Chapter 3
The Philosophy of Confucius

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1 Introduction

If any single person has exerted more influence on the entire Chinese philosophical tradition than anyone else, it must be Kong Fuzi, better known in the West by the Latinized term, Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). While "Kong" is his family name, "Fuzi," close in meaning to "master," is a respectful way of addressing the man. His given name, Qiu, is rarely applied in references to him.

Though the time in which Confucius was born was a chaotic period, it was the golden age of the Chinese philosophical tradition. The glory of the early Zhou 周 Dynasty was declining, but still fresh in the minds of the people. The founders of the Zhou, King Wen and his son Duke Zhou, laid the foundation for a humanitarian government in emulation of the ancient sage-kings and refined the feudal ritual system. By the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 B.C.E.), however, the social order of the Zhou was crumbling. It was against such a historical background that China had its most glorious period in philosophy. Not only were the founders of the two most influential philosophies in Chinese history, Confucianism and Daoism, born during the period, many other brilliant minds brought about the so-called "hundred schools of thought," making the time comparable to ancient Greece in terms of the importance to their respective civilizations.

Confucius was born near Qufu 曲阜, a town in the state of Lu 魯 in China known for its preservation of the early Zhou rituals and music. Little about his parents is known for certain. It is commonly believed that his father was a low ranking military officer, who died when Confucius was only 3 years old. His mother, from whom he received his primary education, raised him in a relatively humble situation. Confucius set his heart upon learning at the age of 15, and since that time he was a

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determined learner. He is believed to be the first person in the history of China to set up a school that offered, in today's term, "liberal education" in an institutional way. According to a likely exaggerated account, he had over 3,000 students during his life time, and 72 of them became conversant with the "six Arts" that he taught – ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and arithmetic.

Confucius considered himself a "transmitter" rather than a creator. According to him, the wisdom that he taught was already entailed in the ancient traditional rituals, the history, music, poetry, and the limited written works, which were, though corrupted over the ages, still largely available. He is believed to have edited some of the most basic Chinese classic books, including the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of History*, the *Classics of Odes*, the *Classics of Music*, and the *Classics of Changes*. Though his teachings are inseparable from these traditional works, Confucius is actually an innovative and even revolutionary thinker of the time. With deep understanding and insights about what was most valuable in the tradition, he creatively reconstructed the tradition and through him, the works became a set of canons that the later ages would abide by. But above all these other works, his own major teachings, recorded and collected by his students and their students into the book known as *Lunyu* 論語 (the *Analects*), later became the most sacred canon of all in traditional China.

With a strong sense of mission and ambition to bring the world into a harmonious order, Confucius spent a considerable amount of his life traveling around, often with his close disciples, trying to implement his humanistic ideas in political affairs. However, he was deeply disappointed with the rulers. Having survived some life-threatening situations, he finally returned to his home state Lu at the age of 68, and died 5 years later with no anticipation of his subsequent fame as China's first and foremost teacher, a supreme sage, and a "king without a crown."

His teachings were carried on and developed by the persistent effort of his followers, especially Meng Zi 孟子 (Latinized as "Mencius," 390–305 B.C.E.) and Xun Zi 荀子 (325–238 B.C.E.). Tested against the rival schools of thought and having endured sweeping attacks from the First Emperor of Qin Dynasty (reigned from 221–209 B.C.E.), Confucianism was finally recognized as the official state ideology during the Han Dynasty around 100 B.C.E. Since then, though with ups and downs, Confucianism enjoyed the status of being China's principles of morality, of law, of government, of education, and of life in general, which everyone was supposed to follow, from the emperor down to the ordinary people. During the Song and Ming Dynasties (roughly from the tenth – thirteenth century and the fourteenth – seventeenth century respectively), Confucian scholars brought another upsurge of Confucianism by their creative interpretations of it in response to the challenges from its strong rivals, Daoism and Buddhism, and further consolidated its dominant position in China. The status of being an official state ideology, however, was not simply a blessing to Confucianism, for once endorsed as an official doctrine it could hardly avoid being dogmatized and became alienated as a means for political advantages. Most of the repressive practices of the feudalistic China were conducted under the name of Confucianism, though in most cases they were contrary to the real spirit of the Master's own teachings.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the arrival of Western material powers and ideas in China, Confucianism was criticized and considered to be responsible for all that was backward and benighted in China. In the recent decades, however, a rival voice has been growing stronger in scholarly circles and public media. Accompanied by the success of the four "small dragons" in Asia – Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, where Confucianism retained its strong hold, the interest in Confucianism revived. It is characterized by Mou Zongshan and other Confucian scholars such as Tu Weiming as the "Third Epoch of Confucianism," succeeding the first one, represented by Confucius himself and his immediate followers such as Meng Zi and Xun Zi, and the second, represented by the Song and Ming Confucians. With a critical re-appropriation and transformation, many contemporary Confucian scholars believe that Confucianism can provide valuable philosophical resources for addressing disturbing situations in the post-modern world.

Since the philosophical ideas in the *Analects*, the "Bible" of Confucianism, are contained in excerpts put together with no apparent logical order and with little articulation, they need to be unpacked and re-organized so that contemporary readers who are accustomed to the discourse style of writing in philosophy have less difficulty in assessing and appreciating them. Doing this, however, involves the risk of cannibalizing the dynamic system, in which the passages are related like different sides of a crystal that reflect the lights of each other. Readers of this article are therefore cautioned to pay special attention to the mutual entailment of the ideas, and not to treat them simply as distinct parts of a system.[1]

2 *Tian* 天– Heaven

The word "Confucianism" is unknown to most Chinese, because in China the school is referred to as "*ru jia* 儒家" – the school of *ru*, where "*ru*" refers not to Confucius, but to the practices and the way of life most distinctively represented by him. There is neither dependency on deity worship nor priesthood in Confucianism, and Confucius himself is deemed as a model human being rather than a god. There are indeed Confucian temples all over China, but they are more like memorials than monasteries. This significant fact shows that Confucianism is different from most religions and is less likely to develop into fundamentalism.

Confucius' own attitude toward issues regarding deities and life after death is partly skeptical and partly pragmatic. He says, "To say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not. That is knowledge/wisdom" (2/17). It was said of him, "The Master did not talk about strange phenomena… or supernatural

[1] The translation of the Chinese texts in this chapter is mostly based on the English books listed in the bibliography at the end, often with some modifications, or, in the case of direct quotes from Chinese texts, my own. Citations from the *Analects* will be given simply in parentheses with the chapter number and the section number. For example, "(2/1)" means Chap. 2, Sect. 1 from the book of the *Analects*.

beings" (7/21). His advice is to "Keep a distance from supernatural beings while showing them due reverence" (6/22). "If you are not yet able to serve other people, how can you serve supernatural beings?" "If you do not yet understand life, how can you understand death?" (11/12) It is evident that the Master did not conceal his lack of knowledge about matters related to supernatural beings or to life after death. He refrained from speculating or conjecturing about things that he had no knowledge about. At the same time, he remained open to the possibility that there might be deities. When Confucius offered sacrifice to his ancestors or to other spirits, he did it as if the spirits were actually present. He said, "If I am not fully present in the sacrifice, it is no different from not having done the sacrifice" (3/12).

Confucius' focus is always on this life and this world. When his disciple Zigong asked whether those who were dead had consciousness, the Master is reported to have responded with these remarks:

> If I were to say that they do have awareness, I am afraid that those who are filial to their parents and grandparents would send off the dead ones as if they were alive [and hence have lavish burials]. If I were to say that they don't have awareness, I am afraid that those who are not filial would discard the dead ones unburied. Ci [Zigong], do you want to know whether people have awareness after they die? When you die, you will eventually know. It will not be too late to know by then. (Sun and Guo 1998: 21)

The response interestingly contains no direct answer to Zigong's question about the afterlife. All that concerns him is how those who are alive would behave. It seems that for the Master, as long as one lives a decent human life in this world, one will have nothing to regret, whether there is an afterlife or not. This attitude is also reflected in another passage in the *Analects*. When his disciple Zai Wo inquired, "The 3 year mourning period on the death of one's parents is already too long, … surely a year is enough," the Master replied, "Would you then feel at ease [*an* 安] eating fine rice and wearing colorful brocade?" (17/21) Clearly the Master's concern is not so much about pleasing the spirits, much less about knowledge pertaining to the existence of the afterlife. His concern is about the appropriateness of one's own feelings and dispositions.

Confucius' this-worldly attitude does not mean that there is no spiritual dimension to his thought. He firmly believes that his mission is bestowed by *tian* 天, usually translated as "heaven" (9/5). For this mission, one should be determined to travel a journey that is not supposed to end before one's death (8/7), and the aim is even more important than life itself (15/9). Scholars have varying interpretations of the Confucian notion of *tian* with regard to whether it is personal or impersonal, transcendent or immanent. While some have gone so far as to claim that it resembles the Christian notion of a personal and transcendental God, others claim that it is entirely impersonal and immanent, no other than the natural order of the universe displayed through the change of the seasons and dynasties and the like. Still others hold opinions somewhere in between, maintaining that the Confucian *tian* is "immanently transcendent."[2] While these conflicting interpretations reflect the ambiguity in Confucius' notion of *tian*, scholars generally agree that it is important to look at the notion's historical emergence. *Tian* is a notion that Confucius' early

[2] See Huang (2007) for a comprehensive summary of the controversy.

Zhou predecessors used to replace and to depersonalize the Shang Dynasty notion of *Shang Di* 上帝, "Lord-on-High." Even though the notion of heaven found in the Zhou literature such as *Shu Jing* 書經 (the *Book of History*) and in the *Analects* still carries with it the sense of a being that governs worldly affairs, it already showed itself in the realm of this world rather than being entirely transcendent. The will of heaven was no longer considered so much as the will of an anthropomorphic deity that issues orders and gives blessings and sanctions from above; it immanently exhibited itself in popular consensus and in regular patterns of discernible social and natural events, and it could be affected by the moral undertakings of the people. From a passage in the *Shu Jing* that says "Heaven sees through the eyes of the people, heaven listens through the ears of the people," we can see that what appears to be anthropomorphic here is rather more anthropogenic. In the *Analects*, Confucius is quoted as saying "Does heaven speak? And yet the four seasons turn and the myriad things are born and grow within it" (17/19). Most scholars take this passage as evidence that for Confucius, heaven is the principle according to which natural events take place. The same philosophical implication is contained in the *Classics of Changes.* Divination based on reading the pattern on tortoise shells after they are heated, or yellow stalks after they are scattered, entails the belief that everything in the universe is governed by the same principle, whether in an intentional or in a purely naturalistic way. The *Classics of Changes* also entails the view that humans can affect their destiny through their own activities. It tells people not only what situation they are facing, but also, given the specific situation, what kind of action should be taken. Under such a notion, rulers were considered sacred only so long as they were able to continue to be "entrusted" with *tian ming* 天命, the mandate of heaven.

Because heaven displays itself through worldly phenomena, it is possible for humans to know its mandate. Confucius says: "At the age of 50, I knew *tian ming*" (2/4). He did not explain specifically how he came to know it, but he shows a strong confidence that heaven has bestowed virtue/virtuosity upon him (7/23). Since the word for virtue/virtuosity, *de* 德, also means power, his confidence might be derived from his faith in the power given to him by heaven. Even though otherwise heaven often appeared to be at odds with him, the Master believed that "It is human who are able to make the Way great, not the Way that can make human great" (15/29). This statement also sheds light on the notion of "the Way" (*dao* 道), because it suggests that the Way is a trajectory, a mode of acting, which is itself road building, rather than a metaphysical entity that is purely objective and external to human conduct.

This feature of the Confucian spirituality is naturally accompanied by a strong sense of anxiety and responsibility, a realization of a close interdependence between people's fortunes and their own conduct. Not only do people have to rely on themselves for their own fortune, they also have to take the responsibility of affecting the fortune of other people, depending on how great their influences can be. The more power one has, the more one is accountable. As contemporary Confucian scholar Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 says, in other religions piety is a state of the mind when one dissolves one's own subjectivity and throws oneself entirely before God, yet in the Confucian spirituality, as the embodiment of heaven, human subjectivity becomes highly concentrated and piety becomes staying sincere to one's own responsibility

(Xu 1984: 22). The *Analects* records that Yao, an ancient sage King, said to his successor: "On – you Shun! The line of succession conferred by heaven rests on your person. Grasp it sincerely and without deviation. If all within the four seas sink into dire straits, the honors bestowed on you by heaven will be terminated forever." King Tang of the Shang Dynasty said in a sacrificial ceremony, "If I personally do wrong, let not the 10,000 states be implicated; if the 10,000 states do wrong, the guilt lies with me alone!" (20/1) This sense of subjectivity is well displayed in the well-known passage by the Song Dynasty Confucian Zhang Zai 張載:

> To establish heart-mind for heaven and the Earth,
> To shape destiny (*ming* 命) for the common people;
> To revive the lost scholarship for ancient sages,
> To generate peace for ten-thousand generations to come.

The word *ming* 命, a term usually translated as "destiny" or "fate," also appears many times in the *Analects*. Since the word also means decree or mandate, and is sometimes used as an abbreviation for *tian ming*, it is easy to confuse the two. *Ming* is different from the mandate of heaven in that the latter is more of a moral imperative, and the former is more of a definite order or sequence of certain phenomena. For instance, when a natural event happens beyond a person's control, it would be considered *ming* (see, for example, 6/10 and 12/5). Similarly, whether the Way eventually prevails or not, given the human efforts involved, is determined by *ming* (14/36). Since heaven is more like nature that is beyond personal control, so what is by *ming* is also by *tian*, heaven.

Confucius fully recognizes the fact that, even though humans do not have full control of everything, we can make great differences to our life within certain limits. On the one hand, as Mencius puts it, "he who understands *ming* does not stand under a wall on the verge of collapse" (*Mencius*: 7A/2). On the other hand, one can actively change one's *ming* by various means. For example, the *Analects* tells us that when Confucius' disciple Sima Niu 司馬牛 lamented, "Everyone has brothers except me," another disciple Zixia 子夏 said to him: "Life and death are a matter of *ming* (destiny); Wealth and honor lie with heaven. The exemplary person is deferential and faultless, respectful of others and refined, and everyone in the world is his brother. Why would the exemplary person worry about not having brothers?" (12/5) By becoming a morally exemplary person and redefining what it means to have brothers, Zixia showed Sima Niu how he could gain control of his *ming*, or *ming*ing (ordering) his *ming* (destiny)!

Even those who take *tian* to be entirely immanent would not take Confucianism as simply a secular humanism that is complicit with the status quo, and hence would not reject the view that Confucius advocates transcendence in the sense of going beyond the status quo or the surface appearance. The spiritual aim of Confucius is often characterized in the phrase "the unity of heaven and human." Compared to the Christian aim of going to Heaven and being united with God, the transcendental creator, but not becoming God oneself, the Confucian unity is to become sacred oneself through the unity and it is achieved through one's relatedness with other people in this world. Confucius never felt that a lack of personal immortality would

lead to the lack of meaning for life, for a life may go infinitely beyond its narrow, personal biological span. A common application of this broad notion of immortality is the continuation of one's family line, which Confucians also honor. Among the things that are considered bad to do to one's parents, the worst is to have no heir, says Mencius (*Mencius*: 4A/26). Another bad thing to do to one's parents is to behave immorally and to make the parents feel ashamed. Both of these "bad things" done to one's parents need to be understood as an extension of the parents' own immediate personal state of existence to the way they "exist" in others. That Chinese people take how others regard them very seriously, and that they expect their children to bring honor to their family and community, are clear indications of their conception of themselves. Their existence extends to the lives of other people. Confucius' saying that "If for three years [of mourning] one does not change from the way of his father, he may be called filial" (1/11) can also be understood in this light, for it is a way in which the father continues to be "alive." Confucius may very well be aware of the notion of "Three Immortalities" that existed in his home state, Lu, according to which one can become immortal by establishing words for others to keep in mind, achievements for others to benefit from, and virtue/virtuosity for others to follow (see Chan 1963: 13). All these three immortalities are achieved relationally through continued existence and manifestation of one's efficacy in the community and in history rather than personal survival after death. Confucius' endorsement of this idea is indicated in the *Analects*. He says, for example, "Exemplary persons despise the thought of ending their days without having their names properly established" (15/20). In the context of his overall teachings, one's "name" clearly relates to how one continues to "live" in the lives of others, particularly through the three ways mentioned above (see, e.g. 16/12).

Obviously this kind of immortality, or the unity between heaven and human, is not guaranteed or dependent on the mercy of a deity and is not attained in another world. It is dependent on oneself in this life and this world. It is therefore, as Herbert Fingarette puts it as the title of his influential book on Confucianism, "secular as sacred" (see Fingarette 1972). But dependence on oneself does not mean solitary effort. One needs to pursue it in the course of one's life within the community. To be more specific, this is to be *ren* and practice *li.*

3 *Ren* 仁 – Human-Heartedness

Central to Confucius' philosophy, the word "*ren* 仁" appears frequently in the *Analects*. Yet nowhere can one find a precise definition of it, nor have translators reached agreement on any satisfying English translation. Whether one takes it as "benevolence," "human-heartedness," "authoritative person/conduct," "altruism," "humanity," or "goodness," there always seems to be something that is left out, or something not quite fit that would creep in. *Ren* seems to be an ideal that even the Master himself claimed never to have fully reached (7/34), and yet it is so close to

everyone that the Master says, "Is *ren* far away? No sooner do I seek it than it has arrived" (7/30).

Some observations, however, can help us to get a good grasp of it. First, as "*ren*" is occasionally used in Confucian texts interchangeably with "human" or "person," – *ren* 人 – which is, in Chinese, homophonic to it (see *Mencius*: 1B/15 and *Zhongyong*: Chap. 20), we have reason to believe that "the distinction between the two terms [人 and 仁] must be qualitative: two distinguishable degrees of what it means to be a person" (Hall and Ames 1987: 114). As in English, "human" is sometimes used in Chinese to carry the moral expectations for being a human, and thereby making the expression "a human should be like a human" more than a simple tautology. For this reason "*ren* 仁" can be interpreted as a quality that makes a person an authentic human being, which every biological human should strive toward.

Second, the Chinese character "*ren* 仁" consists of two parts, "person 人" and the number "two 二." This etymological analysis, say Ames and Rosemont, "underscores the Confucian assumption that one cannot become a person by oneself – we are, from our inchoate beginnings, irreducibly social" (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 48). Indeed, many descriptions of *ren* in the *Analects* are about interpersonal relations. "*Ren*" is to "love people" (12/22), says the Master, and the method to be *ren* is "*shu* 恕" – comparing one's own heart with other hearts with compassion (6/30). The interrelatedness of a person is so important to Confucius that some contemporary Confucian scholars believe that for Confucius, one does not *play* the roles of being a father, a friend, a teacher, etc.; one *is* these roles (see, for instance, Rosemont 1991: 72). They argue that the Confucian concept of a person is different from those who take humans as atomic, autonomous individuals.[3] *Ren* is essentially relational, and the *ren* person defers to his or her relationship and interaction with "the other" for the completion of oneself. No one can become fully human in isolation, nor can one say that what happens to others has nothing to do with him or herself. This relational dimension in the concept of the individual serves as an important philosophical foundation not only for the social and political philosophy of Confucius, but also for his ideas of religiosity or spirituality.

Third, we observe that, while Confucius never offered any definition of *ren*, he gave different answers to different disciples when they asked about it. This would indeed be puzzling and confusing if *ren* were understood as a concept to be grasped by the intellect. However, it would be totally understandable if it is more like an art or a disposition that needs to be mastered, embodied, and displayed in one's life, including in one's gestures and manners. The Master's different answers should be seen as practical instructions offered in accordance to each of the disciple's particular needs for their attainment of *ren*.

[3] Of course this raises both the philosophical question about whether such a notion can be consistent with human subjectivity, namely human beings as decision makers, as initiators of our actions, etc., which Confucius certainly acknowledges, and the interpretive question about whether Confucius does not at the same time also think that humans are individual entities. P.J. Ivanhoe, for instance, raises a number of objections to this interpretation of the Confucian notion of self (see Ivanhoe 2007 and Rosemont's response in the same book).

These three observations lead us to the conclusion that *ren* is a quality pertaining to one's caring disposition toward others that has to be developed and fully embodied before a biological person can become an authentic human being. *Ren* is more associated with one's heart and the whole bodily disposition than with rational knowledge or decisions. It must be embodied, and not merely understood and followed as a universal principle or imperative. For this reason, it is a matter of cultivation rather than gaining propositional knowledge, and by its nature unsuitable for conceptual formulation.

Twice when asked about *ren*, Confucius answers "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not want" (12/2, 15/24). It is known as a negative version of the "Golden Rule," – it is "golden" because it seems to capture what is moral at a substantial level, and can be considered a general rule of conduct after which other rules would follow; it is "negative" because it tells people what *not* to do. Actually Confucius provides a positive version of it also, for he says: "If you want to establish yourself, establish others. If you want to promote yourself, promote others" (6/30). However, we must be clear that Confucius never took it as a rule, much less "Golden." He "rejects … inflexibility and rigidity" (9/4, see also 15/37), and he states clearly that a morally exemplary person, *jun zi* 君子, "is never for or against anything invariably. He is always on the side of the appropriate" (4/10). Confucius himself was characterized as a sage who acted according to circumstances rather than rules (*Mencius*: 5B/1). The art of flexibility is deemed by the Master so highly that he says, to find a partner good enough in the exercise of *quan* 權 (discretion) is more difficult than finding a partner good enough in taking a stand or in the pursuit of the Way (9/30). The word "*quan*" originally means "scale," and thus the action of "weighing" or "making discretion" as well. According to *Gong Yang Zhuan* 公羊傳, a Chinese classic dated probably to the Warring State period (476–221 BCE), "*quan* means moral goodness resulting from transgressing well-established canons" ("The 11th Year of the Duke of Heng"). Indeed, to take the teachings as the "Golden Rule" would result in the problem of basing rights and wrongs on personal unqualified likes and dislikes, and thereby subject to counterexamples that are contrary to our moral intuitions. For a person who likes to be bribed, the Golden Rule (positive version) would not only permit him to bribe others; it would obligate him to do so. For a judge who does not like to be put in jail, the Golden Rule (negative version) would make the criminal justified in disputing such a punishment. Confucius is not at all uncritical about one's desires and wants. In fact one of Confucius' major descriptions of *ren* is "To restrain the self" (12/1). For Confucius, cultivating one's heart-mind is almost a life-long journey. He says that he himself did not reach the state where he could follow his heart's desire without overstepping the line until the age of 70 (2/4).

How should we take the Confucian "Golden Rule," if it is not meant to be a rule at all? Let us look at the contexts where the statements are found. When a disciple asked, "Is there one expression that can be acted upon throughout one's entire life?" the Master replied, "There is *shu* 恕. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want" (15/24). In another passage, right after the statement of his positive version of the "Golden Rule," the Master says: "Taking an analogy near at hand is the

method of becoming *ren*" (6/30). The word "*shu*" consists of two parts, the upper part "*ru* 如" means "like," "as if," "resemble," and the lower part, "*xin* 心," means "heart-mind." This etymological analysis helps us to understand that for Confucius, the application of the "Golden Rule" is to take one's own heart as an analogy near at hand, and to extend one's considerations to the wants and needs of others empathically.

According to such a reading, the "Golden Rule" statements in the *Analects* should be read as no different from "*shu*," a *method* to be *ren*. Even though there is no guarantee that the method will lead to right actions all the time, it helps a person to become sensitive to the interests of others. Unlike a rule which allows no exceptions and is typically *imposed upon* the agent as an obligation and *proscribing* certain acts, a method is *mastered* by the agent, *enables* the agent to perform the right action, and is certainly not to be used when its application is unwarranted.

This leads us back to a notion we mentioned earlier – *de* 德, or virtue/virtuosity. Often, *ren* is considered as a virtue in Confucianism, and due to its central place, Confucianism is taken as a version of virtue ethics comparable to Aristotle's, since both of them focus on building the moral agent, and not on formulating rules of conduct. Both Aristotle's *areté* (virtue) and Confucian *de* are dispositions or abilities required for living an excellent life, and both need to be embodied through constant practice so that they become almost like our second nature. Both philosophers agree that the virtuous person possesses the ability to discern particularities in individual situations that are not subject to formulations of rules. However, there are important differences between the two. Based on a teleological metaphysics, the Aristotelian virtue is a matter of moral obligation for people to develop for the sake of fulfilling the pre-established *telos* (aim) of a human being. The Confucian *de*, on the other hand, is more a power or an art that enables a person to develop their human potential creatively as authors of their own life.

Another important difference between Aristotle and Confucius is that Aristotle places intellectual virtue at the center of his theory, taking rationality to be a defining feature of being a human and contemplation to be the most distinctive human activity. The Confucian *de*, on the other hand, centers on the affective aspect of caring and loving, and Confucius takes the cultivation and manifestation of proper emotions and attitudes to be more important for a human than the use of the intellect. Confucius characterizes *ren* as to "love the people" (12/22). Even though this love is similar to moral duty in that, unlike the way a mouse loves rice, it extends beyond personal interests, it differs from moral duty in that love must be out of the heart, and not merely out of the rational faculty of the mind. Whether in daily life or in governmental affairs, a *ren* person is always considerate and has others' interests at heart. In running a government, the *ren* ruler "is frugal in his expenditures and loves his subordinates, and puts the common people to work only at the proper season of the year" (1/5). In daily life, a *ren* person "loves the multitude broadly" (1/6). She "does not exploit others' fondness of her, nor does she exhaust others' devotion to her" (*Book of Rites*, Chap. 1. 1987: 11). She "does not intimidate others by showing off her own talent, nor belittle others by revealing their shortcomings" (*Book of Rites*, Chap. 32. 1987: 293).

Just like the "Golden Rule," love by itself does not guarantee that what it dictates is always morally right. One of the Confucian qualifications for a proper love is to love with distinction. The Confucian understanding of relatedness is reciprocal but not symmetrical. It starts locally and concretely from family love and extends outward without limit. The abstract idea of everyone being equal is therefore not only foreign to Confucius, but would also be considered misleading. Confucius differentiates according to relationships and social roles. "When his stables caught fire, the Master hurried back from court and asked, 'Was anyone hurt?' He did not inquire after the horses" (10/17). It does not mean that he cared nothing about animals. "The Master fished with a line, but did not use a net; he used an arrow and line, but did not shoot at roosting birds" (7/27). It only means that in comparison, we are closer in relation to our fellow human beings. Among humans, he also believes that one should start with loving one's own parents and gradually extend the love to others according to the degrees of closeness in relations. Not only is it more natural for us to care more about those who we consider to be one of "us," it is also the starting point for extended love. The *Analects* states clearly that filial piety (*xiao* 孝) is the very root of a proper social order. "The morally exemplary person concentrates his efforts on the root; for the root having taken hold, the Way will grow therefrom. Aren't filial piety and fraternal deference the roots of becoming human-hearted indeed?" (1/2) Here we find the love to be both a characteristic of the *ren* person and a method of becoming *ren*. By practicing *ren*, *ren* grows. If we do not start our love from the immediate context of our life and with those who we immediately encounter, it will not start at all.

This methodological function of filial piety shows that it should not be simply taken as a moral imperative or principle. Confucius' endorsement of his fellow villagers' way of dealing with their own family members' misconduct by mutual concealment (13/18) becomes a defense of injustice if we take it to be an ethical principle, but it becomes sacrificing a branch for the sake of saving the root when we treat it as a method of becoming *ren*.[4] The Confucian strategy is, as Mencius puts it beautifully, to "Treat the aged of your own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend this treatment to the aged of other families; treat your own young in a manner befitting their tender age and extend this to the young of other families, and you can roll the Empire on your palm" (*Mencius*: 1A/7).

Confucius also differentiates love according to circumstances. He would rather help the needy than make the rich richer (6/4). Unlike "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" or Jesus Christ's exhortation to turn the other cheek, Confucius repays ill will with *zhi* 直, uprightness or straightforwardness, or, taking the word *zhi* as a verb, "to straighten," "to correct," or "to help grow." If you repay ill will with kindness, says the Master, "then how would you repay kindness?" (14/34. See also 19/3). The proactive attitude of helping the wrong-doer to correct the wrong

[4] There is a heated debate on the issue in the recent years, initiated by Liu Qingping's criticism of Confucian morality as a basis for favoritism toward one's own family, and hence is opposed to the principle of justice. See *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* (2008) for a collection of essays on this controversy.

provides us with a thought-provoking alternative to merely sticking on social justice or to "love your enemy" by letting them continue to do harm.

Ren is also what makes a person worthy of respect and the basis for respecting others. Unlike the Kantian who conceives humans as ends in themselves because, as rational beings, humans can make free choices and hence are the source of all values, or the Christian who believes that humans have dignity because we are made in the image of God, for Confucius, human dignity is more an achievement than a natural quality given by nature or by God. For Confucius, one earns respect from others by being respectful oneself. "If one is respectful, one will not suffer insult" (17/6, 1/13). Confucius says, "The exemplary person does not speak more than what he can accomplish, and does not behave across the line of proper conduct, people revere him without being forced to" (*Book of Rites*, Chap. 27. 1987: 277). The respect one deserves is therefore in proportion to the wellness of one's cultivation. It does not mean that for a well cultivated person, no one will initiate insult, but rather that the insult will only display the insulter's own lack of humanity. When someone spoke disparagingly of Confucius, Zigong made the following remarks:

> This is in vain. Confucius would not be hurt. The superior character of other people is like a mount or a hill which can still be stepped on, but Confucius is the sun and moon which no one can climb beyond. When people cut themselves off from the sun and moon, what damage does this do to the sun and moon? It would only demonstrate that such people do not know their own limits. (19/24)

This teaching reminds everyone to cultivate themselves and not to disrespect others, even those who are not well cultivated. Repeatedly Confucius reminds his students to set strict standards for themselves and to be lenient to others (see 15/15, 4/14, 14/30, 15/19, and 15/21). Viewed from this perspective, one's respect for others is more a requirement for one's own humanity than a moral act based on judging others.

No passage in the *Analects* embarrasses contemporary Confucians more than 17/25, where Confucius says, "It is only *nü zi* 女子 (typically taken to mean 'women') and petty persons who are difficult to provide for. Drawing them close, they are immodest, and keeping them at a distance, they complain." Modern advocates of Confucianism, like their opponents, take the saying to be descriptive, and denounce it as sexist. Putting aside whether the term "*nü zi*" refers to women in general or only to female servants, as some scholars have speculated (since at the time "*fu ren* 婦人" was a more common term for women in general),[5] few have noticed the instructive message beneath the surface that can be found by relating it to other passages in the *Analects*: Can one be like the Master, as described by his disciples, "respectful and yet at ease" and "commanding but not ferocious" (7/38), so that even the most difficult to provide for are "pleased, if close, and attracted, if at a distance" (13/16)? Reading the passage as a reminder to cultivate oneself rather than a description of fact, this passage looks more consistent with the rest of the book and the overall spirit of Confucianism.

[5] Refer to Li's *The Sage and the Second Sex* (Li 2000) for the issue about Confucianism and gender, and pages 3–4 of the book for the specific issue about interpreting "*nüzi*."

4 *Yi* 義 and *Li* 禮 – Appropriateness and Ritual Propriety

While *ren* is the internal quality or disposition that makes a person an authentic person, *yi* 義 is the appropriateness of actions that typically originates from *ren*. For being appropriate in one's action, however, one also needs the guidance of *li* 禮, ritual propriety, for otherwise a person of *ren* can still go astray. "Not being mediated by the observance of the ritual propriety, in being respectful a person will wear himself out, in being cautious he will be timid, in being bold he will be unruly, and in being forthright he will be rude" (8/2).

The word *li* originally meant holy ritual or sacrificial ceremony, and it is used by Confucius to mean more broadly behavior patterns established and accepted as appropriate through the history by a community, including what we call manners, etiquette, ceremonies, customs, rules of propriety, etc. The metaphor of holy ritual serves as a reminder that the most ordinary activities in our life can also be ritualistic or ceremonial, and it is the ceremonial that sets human activities apart from those of animals. The way we greet each other, a handshake, for instance, is ritualistic, for it is not a mere physical touching of hands. We stand up to greet our guests, and walk them to the door as they leave. These are rituals because, from the point of view of efficiency, they can be spared in most cases. We address people in a certain manner, though practically, calling someone's attention can be done in many other ways. We even look at each other according to some implicit rules – at a very young age we start to learn that it is impolite to stare at people, especially at certain parts of their body. When a disciple asked about filial conduct, the Master replied: "Those who are called filial today are considered so because they are able to provide for their parents. But even dogs and horses are given that much care. If you do not respect your parents, what is the difference?" (2/7) By serving food and dining with respect and appreciation in a proper setting, mere physical nourishment becomes a ceremony, and thereby becomes human.

Indeed the learning is basic but not at all primitive. As any "*zhi* 質" (basic stuff, substance, inside principles, or characters) needs certain "*wen* 文" (refined pattern, form, style, and outside appearance) to exist and unfold, appropriateness (*yi*) needs ritual propriety (*li*) to be its form of expression. "An exemplary person takes appropriateness as the *zhi* [substance of his conduct], and carries it out in the form of ritual propriety" (15/18). "When there is a preponderance of *zhi* over *wen*, the result will be churlishness; when there is a preponderance of *wen* over *zhi*, the result will be pedantry. Only a well-balanced admixture of these two will result in an exemplary person" (6/18). When someone said, "Exemplary persons should focus on the substance, what do they need refined form for?" Confucius' disciple Zigong replied, "Refined form is no different from substance; substance is no different from refined form. The skin of a tiger or a leopard, shorn of hair, is no different from that of a dog or a sheep" (12/8). According to this interpretation, the refined form and the substance of an exemplary person are so closely connected to each other that not only *should* they match each other, without one the other cannot exist! An appropriate conduct must have a refined ritual form, otherwise it would not be appropriate; and a ritual form cannot be considered refined unless it is appropriate.

As the Master says, "In referring time and again to observing ritual propriety, how could I just be talking about the presence of jade and silk?" (17/11) Learning rituals is no different from learning to be a human. Humans are like raw materials – they need to be carved, chiseled, grounded, and polished to become authentic persons (1/15). Learning ritual propriety is such a process. By practicing ritual propriety, a person can be transformed and established (8/8). Most people learn their basic moral lessons at a young age, not by studying Kantian formulations of categorical imperative or utilitarian calculations, but by repeated use of rituals such as saying "thank you," which increases one's sense of appreciation, and "I am sorry," which increases one's sensitivity to others' pain. Not only does the skill of dealing with sophisticated human relationships have to be learned from actual life, and in this sense it is not merely a matter of remembering what is right and wrong in the brain, the habit of rituals is not something extrinsic to the person, but the result of transformation of the person. Through the process not only does one *know* what is expressive of humanity but one also *becomes* an excellent human. Only from this perspective can we understand and appreciate the passages in the *Analects* that give detailed accounts of how the Master greeted his guests, dressed himself, ate, sat, etc. The subtlety and complexity of the coordinated ritual acts are certainly beyond what can be capsulated in any abstract principle. This matter of ethical importance, nicely captured by Joel Kupperman as the "style" of life, is unfortunately neglected by most Western ethical theories (see Kupperman 1999: 26–35).

In his influential work, *Confucius – the Secular as Sacred*, Herbert Fingarette articulates the significance of the Confucian teachings about ritual propriety by referring to J. L. Austin's work in the early 1960s on a class of linguistic actions called "performative utterances."[6] Fingarette says that the lesson of Austin's work is not so much about language as it is about ceremony, for all the performative uses of language are ceremonies or rituals or they are nothing. They cannot be done out of ritual context. "No purely physical motion is a promise; no word alone, independent of ceremonial context, circumstances and roles can be a promise." "In short, the peculiarly moral yet binding power of ceremonial gesture and word cannot be abstracted from or used in isolation from ceremony. It is not a distinctive power we happen to use in ceremony; it is the power *of* ceremony" (Fingarette 1972: 12, 14). In an apparently puzzling conversation, Confucius compared his disciple Zigong to a sacrificial vase of jade (5/4). According to Fingarette, the passage reveals the profound significance of ritual propriety, for the vessel's sacredness does not reside in the preciousness of its beauty; it is sacred "because it is a constitutive element in the ceremony.… By analogy, Confucius may be taken to imply that the individual human being, too, has ultimate dignity, sacred dignity by virtue of his role in rite, in ceremony, in *li*" (Fingarette 1972: 75). Outside of a certain ritual setting, a vessel would not be sacred, no matter how beautiful it is. Of course the analogy should not be taken so far as to mean that one can be sacred by merely being in a ritual setting

[6] The utterances are not acts of descriptions about certain facts or acts of instructions to induce some other action; they are the very execution of the acts itself. A promise is a typical example – the utterance of "I promise" is the very act of promising.

without personal cultivation and active participation in the ritual. It is typical that before a holy ritual takes place, the participant has to take a shower, fast for a certain period of time, and meditate for a while to calm the mind and make the will sincere. If placement alone was enough to confer the holiness, all those processes would be simply meaningless.

As all ritual practices involve encountering others, the passage also implies that no one can become sacred in solitude. It is through ritual propriety that social activities and human relations are coordinated in a civilized, and hence, sacred way. The Master says, "Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety" (1/12). Harmony (*he* 和) is different from conformity (*tong* 同). "The exemplary person pursues harmony rather than conformity; the petty minded is the opposite" (13/23). Just like simply adding water to water would not make a delicious broth, or playing the same note would not make beautiful music, diversity is a precondition for harmony. While the parts forced into conformity are in agreement with each other at the cost of their individuality, the parts of a harmonious whole mutually enhance each other without sacrificing their uniqueness. People in harmonious relations *participate in* social activities and construction. They are not merely *constituents of* them.

Of course, harmony also presupposes something fundamental that the participants will have to agree upon. Confucius made it clear that "People who have chosen different Ways (*dao*) cannot make plans together" (15/40). The harmony of a broth is dependent on the condition that no ingredient is sharply at odds with other ingredients. This requirement would be very difficult to meet and problematic if the universal agreement is expected to be in the form of principles stated in words. The principles often tend to be either too rigid to allow for differences and creativity or too thin (abstract) to be practically meaningful. The practice of ritual propriety, however, is ambiguous and leaves maximum space for uniqueness and creativity. A handshake in itself does not specify what is agreed upon, and yet a certain trust and mutual recognition can be established through it. Not only can the meaning carried by a handshake be richer than any agreement on a principle, it will not lose mutuality for the sake of having an agreement, nor will it lack emotional content for the sake of retaining rationality.

The ritual order envisioned by Confucius implies social hierarchy, and for this reason it is often criticized as elitist and opposed to human equality. But it is supposed to be one of reciprocity and deference to excellence rather than a rigid order of aristocracy. The Master is himself a role model: "At court, when speaking with lower officials, he was congenial, and when speaking with higher officials, straightforward yet respectful. In the presence of his lord, he was reverent though composed" (10/2). In these rituals the social roles and relationships are confirmed and communicated, the responsibilities that come with them are accepted, and human-heartedness is displayed. Those who are in superordinate positions enjoy more status of authority while bearing more responsibility, and those who are in subordinate positions enjoy more protection and less responsibility but are expected to return the former with respect and wholehearted devotion (*zhong* 忠). This does not mean that the subordinates will always have to obey their superiors. Confucius says, "In political matters, if no one says anything different from what their ruler says, it is fine when what the ruler says is good, but it would ruin a state if what the ruler

says is not good" (13/15). Even though he did not have a concept of modern democracy, he believes that:

> when a state has subjects who dare to stand up and appeal to the King, it will not be in danger. When a father has a son who dares to speak up, he will not deviate from ritual propriety. When a person has friends who dare to speak up, he will not take inappropriate action. Hence how can we say that the son is filial, if he obeys whatever his father says? How can a subject be considered whole-heartedly devoted if he follows whatever his King orders? Those who examine what they are expected to follow, that is what filiation and whole-hearted devotion means. (*Xun Zi* 1967: Hsun Tzu, Chap. 29)

Confucius himself even endorsed King Wen and Duke Zhou, who overthrew their corrupted king and became rulers themselves.

Though Confucius values traditional ritual proprieties so highly that he says, "If for a single day one were able to return to the observance of ritual propriety, the whole empire would defer to *ren*" (12/1), nowhere did he say that they must be unchangeable. When asked about the root of observing ritual propriety, the Master replied, "What an important question! In observing ritual propriety, it is better to be modest than extravagant; in mourning, it is better to express real grief than to worry over formal details" (3/4). The principle behind this is the humanitarian spirit, *ren*, not mere traditional formality (see also 9/3, 11/1).

To Confucius, ritual propriety is no less aesthetic than it is educational or social-political. He often puts the word *li*, ritual propriety, together with *yue or le* 乐, a word that, when pronounced as *yue*, means aesthetic activities such as music, dance and poetry, and when pronounced as *le*, means happiness or joy (see 11/1, 16/2, 16/5, 17/11). Ritual ceremonies were traditionally composed of dance, song, and music. The beauty of the music, the dance, and the songs which constitute the rituals reinforces the ethical and social meanings of the rituals by giving them an aura of sacredness. At a more fundamental level, the persons who are refined by rituals and the social order resulting from and exemplified by ritual proprieties can themselves be considered artistic. Refined by ritual propriety, a person will have the grace that enhances the natural beauty of the body profoundly. To the contrary, lacking proper manner, the natural beauty of a person will diminish dramatically, and in extreme cases, to nothing but what is of the flesh. An unsightly behavior is always opposed to ritual propriety, and a conduct in accord with ritual propriety is always elegant and aesthetically pleasing.

The beauty of the social order resulting from ritual propriety is compatible to the beauty of the natural world, in which objects are different but mutually dependent, and they rise and fall rhythmically. The beauty of each object is dependent upon its place within the whole, in relation to its environment. The surrounding can enhance or reduce its beauty, depending upon how it is placed within the environment and in relation to everything else. By ritual propriety, humans can correspond and interact with each other artistically, like performers in a well-conducted orchestra, in which the artistic performance of each is aesthetically dependent on and enhanced by her cooperation with and coordination within the whole.[7]

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[7] Readers may refer to Neville (2008) for elaboration of the modern significance of the Confucian idea of ritual.

5 *Zheng* 正 – Political Philosophy

Confucius' humanitarian spirit is well exemplified in many teachings in the *Analects*. He clearly says that one should "love the multitude at large" (1/6). He teaches his disciples that an exemplary person should be gracious in deporting himself, deferential in serving his superiors, generous in attending to needs of the common people, and appropriate in employing their services (5/16). This is the Confucian ideal society:

> When the great Way prevails, a public and common spirit is everywhere under the sky. People of talents and virtue are chosen, trustworthiness advocated and harmony cultivated. People love not merely their own parents, nor treat as children only their own children. The aged are provided till their death, the able-bodied all have places to utilize their ability, and the young have the means for growing up. Widows, widowers, orphans, childless, disabled, and ill, all sufficiently maintained. Men get their share and women have their homes. People hate to throw goods of value away upon the ground, but see no reason to keep them for their own gratification. People dislike not putting their strengths into use, but see no reason to use them only to their own advantage. Therefore schemings diminish and find no development; robberies, thefts, rebellions, and treason do not happen. Hence the outer doors need not be shut. This is called the Grand Union. (*Book of Rites*, Chap. 9. 1987: 120)

What is needed for achieving such a Grand Union is basically *ren* (human-heartedness) and *li* (ritual propriety). This section will serve as a further elaboration and clarification of how the principles are applied in the social-political realm.

Confucius explicitly placed the use of administrative and law enforcement as inferior to the way of ritual propriety and moral excellence for securing social order. First of all, during that particular historical era, it was unlikely that the rulers could sanction anything except through arbitrary and power driven orders from above, whereas ritual propriety, a repository of past insights into morality, was already there as a tradition, actualized in custom in the society. More importantly, "Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with virtue/virtuosity (*de* 德) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety, and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves" (see 2/3). Compulsion and punishment can only ensure outward conformity, at best. People will stay out of trouble not because they are ashamed of doing wrong, but because they fear the punishment, and in places where legal enforcement cannot reach or no one else is around to see, they may still do wrong. However, if the social order is secured by virtue/virtuosity and ritual proprieties, an internal supervision will develop, which is much more effective in its penetration into people's lives, saturated as a way of life itself. The Master said, "In hearing litigation, I am no different from anyone else. But if you insist on a difference, it is that I try to get people to have no need to resort to litigation in the first place" (12/13). He did not mean to be just idealistic and optimistic. Litigation is often needed when things are not going well, but it tends to inflict ill feeling and animosity, a side-effect hard to avoid even in the most fair court rulings.

Families are small societies on the bases of which the larger society is structured. If the person can be a good member of a family, that person can be a good member of a larger community; if the person can regulate the family well, that person can

rule a country well. When someone asked Confucius, “Why do you not actively search for a career in governing?” the Master replied,

> the *Book of Documents* says, “It is all in filial conduct (*xiao* 孝)! Just being filial to your parents and befriending your brothers is carrying out the work of government.” In so doing a person is also taking part in government. How can there be any question of my having actively taking part in governing? (2/21)

Extending the family model to the art of ruling, Confucius believed that the way to conduct *zheng* 政 (to govern) requires one to be *zheng* 正, a homophone that means “being proper,” “straight,” “orderly,” or “to correct,” “to make straight.” When the Master was asked about the order of importance among the following three things for an effective government – sufficient food to eat, sufficient arms for defense, and that the common people have confidence in their leaders, he put confidence in leaders at the top. “Death has been with us from ancient times, but if common people do not have confidence in their leaders, community will not endure” (12/7). The words *zheng*[--to govern] and *zheng*[-being correct] are not merely homophonous; they have an intrinsic affinity. He believes that “the excellence of the exemplary person is the wind, while that of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend” (12/19). In public affairs, if those who are in superior positions are fond of ritual propriety, the common people will be easy to command (14/41), so easy that they will even follow without any command (13/6). “If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action (*wu wei* 無爲), it was surely Shun. What did he do? He simply assumed an air of respectfulness and faced due south. That was all” (15/5). [8] “Being proper in their own position, what difficulty would the rulers have in governing? But if not able to set themselves proper, how can they set others proper?” (13/13. See also 12/19 and 12/17).

This is the Confucian notion of *wu wei* – action by non-action, a notion more well known for its Daoist affiliation. It is non-action because the agent does not seem to be making efforts or exerting any force at all. While the Daoist *wu wei* is to do things naturally and spontaneously, the Confucian *wu wei* is to accomplish the intended results by ritual proprieties enlivened by their *de* – virtue/virtuosity. Here we may take up a troubling passage in the *Analects*, “the common people can be made to follow a path, but not to know 民可使由之,不可使知之” (8.9), to illustrate the importance of reading Confucius holistically. A careful reading reveals that the key word “*ke*可” in this passage may be taken either as “be permitted to” or “can.” The first reading would make the passage read “the common people are permitted to follow a path, but not permitted to know.” Based on this reading, critics of Confucianism argue that Confucianism is authoritarian, elitist, and opposed to human freedom and democracy. Though no government can afford to have total transparency (if a government were to reveal all threats to the public as soon as they were reported, it would cause the public to panic and lead the society into chaos), it is still wrong to keep the common people entirely in the dark. Confucius does think that common people are in the dark and do not know what is good for them (see 15/25); but it is

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[8] Shun was an ancient sage king that Confucius revered greatly. According to traditional Chinese ritual, south is the direction to which the superior’s seats face.

precisely because of this that he thinks they should be educated (see 2/20, 13/9, 13/29, 13/30). His principle of education is to provide teachings for everyone who shows a sincere willingness to learn and to do this without discrimination (15/39). It would be totally inconsistent to interpret the saying as wanting to have the common people kept in the dark.

Taking "*ke*" to mean "can" and reading the passage as saying that common people can be made to follow a path but cannot be made to know the path still leaves a number of different ways to explain the reason for it. One is that common people are low in intelligence and lack the ability to know it. Another, held by Cheng Yi 程頤, argues that the reason that common people cannot be made to know the path is that this kind of knowledge is knowledge of/as virtue. Unlike knowledge gained through hearing and seeing, which can be understood by one's mind, knowledge of/as virtue has to be experienced in one's heart so that the person is willing to act accordingly. By its very nature, knowledge of/as virtue cannot be taught but has to be attained by oneself (*zide* 自得). Still another explanation, offered by Zhu Xi 朱熹, maintains that the sage cannot go door to door to explain the reason to everyone. It is simply impractical.[9] While all these readings have some plausibility, a most convincing reading, maintained by a number of Confucian scholars such as Dai Xi 戴溪, He Yan 何晏, and Zhang Ping 張憑, is that the saying is about the sage's way of transforming people. The sages can make the common people follow them like having an invisible spiritual force that excites and motivates people. When the common people plow the land to get their food, or dig their well to get their water, they do not think that the power of their Emperor has anything to do with them. If there were something for the common people to know, it means that the ruler's way is still visible and not very effective (see Dai 1999: 9). Here the whole passage is understood as advice, consistent with Confucius' teachings about *zheng*: it is better when people are made to follow the path naturally by the magical forces of examples of excellence and by ritual proprieties than by visible forces.

Since ritual propriety is dependent on clarification of roles, Confucius takes *zhengming* 正名, ordering or rectifying names, seriously, so that each person will know what is expected of him or her in a given web of particular relationships. When asked what would be the priority in bringing order to a state, Confucius replied, "Without question it would be to order names properly" (13/3). Using names, for Confucius, is like implementing strategies or devices that stipulate expectations and norms of conduct. "The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son" (12/11). Each "name" carries with it a certain norm that whoever bears the name is expected to follow, and others are also expected to treat them accordingly. This is why Confucius advises people to "speak cautiously" (2/18). It is said that when Confucius was editing the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, he paid special attention to the use of words, since words carry the force that can affect reality. An important feature of this Confucian pragmatic orientation toward language is that it focuses on the acceptability of names, or, as Chad Hansen puts it, "social-psychological techniques for shaping inclinations and feelings that direct

[9] See Huang (2008) for a detailed analysis of these interpretations.

behavior in accord with a moral way" (Hansen 1985: 495). It does not aim at trying to get to the truth in a correspondence sense, nor to invoke proofs or propositional knowledge. In this orientation, reality is supposed to match words, or term-beliefs, and the aim of the rectification of names is to ensure that, as pegs of role expectations, the names are acceptable, and people will have proper dispositions to respond to them. In contrast, in the referential use of language familiar to the Western philosophies preoccupied with obtaining truth and knowledge, sentential beliefs are supposed to match reality, and the aim of rectification is to ensure that they capture what is true.

It would be inadequate to take Confucius' teachings as merely advocating a social and political order, because they also aim at achieving personal freedom and aesthetic creativity. It is true that in the works of Confucius, there is no word close to the Western idea of "freedom." Meanwhile, ritual propriety seems to serve as intangible rope that even limits what one can and cannot think or will. Furthermore, Confucius' emphasis on ritual propriety and the importance of acting in accordance with one's roles in the web of social relationships seem to place limitations on individual freedoms. However, actually Confucius has a different understanding of freedom. In his famous short autobiography, Confucius says, "At the age of 70, I was able to follow my heart-mind's (*xin* 心) will (*yu* 欲) without overstepping the line" (2/4). The statement entails that for Confucius, freedom does not mean the lack of any "lines" of conduct that constrain what one can and cannot do, nor the ability to deliberate between alternatives and act upon what one chooses. For him, freedom is a cultivated spontaneity that frees one even from making choices because one would know what the proper lines are and would not have any intention of overstepping them! In this state of existence the "lines" to the person would be no more than "No smoking" signs to non-smokers. Just as any decent human being would not deliberate on whether or not to kick an innocent child for fun, a well cultivated person will have no need for deliberation in most cases (see Kupperman 1999: 102–114). Indeed, an uncultivated person is like a novice chess player who does not know what to do when faced with all available alternatives, and hence would not be considered by Confucius as having any real freedom. One who is totally indifferent to alternatives would be like Buridan's ass, which starved to death between two equally good piles of hay because it could not find a reason to go to one pile and not the other. Of course, the freedom of cultivated spontaneity is not a natural state that people are born into and can simply enjoy without having to earn it, nor is it a matter of knowing all the relevant facts and making deliberate choices. One has to develop proper inclinations or dispositions, which is to learn proper rituals and cultivate *ren*. "Those who know are not perplexed," says Confucius; but that is not all. He also says that one must be *ren* to be free from anxiety, and courageous to be free from fear (9/29).

Taking one's own right as an autonomous choice maker for granted and making demands on external conditions is not Confucius' way of assuring freedom. Though he clearly does not think that people should submit to whatever is imposed on them, he believes that "If one sets strict standards for oneself and makes allowances for others when making demands on them, one will stay clear of ill will" (15/15; see

also 1/16, 4/17, 15/21 and 20/1). Confucius even describes *ren*, the central quality of an exemplary person, in part as "reforming the self" (12/1). Not having the person cultivated to a certain level of maturity, the availability of alternatives could even endanger the person.

Of course for Confucius freedom is not a personal matter. Just as water is a necessary condition for one to swim, and adjusting bodily movement according to the nature of water increases one's freedom in the water, specific relationships with others are a necessary condition for an individual to be free within the given social environment, and adjusting the relationships according to ritual propriety increases one's freedom in it. A person is so inseparable from others that her domain of choice is itself defined and transformed by her interaction with others. It is with this understanding that Confucians take the selection of one's own residence to be a serious matter – not about the material wealth of the neighborhood, for "were an exemplary person to live in it, what crudeness could there be?" (9/14); the most important feature of a residence is the presence of human-hearted (*ren*) persons in the neighborhood (see 4/1).

Confucianism is often criticized for ignoring, if not opposing, individual rights and for the lack of any idea of democracy. However, some contemporary Confucian scholars have argued that not only are the criticisms unfair to classic Confucianism in the way that Confucius himself represented it, but also that, in exactly these areas, Confucianism has particularly valuable insights to offer. Henry Rosemont, for instance, argues that the modern Western notion of the autonomous right-bearing individual is fundamentally flawed. "99 % of the time I can fully respect your first generation civil and political rights [the rights of speech, of religion, of a fair trial, etc.] simply by ignoring you. You certainly have a right to speak, but no right to make me listen" (Rosemont 1998: 59). Without a communitarian notion of self, i.e. the self as a nexus of social relations, the practice of human rights could result in "excessive individualism, competitiveness, and vicious litigiousness" that "is not only endangering the well-being of others but also detrimental to our own wholesomeness" (Tu 1998: 305). The Confucian notion of the embodied, relational, duty-bearing person allows each member of a society to have a clear sense of mutual dependence on other people, and to develop a sense of caring for the interest of others. On this basis we can construct our notions of democracy and human rights as the right and duty of every member of the community to participate in public affairs and take the public welfare of all as one's own. This Confucian notion of democracy is fully compatible with the spirit of democracy – a way of social and political life that promotes the interest of each member of the community as a vital part of the society of, by, and for the people. The key Confucian constituent in this theory is that there can be a good life over and above individual preferences, a life in which "the desired would not be equated with the desirable, and democratic political participation – being a citizen – would involve engaging in collective dialogue about the appropriate means for achieving agreed-upon ends" (Rosemont 1991: 93). It is worth noting that when Carsun Chang, the Chinese delegate to the U.N. and a distinguished Confucian scholar, added the clause that all men "should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" (which is derived from the Confucian saying

that "all within the four seas are brothers," 12/5 of the *Analects*), to the *Declaration of Human Rights*, he could not have expected to merely establish a procedure that would guarantee all the "brothers" the basic rights to speak, to be fed, etc. The spirit of brotherhood requires a sense of caring, love, and respect beyond just not legally violating the rights of a sibling. When a person acts toward his brother in a legal but otherwise unkindly manner, there is nothing a legal authority can do.

6 *Xue* 學 – Learning to Be Human

As a system of teachings that revolves around the theme of personal cultivation and manifestation of *ren* and *li*, naturally the topics of learning, thinking, and attaining knowledge are important to Confucianism.

One distinctive feature of the Confucian way of dealing with learning, thinking, and knowledge is that they all contain the *heart* part of *xin* 心, heart-mind. The heart is engaged in the process of reaching a deeper understanding, of critical evaluation, and of appropriating what is learned so that one is able to apply it creatively and artistically. Responding to a disciple's question about shortening the period of mourning for his parents, Confucius asks "Would you feel at ease?" (17/21) This question forces the disciple to bring whatever feelings and ideas he has on the matter in front of his moral subjectivity and examine whether or not he can accept them at ease. When another disciple asked Confucius about the exemplary person, the Master said, "The exemplary person is free from worry and apprehension.… If there is nothing to be ashamed of upon self-reflection, what can the person be worried about and afraid of?" (12/4) It is no coincidence that the Chinese language contains lexicons that can be illustrative of the bodily characteristic of the Confucian way of thinking and knowing, such as "*ti yan* 體驗," bodily experience, "*ti hui* 體會," bodily understanding, "*ti cha* 體察," bodily examination, "*ti zhi* 體知," bodily knowing, and "*ti ren* 體認," bodily recognition. We do not passively receive impressions, nor do we merely reason intellectually. We experience with the body engaged, understand with our heart in empathy, examine with the sensitivity of the body, and know with the body disposed to act upon what is known.

Since the process of learning and reflection involves dispositioning the body and transformation of the entire person, it requires practice to perfect. Biologically, human beings are similar in nature. It is by *xi* 習 (practice) that they diverge (17/2). The outcome is not nearly as much an accumulated stock of propositional knowledge as a set of abilities, which Song and Ming dynasty Confucians call "*gongfu* 功夫" (*kung fu*), obtained through receiving training from masters and through one's own diligent practice. The *Analects* shows that when asked about *ren* by the disciples, Confucius never tried to describe *ren* per se. He talked about what a *ren* person would be like, how they would act, and he gave instructions according to each disciple's particular condition, letting them know on what level and in which respect they should start or continue their practice. The teaching

method is indeed more typical of *gongfu* masters than of philosophy teachers in the ordinary sense of the term.

The Confucian *gongfu* culminates at *zhongyong* (see 6/29). "*Zhong* 中" means "centrality," "not to be one-sided." "*Yong* 庸" means "ordinary" or "commonality," "practicality," and "constancy." When "*zhong*" and "*yong*" are used together as one term, it can be translated as "centering the commonality." There is a considerable overlap between the Confucian doctrine of *zhongyong* and the Aristotelian Golden Mean. Both mean the virtue (not necessarily moral virtue), or excellence, of avoiding two extreme vices – deficiency and excess (see 11/16, 11/22, and 20/1), and not a state of being mediocre. By associating "*zhong*" with "*yong,*" Confucius advises people to constantly practice *zhong* in the ordinary or everyday life that makes our heart-mind always at ease. Since everyday life situations are dynamic and hence there is no rigid rule to follow, the person has to embody the *gongfu* to respond to differing situations in a consistent way, and be creative as a co-creator of the universe. After all, the unity between heaven and human is not a combination of two entities or a human's ascendance to another world; it is rather one's becoming truly human in serving parents, taking care of children, respecting teachers, helping friends, and finding enjoyment in these activities (see 7/19).

The kind of knowledge obtained through the Confucian sense of learning is closer to what is now commonly referred to as "knowing how [to do something]," as opposed to "knowing what [is the case]." The former is dispositional, and the latter is propositional. The teachings of Confucius are like road signs, or directives, that guide people's life and their actions, leading them to their own new discovery and their own unique life. An obvious omission in the Confucian learning program is natural sciences. Confucius felt close to nature, but he never displayed any interest in the dispassionate, objective analysis of nature, as scientists do. His remarks about nature are without exception the objectification of his moral and aesthetic sentiments and virtues. As Xu Fuguan points out, the names of plants and animals in the 300 *Odes* are sentiments and virtues of the poets, not botany or zoology. Western science interprets human as part of nature; Confucius interprets nature in terms of human.

But certain caution is needed in taking the Confucian learning as "knowing how." First of all, while it is true that Confucius never really delved into natural sciences, the holistic and correlative way of thinking that was prevalent in Chinese philosophy, including Confucius' teachings, has led to remarkable achievements and insights about how the universe (including our own bodies) functions. It is best exemplified in traditional Chinese medicine. Confucius' own observation about the connection between human-heartedness and longevity (6/23) and his followers' contribution to Chinese medicine and the Chinese theories of health are indications that Confucianism may have more profound understanding of how the natural world functions than modern medical science does, though the latter is indisputably much more advanced in detailed local areas (that is, if we put aside the fact that the two systems may be incommensurable scientific "paradigms"). The most remarkable feature of the Confucian outlook on the natural world is that it helps us to understand the inseparableness between the body and the mind, between moral cultivation

and the overall wellness of a person, and between the state of an individual and her interpersonal relationships, and that the universe is a continuum, which must be viewed holistically (see Ni 1996, 1999).

Second, it is important to stress that the Confucian learning is not merely a matter of acquiring motor skills, as "knowing how" is commonly understood. It is more a transformation of the person. I may know how to overcome procrastination, but not disposed to do it or have the ability to do it. On the other hand I may be able to do it, but not know specifically how. The aim of the Confucian learning is to achieve the full capacity, including the strong inclination, to achieve excellence.

An interesting observation here is that, in this philosophy that aims primarily at prescribing a good way of life and offering instructions for people to grow mature and live well, the notion of time may also be different. "The Master was standing on the riverbank, and observed, 'Isn't life's passing just like this, never ceasing day or night!'" (9/17) On the surface, this appears to be just a lament on how fast time goes. But the Master always draws moral lessons from observations of nature. The other passages succeeding this quote indicate that he is more likely reminding people that one should be like the river, making constant efforts to improve oneself. Time for a learner is not a passage that always passes evenly. "As in pilling up earth to erect a mountain, if, only one basketful short of completion, I stop, I have stopped. As in filling a ditch to level the ground, if, having dumped in only one basketful, I continue, I am progressing" (9/19). "If there was anyone who was never tired of practicing what he was taught, it was surely Yan Hui" (9/20), for he is a person that "I only saw his progress; I never saw him stop" (9/21). "There are indeed seedlings that do not flower, and there are flowers that do not fruit" (9/22). Though no one can be perfect, one should aim at constantly perfecting oneself.

Confucius himself is a model learner. He says, "In strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly" (7/22). One must not hesitate in correcting oneself when in error (1/8). When he was told that he misjudged someone, the Master said, "I am fortunate. If I make a mistake, others are sure to inform me" (7/31). "When you erred and yet not to correct yourself, that is to err indeed" (15/30). Often the problem is that, when something goes wrong, people tend to blame others or bad fortune rather than to search for the answer in themselves. Yet the exemplary person is like an archer who first searches for the fault within when he fails to hit the mark (*Zhongyong* 2001: Chap. 14; see also the *Analects*: 14/35).

While everyone should strive to become a *junzi* 君子 (exemplary person), the highest perfection of learning is to become a *shengren* 聖人, or sage. A Confucian sage is not one who has eliminated all natural human desires. The ideal is actually to regulate and transform natural desires to the human level. There is no question that for Confucius, as for all the great thinkers of his time, humans need to regulate their desires. But Confucius never advocated the elimination of human desires. He himself is one who likes fine food, not merely whatever can fill the stomach (see 10/8). With regard to sex, he only cautions young people not to overindulge in it (16/7). The *Songs* (*Odes*) that he repeatedly quotes and advises his disciples to study are full of love themes. He is also fond of having fame (15/20), though he also says that one should not be frustrated if one is not recognized by others (1/1). He is

very frank in saying that "Wealth and honor are what people want, but if they are the consequence of deviating from the way, I would have no part in them" (4/5). "If wealth were an acceptable goal, even though I would have to serve as a groom holding a whip in the marketplace, I would gladly do it. But if it is not an acceptable goal, I will follow my own devices" (7/12). The point is "to desire but not to be greedy" (20/2), and to obtain what one desires without deviating from the proper way.

Perhaps no passage in the *Analects* states Confucius' own orientation toward personal enjoyment more clearly than section 11/26. The passage records a detailed conversation between Confucius and four of his close disciples, Zilu, Zeng Xi, Ran You, and Zihua. The Master said, with an obvious intention to create a relaxed atmosphere and to encourage the students to speak their minds, "Just because I am a bit older than you do not hesitate on my account. You keep saying, 'No one recognizes my worth!' but if someone did recognize your worth, how would you be of use to them?" The four students all expressed their wishes. Zilu said that his wish was to govern a state that was in trouble and to bring it back to a sure direction. Ran You's wish was to rule a small territory and to bring prosperity to the people in 3 years. Zihua stated his modest wish that he wanted to serve diligently as a minor officer and do his job well. Only Zeng Xi (also known as Zeng Dian), after plucking a final note on his zither to bring the music to an end and setting the instrument aside, said that he would choose something different from the rest. Here is how Zeng Xi expressed his wish:

> At the end of spring, with the spring clothes having already been finished, I would like, in the company of five or six young men and six or seven children, to cleanse ourselves in the Yi River, to revel in the cool breezes at the Altar for Rain, and then return home singing.

Typically people would expect the Master to endorse the first three disciples' wishes, for they all expressed moral and political ambitions. However, after hearing all, the Master heaved a deep sigh, and said that he would be with Zeng Xi, whose wish was nothing but enjoyment of a beautiful environment and pleasant company. The detailed description of Zeng Xi's relaxed way of expressing his wish is indeed part of the message: rather than anxiously waiting for his turn, he kept playing his music to the end even after the Master asked him "What about you, Dian?" Instead of being a nervous moralist who always worries about staying within the moral boundary, a real sage is one whose heart-mind is at ease, who is able to enjoy life artistically by spontaneous participation in the revival of everything, and celebrate the transformation of heaven and earth.[10]

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[10] Here I am basically following Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi's reading of the passage. There are some other interpretations. For instance, Cheng Shude takes the Master to be lamenting that given his age and the fact that there was no sage king to employ him, he had no chance to implement his visions in his life. His agreement with Dian was simply saying that he had no choice but to be like Dian (see Cheng 1990: 812). Still another interpretation, held by Zhang Lǜxiang, holds that the four disciples' aspirations show an ascending order. Zilu's was to bring peace to the land, which is necessary for implementing Ran You's wish – to let people have sufficient material supplies. Ran You's, in turn, is a necessary condition for implementing Zihua's wish, i.e. using ritual propriety to teach people and to transform the society. Finally, only when all the three wishes mentioned above become reality can people truly enjoy the kind of pleasure that Zeng Dian was talking about. The Master's "with Dian" is then actually consenting to this highest ideal (see Cheng 1990: 816).

This brings us to the question of the Confucian approach to art and aesthetics. If we say that today's conventional notion of art associates artworks with studios and galleries, the Confucian art is the artistic way of life itself. While the conventional artist dissolves the opposition between the mind and the "hands," the Confucian sage achieves unity with heaven, and is able to participate in heaven's creation. Aesthetic enjoyment is actually the culmination of the Confucian learning. Reading the passage 7/6 as a process of cultivation, we see that Confucius puts "sojourn in the arts" as the highest ideal, above other stages of practice, such as "Set your will on the way. Have a firm grasp on virtue. Rely on humanity." Similarly, passage 8/8 describes "finding fulfillment or consummation in music/enjoyment" as a result of getting inspiration from the *Odes* and taking a stand from observing ritual proprieties. For Confucius, "knowing that it cannot be done and yet doing it" (a remark someone made about Confucius, 14/38) is at its best when one "takes pleasure" in doing it (6/20). When the Duke of She asked Zilu about Confucius, and Zilu did not answer, Confucius said: "Why didn't you say that I am a person who forgets his food when engaged in vigorous pursuit of something, is so happy as to forget his worries, and is not aware that old age is coming on?" (7/19). The word "forget" is a strong indication of the pure non-utilitarian aesthetic ideal. These passages reflect that the ideal of Confucian learning is not in morality in the Kantian sense – not moral for the sake of being moral. It is the opposite: Morality is valuable because of its utilitarian function of leading to the aesthetic ideal (which is itself non-utilitarian)[11] or that what is moral is itself beautiful and enjoyable. Once the ideal is achieved, there is no need to worry about morality. One simply follows the will of the heart-mind without overstepping the line and enjoys the freedom this entails, just like "When the Dao prevails in the world, the common people do not debate affairs of state" (16/2).

The Confucian sage embodies *zhi*, knowledge or wisdom, and is therefore not perplexed; she embodies *ren*, human-heartedness, and is therefore not worrisome; she is courageous, and is therefore not timid (9/29). But that is not all. The person is profoundly joyful. She enjoys water, for wisdom is like water, dynamic and creative; she enjoys mountains, for human-heartedness is like the mountains, enduring and full of dignity (6/23). The Confucian artistic creation is displayed in one's entire life, and not merely in those "big moments" like jumping into a burning building to save a child, or taking up a dangerous mission to protect one's own country. After all, it is more difficult to be aesthetic consistently in daily activities, providing all sorts of social services, and building strong social relationships (this is where the "Zeng Dian spirit" differs from the Daoist and Buddhist ideals). Such a person may not be considered a prominent artist in the conventional sense of the term, yet for Confucius, she will necessarily be truly prominent (see 12/20), because she cannot become such an artist without turning her own relatedness with others into what is

[11] Though this does not mean that arts cannot have utilitarian functions. For instance the Master says that the *Songs* "can arose your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and give expression to complaints" (17/9). It only means that an aesthetic ideal does not need any utilitarian function for its justification.

harmonious and pleasant. Indeed, as Roger Ames and David Hall point out, the social order brought forth by the Confucian sage will be an aesthetic one. In contrast with logical or rational order, which enforces some external or transcendental rule or principle from without, the aesthetic order emerges as embodied rules and principles through self-cultivation and mutual coordination. In a logical/rational order, there is no creativity, but only consistency and continuity, whereas in an aesthetic order, individuals and communities are able to creatively interpret and re-interpret the rules and principles. In a logical/rational order, everyone is equal, because everyone is conceived abstractly as an agent, and hence they are substitutable with any other agent, whereas in an aesthetic order, individuals are concrete particulars, un-substitutable, and the inequality is a matter of deference to excellence (see Hall and Ames 1987: 131–8).

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