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CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 04:

The Scope of Our Moral Duties: Partiality

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco



Learning Objectives

By the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

- Explain the key ideas of the ethic of ubuntu and Confucian ethics.
- Articulate the way in which these moral views allow for a degree of partiality in our moral conduct.
- Evaluate reasons for and against partiality.



Outline

The following topics will be covered in this lecture:

- What Do We Owe to Parents and Community?
- Impartiality and Partiality
- Confucian Ethics
- What a Virtuous Person Would Want
- The Ethic of Ubuntu
- Partiality in Confucian Ethics and Ubuntu



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Topic 01: What Do We Owe to Parents and Community?

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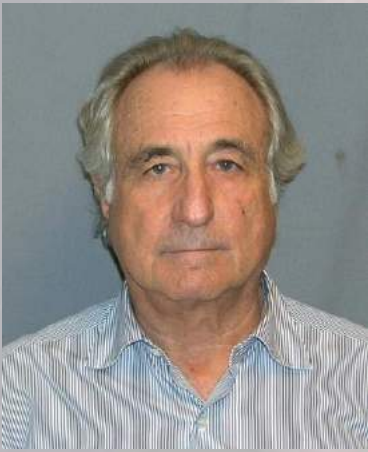
Have You Ever Wondered...

- Do you have any moral duties to your parents that **you don't have to anyone else**? If you do, what's the reason you have those duties?
- What if one of your parents commits a serious crime?
 - Should you help them cover it up if you can?
 - Should you call the police on them?
 - Or should you just do nothing?



Discussion Question 1

Take Bernard Madoff for example. He ran the largest [Ponzi scheme](#) in history. He defrauded investors of close to USD65 billion. In 2008, Madoff confessed to his sons, Mark and Andrew, that he had been lying to investors. Mark and Andrew immediately turned their father in to the police. Did Mark and Andrew do the right thing?



Bernard Madoff
(1938–2021)

Discussion Question 2

Do you think you have any moral duties to people who live in your community **that you don't have to people outside your community**? If you do, what's the reason you have those duties?

- Suppose you could help someone in your community, but **with the same cost and effort, you could help more people outside your community** even more. If you were deciding between these two options, which should you choose?

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Slide 6: Bernie Madoff. (2021, July 1). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernie_Madoff

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Topic 02: Impartiality and Partiality

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Partial vs Impartial Moral Conduct

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- On one hand, it may seem that we have moral duties to give special care to our own families, friends, and communities—duties that we do not have to others.
 - This perspective suggests we should be **partial** in our moral conduct.
 - On the other hand, it may also seem that we should not just care for “our own.” We should also be concerned about people in general, including strangers and outsiders.
 - This perspective suggests we should be **impartial** in our moral conduct.

Ethical Principles of Impartiality

In the past several weeks, we encountered three different ethical principles of impartiality:



Golden Rule Impartiality:

One should make similar evaluations about similar actions, regardless of the individuals involved (see also Gensler 2013: 14).



Utilitarian Impartiality:

Everyone's well-being counts, and counts equally (Shafer-Landau 2020: 93-94).

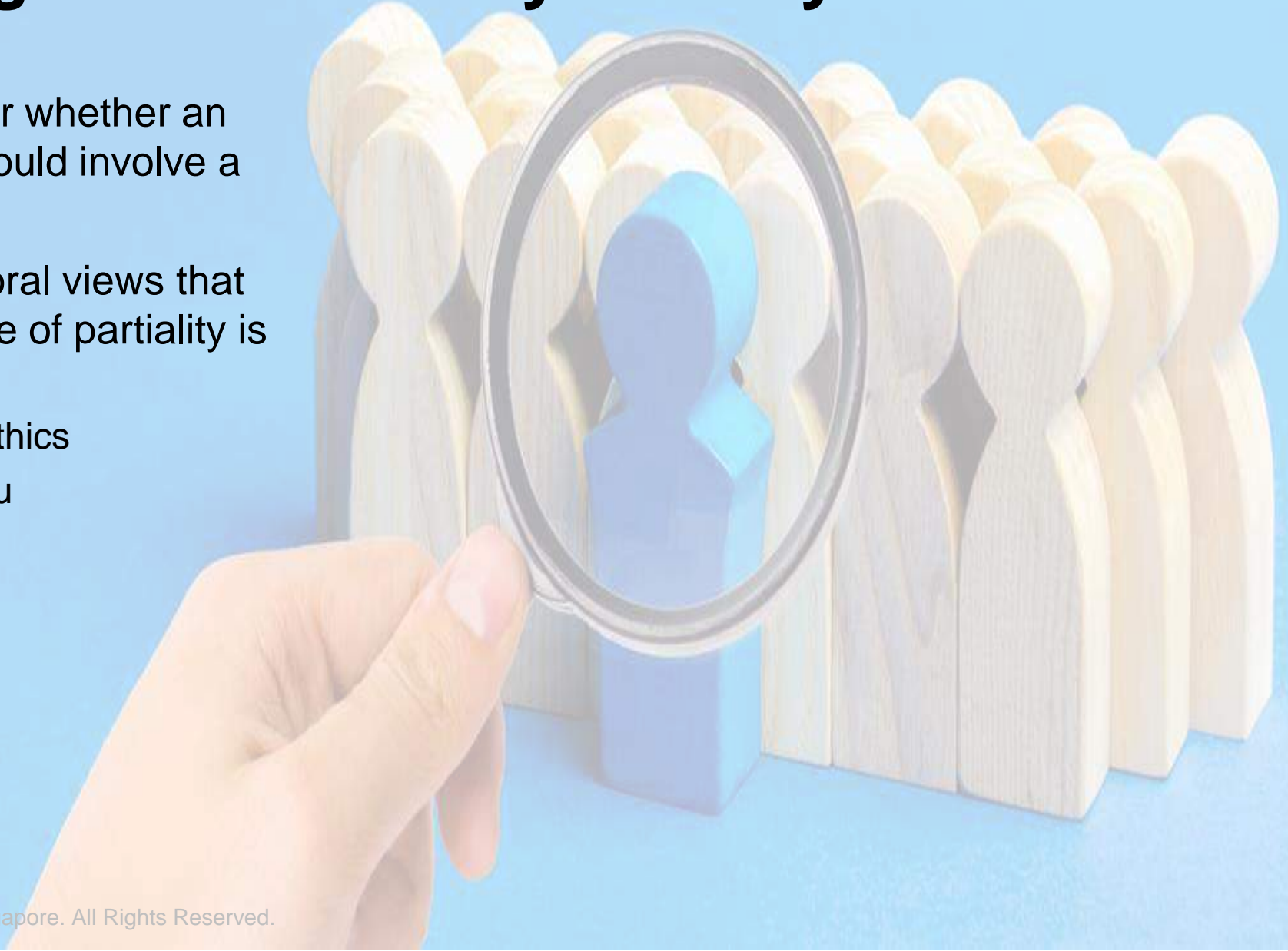


Kantian Impartiality:

All rational and autonomous beings deserve equal respect (Shafer-Landau 2020: 120-122).

Is Some Degree of Partiality Morally Permissible?

- Now, we will consider whether an ethical way of life should involve a degree of partiality.
- We will study two moral views that suggest some degree of partiality is morally permissible:
 - Confucian virtue ethics
 - The ethic of ubuntu



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Slide 10: Pashigorov (n.d.). VS. One against another. versus. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/vs-one-against-another-versus/204901436>

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Topic 03: Confucian Ethics

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Who was Confucius?



Confucius (551 – 479 BCE)


Confucius, or Kong Fuzi (551 – 479 BCE) was an ancient Chinese philosopher who lived during a time of great social and political unrest in his country.

Confucius grew convinced that he had developed a system of teachings that could bring about the ethical reform of society, restoring peace and prosperity to China.


Confucius is one of the most iconic figures in Chinese history today. His teachings inspired the Chinese Civil Service Examination, which was in place for over 1300 years from the Sui Dynasty (581 – 618 CE) to the Qing (1644 – 1911 CE).

Virtue Ethics


Confucian ethics is widely interpreted to be a version of the moral theory known as virtue ethics. **Virtue ethics** claims the following. (Timmons 2013: 280; Shafer-Landau 2021: 273-274)



An action is **morally required** iff a virtuous person, acting in character, would not fail to do it in the circumstances.



An action is **morally permissible** iff a virtuous person, acting in character, might or might not do it in the circumstances.



An action is **morally wrong** iff a virtuous person, acting in character, would not do it in the circumstances.

In the above, the term “iff” abbreviates the phrase “if and only if.”

What is a Virtue?

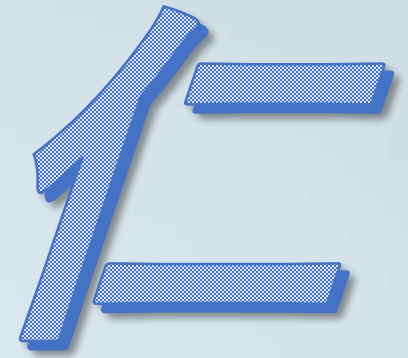
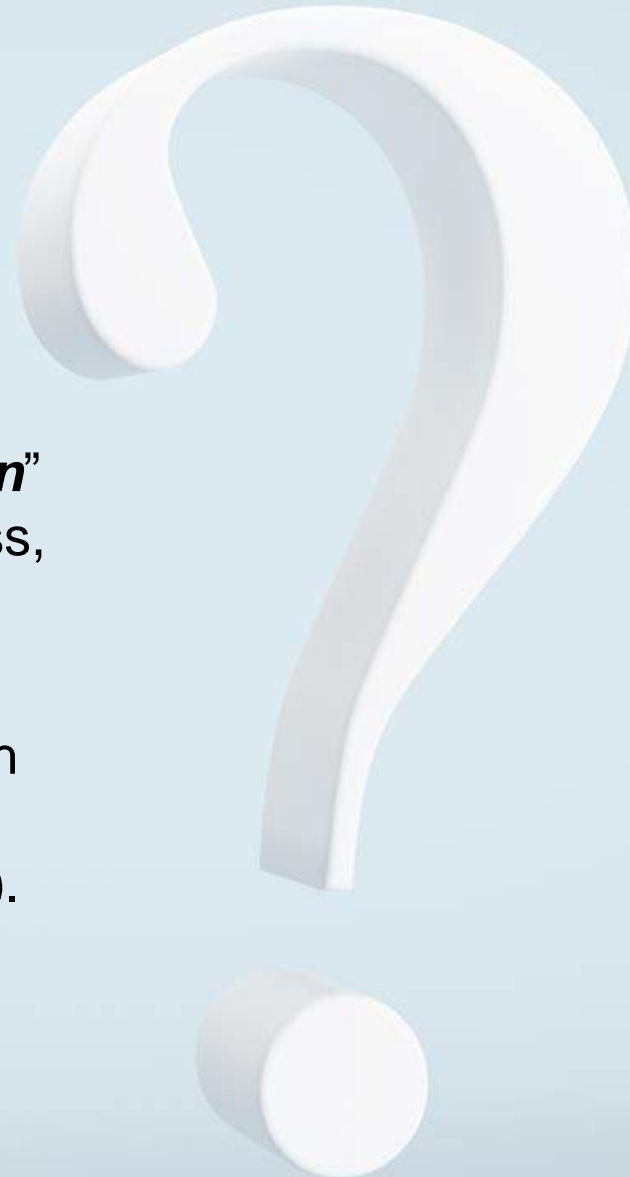
- According to virtue ethics, a virtuous person is a (hypothetical or actual) person who fully possesses all the virtues.
- A **virtue** is an admirable character trait that enables its possessor to achieve what is morally good (Shafer-Landau 2021: 279).
- Different versions of virtue ethics set forth different theories of what the virtues are.
 - To find out what is distinctive about Confucian ethics, we have to study Confucius's theory of the virtues.



Concept of *REN*

In the *Analects*, Confucius poses the question “What kind of person should I try to become?”

- One of his answers is that we should strive to cultivate *ren*.
- In the context of Confucius’s *Analects*, the word “**ren**” has been translated variously as virtue, humaneness, humanity, and benevolence (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 39; Lai 2008: 21).
- Confucius refers to a virtuous person as *junzi*, which is translated as “**superior person**” or “exemplary person” (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 38; Lai 2009: 54).



Virtues and Relationships

According to Confucius, different virtues pertain to different relationships (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 39). There are:

1

Virtues to be displayed toward other people in general

2

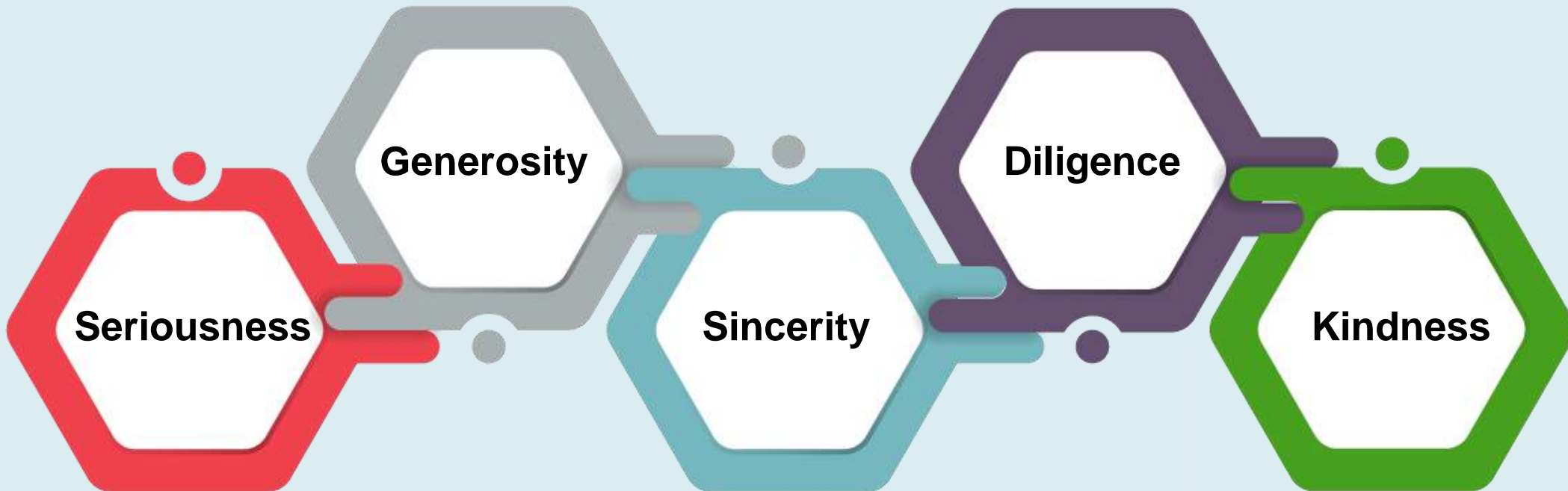
Virtues to be displayed to friends and family

3

Virtues of the self

Virtues and Relationships

The virtues towards others in general are **faithfulness**, plus the five components of *ren* (Analects 1:8; 17:6). Here are **the five components of *Ren***:



(Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 40)

Reciprocity

- In addition, Confucius repeatedly advocates a version of the Golden Rule in our dealings with others:

“What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others” (*Analects* 5:11, 12:2, 15:23).

- In the *Analects*, this principle is called “reciprocity” (15:23).
- Others call this principle the “**Silver Rule**”, because it prescribes *refraining* from actions that you would not want done to you (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 39-40).
 - The Golden Rule is normally expressed as a prescription to do actions that you would want others to do to you.



Virtues Towards Friends and Family

In Confucian ethics, there are two main virtues to be displayed towards friends and family:

Filial piety

Fraternal submission/respect

(*Analects* 1:2; 1:6; 1:7; 2:5)

Confucians state that filial piety and fraternal submission are the “root of *ren*” (*Analects* 1:2). This is interpreted to mean that through our caring interactions with close family members, we learn how to properly treat others (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 40; Lai 2008: 23-24).



Virtues of the Self

Finally, there are the Confucian virtues of the self:

Knowledge: Love of learning; knowing the Way (*dao*) i.e., the ethical way of life.

Virtues of feeling: Loving the Way (*dao*); delighting in the Way (*dao*); the virtuous person wants to do what is right, because it is right.

Virtues of thought: Sincerity and humility with oneself.

Virtues of action: The five components of *ren*; observing the mean in all things; carefulness, warmth, slow-speaking, composure, open-mindedness, etc.

(Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 40)

Virtue as a Mean Between Extremes

Confucius (like Aristotle) thought that virtue is a “mean” between extreme types of character traits.

Analects 6:27: “The Master said, ‘Perfect is the virtue that accords with the Constant Mean’.”

For instance, the five virtues comprising *ren* are means between extremes in the following ways (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 40):

Too little	Right amount (virtues)	Too much
Frivolous	Serious	Sombre
Stingy	Generous	Profligate
Insincere	Sincere	Reckless
Lazy	Diligent	“Workaholic”
Mean, indifferent	Kind	Indulgent

Concept of *li*

Another essential concept in Confucian ethics is *li*, which is translated as **propriety, rite, ritual, decorum, principle, and custom** (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 41).

- Confucius uses the term “*li*” to refer to many things, but he often uses it to refer to the traditional rules and practices of society (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 41; *Analects* 2:3, 3:17).
- In the *Analects*, it’s suggested that *li* (propriety) is needed for someone to become virtuous.
 - *Analects* 8:2: **“The Master said, “Respectfulness without propriety becomes laborious bustle. Caution with propriety becomes timidity. Boldness without propriety becomes insubordination; straightforwardness without propriety becomes rudeness.”**

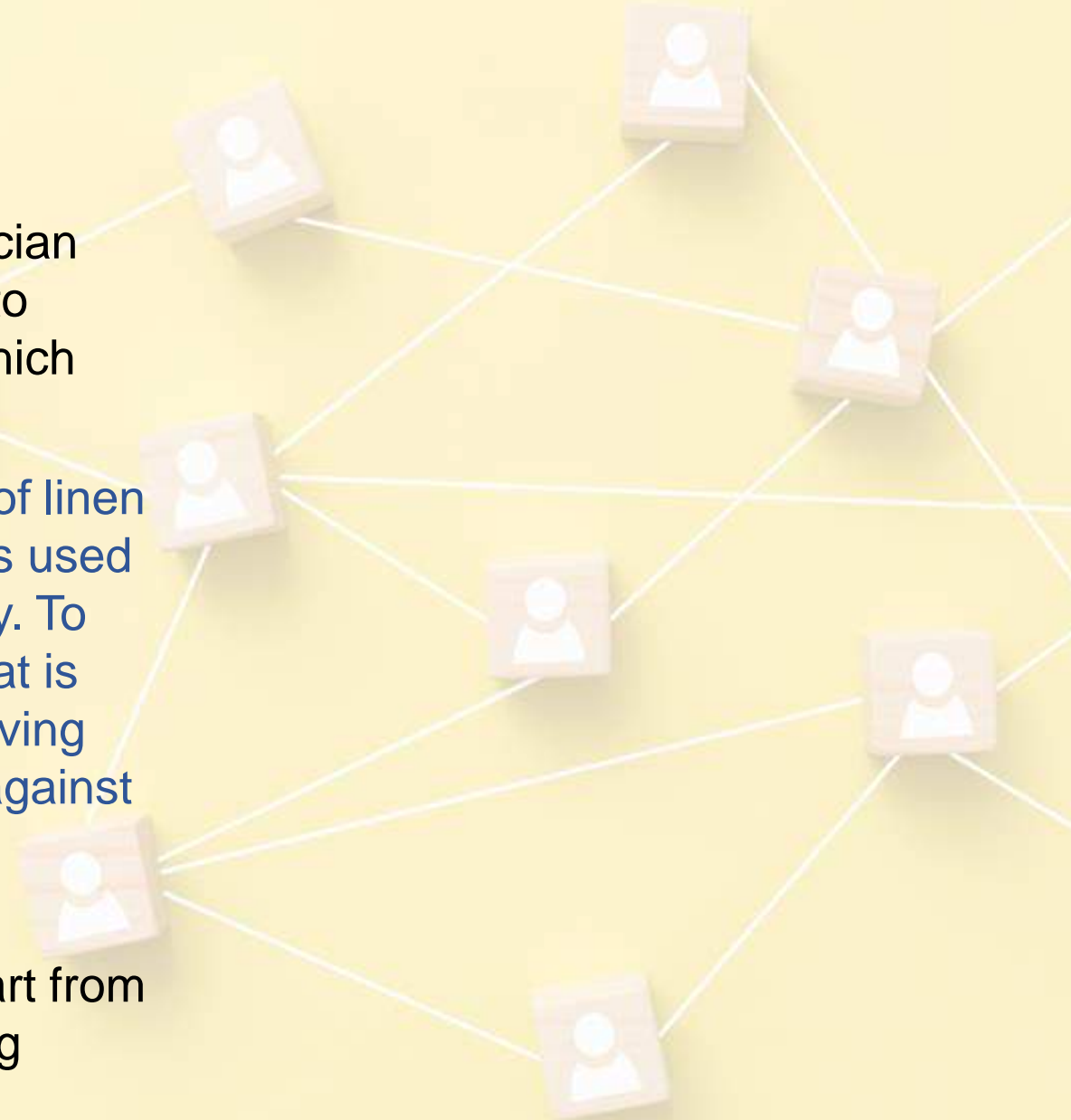


Amendments to *li*

Although the concept of *li* seems to imply that Confucian ethics is highly conservative, prescribing adherence to tradition above all, there are parts of the ***Analects*** which suggest that *li* may sometimes be amended.

- For instance: “The Master said, ‘A ceremonial cap of linen is what is prescribed by the rites. Today black silk is used instead. This is more frugal and I follow the majority. To prostrate oneself before ascending the steps is what is prescribed by the rites. Today one does so after having ascended them. This is casual and, though going against the majority, I follow the practice of doing so before ascending’” (*Analects* 9:3).

The passage suggests that while we should not depart from *li* lightly, we can do so when there are strong justifying reasons.



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Slide 23: Fizkes (n.d.). Perfect choice for everyone. Close up of multiethnic men and women hands raised in thumbs up gesture approving recommending best contract or loan terms conditions, qualified goods service assistance [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images.

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Topic 04: What a Virtuous Person Would Want

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Virtuous Person

- According to Confucius, a virtuous person (“superior person”) desires to be virtuous and do what is right for its own sake (*Analects* 2.3; 4:2; 4:11; 4.16; 16:10).
- These passages are telling:



ren

“The virtuous are at ease with virtue [*ren*]; the wise desire virtue” (*Analects* 4:2).



yi

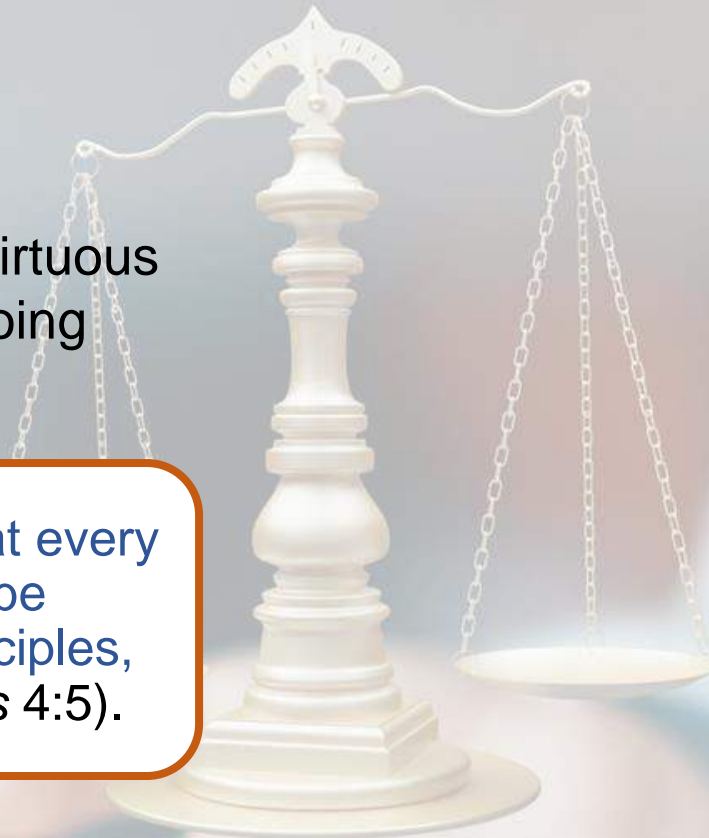
“The superior person’s mind is conversant with righteousness [*yi*]; the inferior person’s mind is conversant with gain” (*Analects* 4:16).

Being Virtuous

Moreover, Confucius asserts that a virtuous person holds acting virtuously and doing right above all else:

“Poverty and humble stations are what every person dislikes. However, if they can be avoided only in violation of moral principles, they should not be avoided” (*Analects* 4:5).

“People of knowledge and humanity [*ren*] may accept death in order to realize humanity [*ren*] but will not seek life at the price of humanity [*ren*]” (*Analects* 15:9).



Why be Virtuous?

- Is there any good reason to be virtuous?
 - Virtue ethicists: We have good reason to attain the virtues because they enable us to attain that which is morally good.
- But what is morally good?
 - Confucius: To be fully human (Yong 2010).



Benefits of Being Virtuous

That said, Confucius recognises various benefits of being virtuous that come to the virtuous person.

- In Book 17 of the Analects, we find the following passage:
 - “Confucius said: ‘To be able to practice five things everywhere under Heaven, constitutes perfect virtue...Seriousness, generosity, sincerity, diligence, and kindness. If you’re serious, you won’t be treated with disrespect. If you’re generous, you’ll win all hearts. If you’re sincere, you’ll be trusted. If you’re diligent, you’ll accomplish much. If you’re kind, you’ll enjoy the service of others.’”
(*Analects* 17:6)
- These benefits could also be considered good reasons to be virtuous.



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Topic 05: The Ethic of Ubuntu

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What is Ubuntu?

Another main idea we'll learn about is the ethic of **ubuntu**.

- “Ubuntu” is a word in Zulu and Xhosa—two southern African languages (Bell & Metz 2011: 79; Metz 2019).
- “Ubuntu” translates literally to “humanness” in English.
- Although the word “ubuntu” is used mainly by people in southern Africa, the moral concept expressed by the word is widely endorsed in societies throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Bell & Metz 2011: 79).



How to Attain Ubuntu?

- Conceptually, to have ubuntu is “to be a person who is living a genuinely human way of life, whereas to lack ubuntu is to be missing human excellence” (Metz 2019).
- One attains ubuntu by developing communal relationships with others (Ibid.).
- According to Thaddeus Metz, communal relationships are developed in two ways (Ibid.):

Identifying with others

Exhibiting solidarity with others



How to Attain Ubuntu?

- The South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose has developed a moral philosophy based on the concept of **ubuntu**.
- Ramose suggests that many Africans consider it to be one's moral duty to have ubuntu.
 - If one lacks ubuntu - that is, if one fails to identify with and exhibit solidarity with others, then they lack a valuable aspect of a fully human life (Metz 2019).

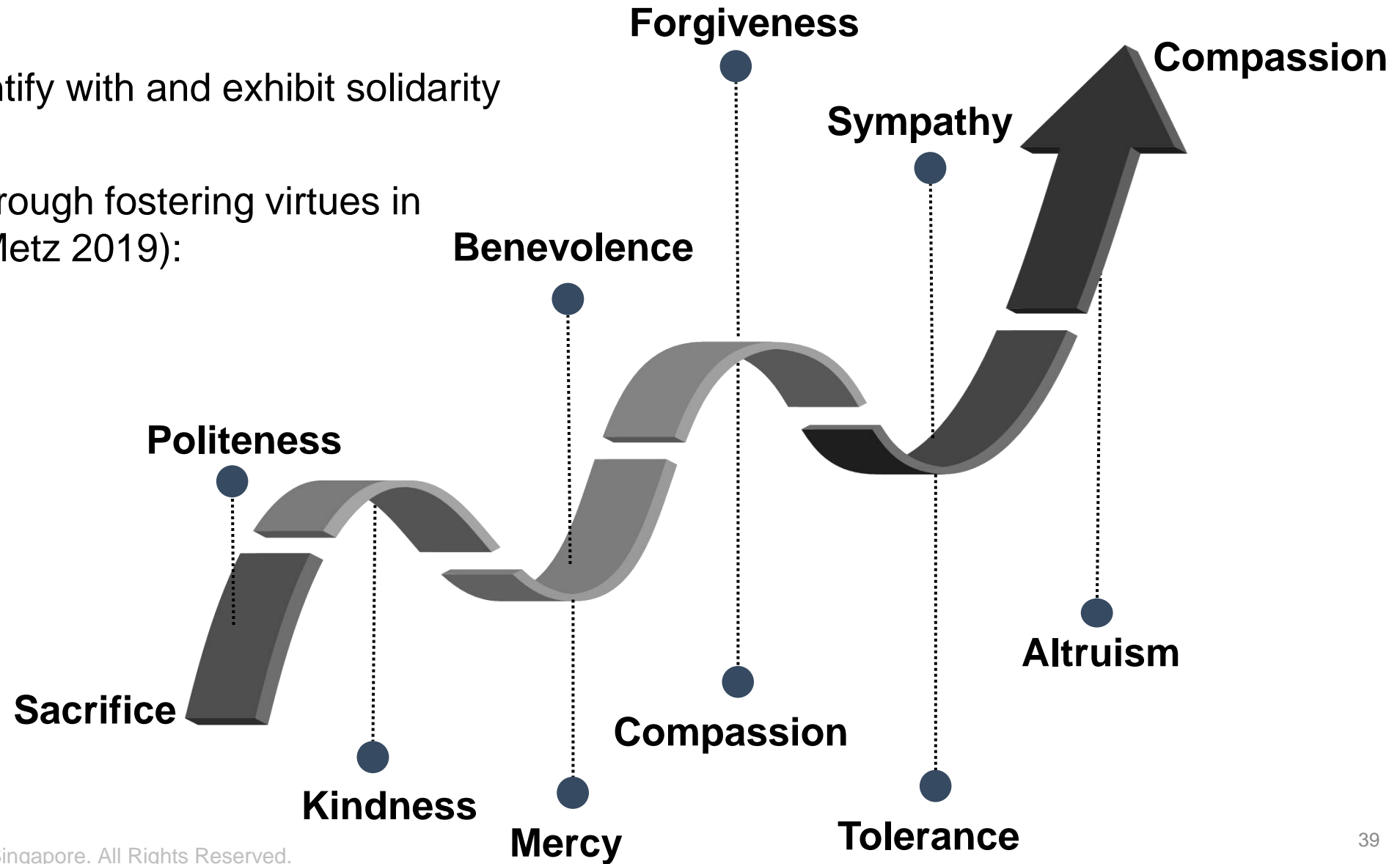


Mogobe Ramose



Solidarity With Others

- How does one identify with and exhibit solidarity with others?
- This is achieved through fostering virtues in oneself, such as (Metz 2019):



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Topic 06: Partiality in Confucian Ethics and Ubuntu

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Partiality in Moral Conduct

- Both Confucian ethics and ubuntu ethics allow for a degree of partiality in our moral conduct.
- In their comparison of Confucian ethics and ubuntu ethics, the philosophers Daniel A. Bell and Thaddeus Metz highlight partiality as one major commonality between these two traditions (Bell & Metz 2011: 88-90):

“Both Confucianism and Ubuntu defend the value of partiality: our ethical obligations, at least with regard to beneficence, are strongest to those with whom we have personal relationships, and they diminish in intensity the farther we go from those relationships. We do have an obligation to extend love beyond intimates, but there is not the expectation that the same degree of emotions and responsibilities will extend to strangers” (Bell & Metz 2011: 88).

Duties to Parents

In Confucius's philosophy, we find claims of strong duties to one's parents. For example:

“Filial piety and fraternal submission are the root of benevolence [*ren*]” (*Analects* 1:2).

“Meng...asked what filial piety was...The Master replied, ‘Parents, when alive, should be served according to propriety. When dead, they should be buried according to propriety...’” (*Analects* 2:5).



African Slogans for Family

Bell and Metz note that in many African societies, people approve of slogans like “Family first” and “Charity begins at home” (Bell & Metz 2011: 89).

In some traditional African societies, it's even regarded as theft to eat the best parts of an animal's meat, without first offering them to one's relatives (Ibid.)



Pros of Partiality

Should we accept these moral stances on partiality toward one's own parents and family?

- One reason in favour of being partial toward your family is that they gave special care to you in the past. Therefore, you have a moral obligation to give special care to them in return (Bell & Metz 2011: 88).
- In contrast, you don't have a moral obligation to give special care to people who didn't give you such care in the past.
- Note: This argument suggests you wouldn't have a moral obligation to give special care to someone who didn't give you similar care, even if they were a parent or family member.

Cons of Partiality

- On the other hand, partiality may be immoral if taken to such an extreme that it exposes others to harm.
- For instance, many commentators find this passage from Confucius's *Analects* highly problematic:

“The Duke of She told Confucius, ‘Some of us are upright. If our father had stolen a sheep, we'd bear witness to it.’ Confucius said, ‘In my country the upright are different. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this.’” (*Analects* 13:18).
- Here, Confucius seems to telling us to cover up the crimes of our parents. But don't we have moral duties to the victims of our parents' crimes, even though they may be strangers to us?

Discussion Question 3

- Do you think there should be a limit to partiality? For instance, are there some things you should not be willing to do to help and care for your own family, because other people's interests are at stake?
- Can you find within Confucian ethics and ubuntu ethics any rationale for limiting how partial you are toward your own family or community?



Acknowledgements:

Slide 9: Ink drop (n.d.). Employee recruitment concept with claw picking a new team member. [3D Rendering] Adobe Stock Images.
<https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/employee-recruitment-concept-with-claw-picking-a-new-team-member-3d-rendering/418224495>

Slide 42: Яланский, А. (n.d.). A team of workers on a blue background. The concept of personnel selection and management within the team. Dismissal and hiring people to work. Human Resource Management. Headhunting. Talented worker [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images.
<https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/a-team-of-workers-on-a-blue-background-the-concept-of-personnel-selection-and-management-within-the-team-dismissal-and-hiring-people-to-work-human-resource-management-headhunting-talented-worker/302890888>

Slide 42 - BELL, D. and METZ, T. 2011. CONFUCIANISM AND UBUNTU: REFLECTIONS ON A DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHINESE AND AFRICAN TRADITIONS. Journal of Chinese Philosophy, pp. 88 - 90.

Slide 43 and 44: Bednarek, P. (n.d.). Happy family together, parents with their little baby at sunset [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images.
<https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/happy-family-together-parents-with-their-little-baby-at-sunset/81356083>

Slide 43: Confucius and Lau, D. 1979. The analects [of] Confucius. London: Penguin.

Slide 44 and 45: BELL, D. and METZ, T. 2011. CONFUCIANISM AND UBUNTU: REFLECTIONS ON A DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHINESE AND AFRICAN TRADITIONS. Journal of Chinese Philosophy, pp. 88 - 89.

Slide 46: Confucius and Lau, D. 1979. The analects [of] Confucius. London: Penguin.

Slide 45 and 46: Pict rider. (n.d.). Concept de la prise de décision, avec deux gestes exprimant des opinions contraires. Une main, le pouce en l'air, donne un avis favorable, une autre le pouce pointé vers le bas, s'y oppose. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images.
<https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/concept-de-la-prise-de-decision-avec-deux-gestes-exprimant-des-opinions-contraires-une-main-le-pouce-en-l'air-donne-un-avis-favorable-une-autre-le-pouce-pointe-vers-le-bas-s'y-oppose/258049847>

Slide 47: Sosiukin (n.d.). Just a lot of question marks on colored papers. vintage background [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images.
<https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/just-a-lot-of-question-marks-on-colored-papers-vintage-background/334683814>

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