety (or *Li*); and, on the other hand, *Ren* as humanness/benevolence, in one's dealings with others, is only realized through all of the daily practices and rituals of life. *Li* is blind without *Ren*, and *Ren* is empty without *Li*. Closely related to *Ren* (humanness/benevolence) is the Confucian principle of Reciprocity. We have already seen that proper social relations involve mutual benefit. Indeed, like all of the major religious traditions, Confucians have a version of the “golden rule:” “What you do not want done to others, do not do to others.” It is interesting that the principle is not focused on one's self but on what one does not want done to others, and here we perhaps see a deeply relational, non-individualistic element in Confucian thought—treat others, as you would want them to treat others—which we will discuss below.

The Five Basic Relationships

A final ancient (Shang Dynasty) influence that shapes Confucian thought is ancestor worship. Under Confucian influence primitive rituals of ancestor worship, however, evolve into the central Confucian virtue of Filial Piety: respect for ancestors, parents, and elders generally. More specifically, within the context of the broad principles of *Li* and the prime virtue of *Ren*, the ideal Confucian person (*Jun-zi*) is further defined in terms of idealized social relationships that include a “natural” hierarchy that is part of (all) social relations. At the core of Confucian Ethics are the following Five Relationships:

Distinctive Virtues:

- a. Father and son (Parent and child)—affection, filial piety/respect
- b. Husband and wife—separate gendered roles
- c. Elder brother (sibling) and younger—order, propriety
- d. Ruler and minister/subject—righteousness, justice, loyalty
- e. Friend and friend—faithfulness, fidelity

These five basic relationships are the natural social relationships that essentially constitute human social life. The traditional Five Core Relationships are strongly gendered leaving out daughters and sisters, and including only wives. The first relationship can be expanded to Parent-Child and third can be recast as Siblings, but the husband-wife relationship is clearly conceived as defined in gendered terms. Altering it to Spouse-Spouse is thus a substantial change, and thus it will receive a more substantial discussion below. Internal to each relationship are specific roles, responsibilities and virtues that are based directly on the nature of the particular relationship:

Parent and Child: A parent owes a child affection and care, an education that Promotes intellectual and moral development; a child owes a parent obedience, respect, and care in old age and after death. The parent-child relationship naturally and spontaneously includes an

emotional bond of love. The authority of the parent is rooted in wisdom and aimed at the good of the child. A child's respect for parents, and family elders, is essential to social order and virtue. Filial Piety is thus the core virtue that defines and shapes most of one's life.

Husband and Wife: The husband is to lead, provide for, and protect the family; and the wife is to maintain the household and defer to her husband. The family is lead by the father. Gender relations involved ritualized and clearly defined female subordination, and this leads to a cultural preference for sons over daughters. The ideal Confucian woman is deferential, silent, and, of course, fertile. Her virtues are inner strength, forbearance, and a calm restraint.

Siblings: The older brother/sibling is to look after the younger and to help the younger to obey and internalize his social roles and to fit well into the overall life of the community. The younger supports, shows deference, and respects the older.

Ruler and Subject: The ruler is like a benevolent parent and the subjects owe obedience and loyalty. Unlike the parent-child relation, the natural bond is not affection and love; instead, it is a sense of justice and righteousness. Since the Rule of Law cannot be arbitrary or lawless, the subject should be able to respectfully express dissent when appropriate. Ideally the Ruler should command obedience by example rather than by coercion and force. The resort to force always signifies failure. If the state is well ordered and the ruler is upright, obedience is natural. "Lead the people with administrative injunctions and put them in their place with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence and put them in their place through roles and ritual practices, and in addition to developing a sense of shame, they will order themselves harmoniously." (Analects II, 3) Rulers should always pick the most able, virtuous and qualified to succeed them, and not their own eldest sons or family members. In this case, State piety is higher than any filial obligation.

Friendship: Mutual loyalty aimed at mutual virtue is the essential virtue of friendship. Friendship is based on virtue and contributes to self-development. Waley (1938) contends that friends are akin to brothers: "When at home, you have your brothers; when abroad, you have your friends" "For men with no brothers, there are none who have established themselves who have not had friends to help them." "True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity". Friendship is the anomaly here. The central place of filial piety or respect, honoring and deferring to paternal authority, is the central and distinctive virtue of Confucian thought and, it clearly provides the hierarchical model for the other relationships. In addition to husband and wife, and ruler and subject, other basic social relationships like employer-employee or teacher-student, and, of course, doctor-patient is understood to have a similar hierarchical, paternalistic but benevolent structure. In addition, the deference to elders and superiors is recognized in all relations through a respect for a hierarchy of age and accomplishment that must always be shown respect.

Although the emotional bond and mutual commitment of friendship is essential to it, in later neo-Confucian thought the pure reciprocity and equality of friendship is often minimized, and indeed a hierarchical element is added or emphasized. The neo-Confucian Wang Youliang (1742-1797), for example, in “Correct Friendship” claims that brothers, like a family of geese, naturally fly one behind the other, and so too the same hierarchical harmony should apply in the case of friends. Friends are also thought of as akin to teacher and student: “When three people move together, surely there is one who can teach” (Waley, 1938). These points, however, are not inconsistent with an egalitarian conception of friendship: friendships founded on equality and reciprocity are fully compatible with the fact that friends often learn from each other (as teacher and student) and that it is often best for one friend to lead the others (breaking the way like a geese flying one behind the other). In a friendship of equality it is simply the case that the roles of teacher and student are fluid and changing with circumstance. I may teach you philosophy and you may teach me art history. I may teach you to sail a boat and you may teach me how to fly fish. You may teach me patience and I may teach you courage. Similarly, like geese or bike teams, we may alternate leaders of the flock thereby taking turns breaking the wind for the mutual benefit of all.

Friendship also stands out from the other relationship because it is a voluntary relationship, and unlike filial bonds, particular friendships are not “decreed by heaven.” The relationship of children and parents, and siblings are largely unchosen roles that come with responsibilities. The relationship of husband and wife also seems to have clear elements of a “natural” relationship, and there is a “natural” basis in child bearing and nursing for a division of social roles and responsibilities. The hierarchy of authority and deference, emphasized in traditional conceptions of marriage, however, is not in fact a necessary aspect of even gendered parenting. In addition, particular spouses are no more decreed by heaven than are friendships. Of course traditional arranged marriages are often decreed by parents, and thus are also unchosen relationships with responsibilities. But these conventional social practices, however common, again are not in fact part of the natural order of things. So even if nature is supposed to be normative, these are essentially social relations requiring additional justifications, if they are to be justified at all. It is worth emphasizing, that the reciprocity and equality of friendship strikes many as an inherent and natural reflection of the nature of the friendship relation. Furthermore, friendship is essential to a flourishing human life; it is a truly deep and essential aspect of human existence. More generally, it is in the nature of things for equals to treat each other with mutual respect, not asymmetrical deference—an attitude of deference to one's equal is itself unnatural. Friendship, with its robust equality, mutuality, and reciprocity, is a core and natural human relationship that lacks the characteristic paternalistic authority of the parent-child “Paternal Relationship.” For lack of a better term, let us call the core elements of the friendship relation an “Egalitarian Relationship.”

Conclusion

Having looked vividly at the ethics of Confucianism, we can conclude that Confucius was a philosopher and not a religious leader. His writings apply to humanistic, rational, ethical and moralistic issues. Virtue and morality are his primary focus. Confucius is concerned with teaching people about benevolence, generosity, love, compassion, and sincerity in a straightforward manner, without worship, metaphysics or dogma. He concentrates on

developing morality - and a sense of shame - so people will behave in harmonious ways. He also stresses that in order to govern, one must govern himself. Additionally, loyalty to family and family lineage are important to maintain honor.

Confucius teaches his students how to live a contented, moral and happy life. He wants people to associate with others who can act as their teachers. He encourages people to live by their principles and continue to build upon them. He tells others to love their work, because they will realize that they are not really working at all. In this natural state of mind, all six of the essential ethical principles are automatically being assimilated into the person's being. They form a framework of ideals that allows the individual to become a 'being' of pure, unlimited virtue. These six qualities are interconnected and dependent on each other for the assimilation of moral principles. The student must be sincere in his efforts while learning these principles, and has a genuine desire to live the virtuous life. Consequently, he expresses authenticity in words and deeds, and has an unselfish desire to expand his capacity for learning. Additionally, he builds upon his *xi*, and therefore, increases his inner potential for goodness.

The Confucian mystery of *xi* is a key component that bridges the gap between exoteric and esoteric philosophy. Although Confucianism is primarily viewed as a philosophical discipline for cultivating morality, there is a metaphysical question concerning the nature of *xi*. This concept cannot be explained rationally, but it inspires discussion about the innate goodness, evil, or nothingness within man. Confucius claims that man is born without good or bad qualities, but the unlimited potential goodness of *xi* casts doubt on this assumption. This one mysterious aspect of 'being' invites the mystic to investigate whether a Confucian-mystical connection exists. Subsequently, the mystic will want to know if Confucianism offers a mystical doctrine that is similar to traditions of Taoism, Buddhism and other traditions. Although it is clear that Confucius was not a mystic, there are mystical references to an 'enlightened state of being'. Consequently, the mystical teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are connected by a common goal of attaining enlightenment. Additionally, all three traditions are teaching similar ethical standards that must be assimilated before the individual attains enlightenment. Therefore, the individual must live the moral life and expand his consciousness in preparation for entering the enlightened state. Upon mastering the Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist ways of ethical living, the student is ready to enter the path of the mystic.

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