## 1. Characteristics of Chinese Ethics: Practical Focus and Closeness to Pre-theoretical Experience

In the *Analects* 13.18, the Governor of She tells Confucius of a Straight Body who reported his father to the authorities for stealing a sheep. Confucius (Kongzi, best known in the West under his latinized name, lived in the 6th and 5th century B.C.E) replies that in his village, uprightness lies in fathers and sons covering up for each other. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates encounters Euthyphro (whose name can be translated as "Straight thinker"), reputed for his religious knowledge and on his way to bring charges against his father for murder. The conversation between Socrates and Euthyphro leads to a theoretical inquiry in which various proposed answers as to piety's *ousia* (essence) are probed and ultimately found unsatisfactory, but in which no answer to the piety or impiety of Euthyphro's action is given. The contrast between these two stories highlights one of the distinctive features of Chinese ethics in general: its respect for the practical problem. The practical problem discussed by Confucius and Socrates is arguably a universal one: the conflict between loyalty owed to a family member and duty to uphold public justice within the larger community. Confucius's response is one dimension of a characteristically Chinese respect for the practical problem. The nature of the problem demands a practical response. However, another dimension of a *reflective* respect for the practical problem is to maintain a certain humility in the face of a really hard problem. It is to be skeptical that highly abstract theories will provide a response that is true to the complexities of that problem. A tradition exemplifying such respect will contain influential works that will not pretend to have resolved recurring tensions within the moral life such as those identified in the *Analects* and the *Euthyphro*.

Confucius gives an immediate practical answer in 13.18, but the reader and commentators have been left to weave together the various remarks about filiality (or as it is often called, "filial piety") so as to present a rationale for that answer. These remarks quite often concern rather particular matters, as is the matter of turning in one's father for stealing a sheep, and the implications for more general issues are ambiguous. Do fathers and sons cover up for each other on all occasions, no matter how serious, and if there is a cover-up, is there also an attempt to compensate the victim of the wrongdoing? The particularity of these passages is tied up with the emphasis on praxis. What is sought and what is discussed is often the answer to a particular practical problem, and the resulting particularity of the remarks invites multiple interpretations. The sayings often are presented as emerging from conversations between Confucius and his students or various personages with official positions, or among Confucius's students. One passage (11.22) portrays Confucius as having tailored his advice according to the character of the particular student: he urges one student to ask father and elder brother for advice before practicing something he has learnt, while he urges the other to immediately practice; the reason is that the first has so much energy that he needs to be kept back, while the second

is retiring and needs to be urged forward. With this passage in mind, we might then wonder whether the apparent tension between remarks made in connection with a concept is to be understood in terms of the differences between the individuals addressed or other aspects of the conversational context.

All texts that have become canonical within a tradition, of course, are subject to multiple interpretations, but Chinese texts invite them. They invite them by articulating themes that stay relatively close to the pre-theoretical experience that gives rise to the practical problems of moral life (see Kupperman 1999 on the role of experience in Chinese philosophy). The pre-theoretical is not experience that is a pure given or unconceptualized, nor is it necessarily experience that is universal in its significance and intelligibility across different traditions of thought and culture. This attention to pre-theoretical experience also leads to differences in format and discursive form: dialogues and stories are more suited for appealing to and evoking the kind of pre-theoretical experience that inspires parts of the text. By contrast, much Western philosophy has gone with Plato in taking the route of increasing abstraction from pre-theoretical experience.

The contrast is not meant to imply that Chinese philosophy fails to give rise to theoretical reflection. Theoretical reflection of great significance arises in the *Mozi*, *Mencius*, *Hanfeizi*, *Xunzi*, and *Zhuangzi*, but there is more frequent interplay between the theorizing and references to pre-theoretical experience. In Chinese texts there are suggestions for theorizing about this experience, but the suggestions often indicate several different and fruitful directions for theorizing to go further. These directions may seem incompatible, and they may or may not be so in the end, but the tensions between these directions are real. The result is a fruitful ambiguity that poses a *problematic*. Pre-theoretical experience poses a practical problem. Apparently incompatible solutions to problems are partially theorized in the text, but the apparent incompatibility is not removed. Much of the value of these texts lies in their leaving the tensions in place with enough theory given to stimulate thinking within a certain broadly defined approach. There is more than enough for the sophisticated theorist to try to interpret or to reconstruct a more defined position as an extension of that broadly defined approach. At the same time, the problematic is partly framed with the language of pre-theoretical experience in the form of dialogue and story, making the texts accessible to a much broader range of readers than is usually the case with philosophy texts. The following sections present some of the major kinds of problematic that appear in the major schools of Chinese ethical thought.

## 2. Confucian Ethics

### 2.1 Virtue ethics: the *dao*, the *junzi*, and *ren*

A common way to understand Confucian ethics is that it is a virtue ethic. For some scholars this will be an obvious, uncontroversial truth. For others, it is a misconstrual that

imposes contentious Western assumptions on Confucianism about what it is to be a person and what an ethics should be about. In light of this controversy, it is important to specify the sense in which it is relatively uncontroversial to claim that virtues constitute a major focus of attention in these texts. Virtues in the relevant sense are qualities or traits that persons could have and that are appropriate objects of aspiration to realize. These virtues go into the conception of an ideal of a kind of person that one aspires to be. Given this rather broad sense of "virtue," it is unobjectionable to say that Confucian texts discuss ethics primarily in terms of virtues and corresponding ideals of the person.

What makes the characterization of Confucianism as a virtue ethic controversial are more specific, narrower senses of "virtue" employed in Western philosophical theories. Tiwald (2018) distinguishes between something like the broad sense of virtue and a philosophical usage that confers on qualities or traits of character explanatory priority over right action and promoting good consequences. Virtue ethics in this sense is a competitor to rule deontological and consequentialist theories. There simply is not enough discussion in the Confucian texts, especially in the classical period, that is addressed to the kind of questions these Western theories seek to answer.

There are other narrower senses of "virtue" that are clearly mischaracterizations when applied to Confucian ethics. Virtues might be supposed to be qualities that people have or can have in isolation from others with whom they interact or from their communities, societies, or culture. Such atomistic virtues could make up ideals of the person that in turn can be specified or realized in social isolation. Further, virtues might be supposed to be identifiable through generalizations that hold true in every case, such that the ways these traits are concretely manifested in conduct do not vary across context or situation. Prominent and influential critics of the "virtue" characterization of Confucian ethics--Roger Ames (2011, 2021) and Robert Neville (2016)--seem to be supposing that the term is loaded with such controversial presuppositions.

As will become clear in subsequent discussion here, one can employ virtue language with the appropriate qualifiers and at the same time acknowledge much of what the critics claim as insights of Confucian ethics: e.g., that the process of realizing the virtues characteristically takes place in relationship to others--those to whom one has responsibilities as a son or daughter or mother or father, for example--and that it can be part of one's very identity to be a particular person's son or daughter, mother or father. It is part of the Confucian vision of a life befitting human beings that it is a life of relationships marked by mutual care and respect, that one achieves fullest personhood that way. One achieves this in a manner that is particular to one's circumstances, including the particular others with whom one most interacts. None of this is inconsistent with virtue characterizations in the broad sense (for an alternative role-ethic characterization of Confucian ethics that incorporates these insights in a different way, see Ames, 2011, 2021).

The most frequently discussed ideal is that of the *junzi*. The Chinese word originally meant "prince's son," but in the *Analects* it refers to *ethical* nobility. The first English translations rendered it as "gentleman," but Ames and Rosemont (1998) have usefully suggested "exemplary person." Among the traits connected to ethical nobility are filiality, a respect for and dedication to the performance of traditional ritual forms of conduct, and the ability to judge what the right thing to do is in the given situation. These traits are virtues in the sense that they are necessary for following the *dao*, the way human beings ought to live their lives. As Yu (2007) points out, the *dao* plays the kind of role in ancient Chinese ethics that is analogous to the role played by *eudaimonia* or flourishing, in ancient Greek ethics. The *junzi* is the ethical exemplar with the virtues making it possible to follow the *dao*.

Besides the concepts of *dao* and *junzi*, the concept of *ren* is a unifying theme in the *Analects*. Before Confucius's time, the concept of *ren* referred to the aristocracy of bloodlines, meaning something like the strong and handsome appearance of an aristocrat. But in the *Analects* the concept is of a moral excellence that anyone has the potential to achieve. Various translations have been given of *ren*. Many translations attempt to convey the idea of complete ethical virtue, connoting a comprehensive state of ethical excellence. In a number of places in the *Analects* the *ren* person is treated as equivalent to the *junzi*, indicating that *ren* has the meaning of complete or comprehensive moral excellence, lacking no particular virtue but having them all. However, *ren* in some places in the *Analects* is treated as one virtue among others such as wisdom and courage. In the narrower sense of being one virtue among others, it is explained in 12.22 in terms of caring for others. It is in light of these passages that other translators, such as D.C. Lau, 1970a, use 'benevolence' to translate *ren*. However, others have tried to more explicitly convey the sense of '*ren*' in the comprehensive sense of all-encompassing moral virtue through use of the translation 'Good' or 'Goodness' (see Waley, 1938, 1989; Slingerland, 2003). It is possible that the sense of *ren* as particular virtue and the sense of comprehensive excellence are related in that attitudes such as care and respect for others may be a pervasive aspect of different forms of moral excellence, e.g., such attitudes may be expressed in ritual performance, as discussed below, or in right or appropriate action according to the context. But this suggestion is speculative, and because the very nature of *ren* remains so elusive, it shall be here referred to simply as'*ren*'.

Why is the central virtue discussed in such an elusive fashion in the *Analects*? The answer may lie in the role that pre-theoretical experience plays in Chinese philosophy. Tan (2005) has pointed to the number and vividness of the persons in the *Analects* who serve as moral exemplars. She suggests that the text invites us to exercise our imaginations in envisioning what these people might have been like and what we ourselves might become in trying to emulate them. Use of the imagination, she points out, draws our attention to the particularities of virtue and engages our emotions and desires. Amy Olberding (2008,

2012) develops the notion of exemplarism into a Confucian epistemology, according to which we get much of our important knowledge by encountering the relevant objects or persons. Upon initial contact, we may have little general knowledge of the qualities that make them so compelling to us, but we are motivated to further investigate. Confucius treated as exemplars legendary figures from the early days of the Zhou dynasty, such as the Duke of Zhou and Kings Wu and Wen. Confucius served as an exemplar to his students, perhaps of the virtue of *ren*, though he never claimed the virtue for himself. Book Ten of the *Analects* displays what might appear to be an obsessive concern with the way Confucius greeted persons in everyday life, e.g., if he saw they were dressed in mourning dress, he would take on a solemn appearance or lean forward on the stanchion of his carriage. Such concern becomes much more comprehensible if Confucius is being treated as an exemplar of virtue from which the students are trying to learn. The focus of Book Ten and elsewhere in the *Analects* also suggests that the primary locus of virtue is to be found in how people treat each other in the fabric of everyday life and not in the dramatic moral dilemmas so much discussed in contemporary Western moral philosophy.

## 2.2 The centrality of *li* or ritual

*Analects* 1.15 likens the project of cultivating one's character to crafting something fine from raw material: cutting bone, carving a piece of horn, polishing or grinding a piece of jade. The chapter also stresses the importance of *li* (the rites, ritual) in this project. In the *Analects* ritual ranges quite widely to include ceremonies of ancestor worship, the burial of parents, and customs governing respectful and appropriate behavior within the family and with friends, in everyday interactions with others in one's village, and protocols for officials performing their duties within the court.

Ritual is an exemplification of the saying that the personal is the political. It is personal in the sense that engaging in ritual, learning to perform it properly and with the right attitudes of respect and consideration while performing it, is to engage in a kind of cutting and carving and polishing and grinding of the self. One of the most distinctive marks of Confucian ethics is the centrality of ritual performance in the ethical cultivation of character. For example, while Aristotelian habituation generally corresponds to the Confucian *cultivation* of character, there is no comparable emphasis in Aristotle on the role of ritual performance in this process of character transformation. Ritual is also political in the sense that the right governance of a society is thought to be founded upon the appropriate conduct of relationships at all levels in a society, starting with family relationships as the foundation. As Olberding puts it, the term *li* covers both good manners and political civility because the Confucians did not distinguish between them: "both require interpreting situations and steering conduct to communicate respect, consideration, and toleration. Success in both will likewise often depend on developed disposition, on prior patterning that renders me more prone to one kind of response than another" (2019, 28).

It is clear that in the *Analects* any complete description of self-cultivation must include a role for the culturally established customs that spell out what it means to express respect for another person in various social contexts. Just how that role is conceived, however, is one of the central interpretive puzzles concerning the *Analects*. The interpretive question of *how li* is central to self-cultivation is posed in particular about its relation to the chief virtue of *ren*. In the *Analects* 3.3 the Master said, "A man who is not *ren*—what has he to do with ritual?" The implication is that ritual is a means of cultivating and expressing a *ren* that is already there, at least in a raw or unrefined state. This implication about the role of ritual is consistent with passages of the *Analects* in which Confucius shows flexibility on the question of whether to follow established ritual practice. 9.3 shows him accepting the contemporary practice of wearing a cheaper silk ceremonial cap rather than the traditional linen cap. 9.3 also shows Confucius rejecting the contemporary practice of bowing after one ascends the stairs leading up to the ruler's dais, and maintaining the traditional practice of bowing before one ascends the stairs. The implication is that the contemporary practice expresses the wrong attitude toward the ruler—presumptuousness in assuming permission to ascend. 9.3 suggests that it is something like the right attitude that is cultivated and expressed by ritual. Kwong-loi Shun (1993) has called this kind of understanding of ritual the "instrumental" interpretation.

However, in other places of the *Analects*, ritual seems to take on a more central role in the achievement of *ren*. Indeed, it seems to be presented as the *key*. A very common translation of 12.1 has Confucius telling his favorite student Yan Hui that "Restraining yourself and returning to the rites constitutes *ren*. If for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to the rites, in this way you could lead the entire world back to *ren*. The key to achieving *ren* lies within yourself—how could it come from others?" (translation from Slingerland, 2003, though see Li, 2007, for a different translation of the word *wei* usually translated as 'constitutes', with different implications for the question of the relation between *li* and *ren*). Such passages have given rise to the "definitionalist" interpretation, as Shun calls it, which makes *li* definitive of the whole of *ren*. Obviously the instrumental and definitional interpretations cannot both be true.

One possibility for resolving this tension is to construe Confucius' remarks as directed towards a particular student and informed by his conception of what sort of advice that student needs to hear given his strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps Confucius believes that Yan Hui should be focusing on disciplining himself through observing the rites, but his advice should not be be taken as an intended generalization about the relationship between *ren* and *li*. Perhaps the remarks that suggest more of an instrumentalist construal of the relationship are similarly context and audience bound. Such interpretation, of course, leaves open the question of what that relationship is, or indeed, whether Confucius ever had in mind a generalization about the relationship that informed his remarks.

Some have argued that such serious conflicts within the text constitute reasons for thinking that the *Analects* is an accretive text, i.e., composed of layers added at different times by different people with conflicting views. To some extent, viewing the *Analects* as accretive is nothing new, but Bruce and A. Takeo Brooks (1998, 2000) have taken that view very far by identifying Book 4 (and only part of it, for that matter) as the most reflective of the historical Kongzi's views, and the other books as stemming from Confucius's students and members of his family. The different books, and, sometimes, individual passages within the books, represent different time periods, people, with different agendas who are responding to different conditions, and often putting forward incompatible strands of Confucianism. The Brooks suggest that the parts of the *Analects* most directly associated with the historical Confucius and his disciples are the parts that feature *ren* as the pre-eminent virtue and that de-emphasize the role of ritual. The parts that are due to another trend in Confucianism, headed by Confucius's descendants, are the parts that elevate ritual as the key to *ren*. The Brooks's theory of the *Analects* has drawn appreciation and disagreement (e.g., see Slingerland, 2000 for both). It threatens to dislodge the assumption that underlies the dominant mode of interpreting the *Analects*, which is that the text, or most of it, reflects the coherent thought of one person.

Tao Jiang (2022) distinguishes between the sinological approach of the kind done by the Brooks and the approach of philosophers that focuses on the "influential received text" which presents to the reader a "textual author," e.g., a Confucius, to whom authorial intent is attributed through the sayings and ideas in the text. The philosopher investigates this textual object as part of a lengthy and highly influential philosophical and cultural tradition that often deploys texts to address problems of contemporary concern.

A third approach, different from though in some respects simiar to the second, is to acknowledge the real possibility that different sets of passages are the products of different thinkers, but also to hold that these different thinkers might have employed different but philosophically substantial perspectives on common problems. One of those problems might indeed have been the relation between *ren* and *li*, and at least part of the explanation of why different and potentially conflicting things are said about that relation is that the relation is a difficult one to figure out and that different thinkers addressing that common problem might reasonably have arrived at different things to say. Whether these different things are ultimately irreconcilable remains an open question. This third approach merges with the second if one is open to the possibility that the "textual author" could be conceived as being of more than one mind as to how to solve the problem in question. This, after all, is a plausible thing to say about some philosophers of whom we are pretty sure that they were the single authors of the texts under study. One might take a constructive attitude to the different possible solutions, ask what good philosophical reasons could motivate the different approaches, and determine whether there is a way of

reconciling what all the good reasons entail. If not, one can ask what might be the best solution, all things considered.

Kwong-loi Shun's approach to the *ren* and *li* is compatible with the third approach. Shun holds that on the one hand, a particular set of ritual forms are the conventions that a community has evolved, and without such forms attitudes such as respect or reverence cannot be made intelligible or expressed (reasons in favor of the definitionalist interpretation). In this sense, *li* constitutes *ren* within or for a given community. On the other hand, different communities may have different conventions that express respect or reverence, and moreover any given community may revise its conventions in piecemeal though not wholesale fashion (reasons in favor of the instrumentalist interpretation).

Chenyang Li (2007) proposes a different approach based on a different reading of the word '*wei*' used in 12.1 and often translated as 'constitutes' to render the crucial line, "Restraining yourself and returning to the rites constitutes *ren*." Li notes that a common meaning of the word is 'make' or 'result in.' The relation between *li* and *ren* need not be construed as either definitional or constitutive, nor need it be construed as purely instrumental. Li proposes that *li* functions something like a cultural grammar where *ren* is like mastery of the culture. Mastery of a language entails mastery of its grammar but not *vice versa*.

Both Shun and Li are striving to capture a way in which *ren* does not reduce to *li* but also a way in which *li* is more than purely instrumental to the realization of *ren*. There are good philosophical reasons for this move. Consider the reasons for resisting the reduction of *ren* to *li*. As indicated above, 9.3 suggests that the attitudes of respect and reverence that are expressed by ritual forms are not reducible to any particular set of such forms, and Shun has a point in arguing that such attitudes could be expressed by different sets of such forms as established by different communities. In studying the cultures of other communities, we recognize that certain customs are meant to signify respect, even if we do not share these customs, just as we recognize that something that does not signify disrespect in our culture does indeed so signify in another culture. The fact that we can distinguish the attitude from the ritual forms that we use to express them allows us to consider alternative ritual forms that could express the same or similar attitude. Ceremonial caps that are made of more economical material are acceptable, perhaps, because wearing such caps do not affect the spirit of the ceremony. By contrast, bowing after one ascends the stairs constitutes an unacceptable change in attitude. To maintain that particular ritual forms do not *define* the respect and reverence they are intended to express is not to underestimate their importance for cultivating and strengthening these attitudes. Acting in ways that express respect given the conventionally established meanings of accepted ritual forms helps to strengthen the agent's disposition to have respect. The ethical development of character does involve strengthening some emotional dispositions over others, and we

strengthen dispositions by acting on them. By providing conventionally established, symbolic ways to express respect for others, ritual forms give participants ways to act on and therefore to strengthen the right dispositions. The cultivating function of observing ritual highlights the distinctive practical focus of Confucian ethics. It is every bit as concerned with *how* to acquire the right sort of character as it is with what the right sort is.

On the other hand, there is good reason to resist the reduction of *li* simply to the role of expressing and cultivating a set of attitudes and emotional dispositions. In his influential interpretation (1972) of the *Analects*, Herbert Fingarette construes ritual performance as an end in itself, as beautiful and dignified, open and shared participation in ceremonies that celebrate human community. Ritual performance, internalized so that it becomes second nature, such that it is gracefully and spontaneously performed, is a crucial constituent of a fully realized human life. There are nonconventional dimensions of what it is to show respect, such as providing food for one's parents (see *Analects* 2.7), but the particular way the agent does this will be deeply influenced by custom. Indeed, custom specifies what is a respectful way of serving food. On the Confucian view, doing so in a graceful and whole-hearted fashion as spelled out by the customs of one's community is part of what it is to live a fully human life.

Ritual constitutes an important part of what *ren* is, and hence it is not merely an instrument for refining the substance of *ren*. At the same time it is not the whole of *ren*. Consider that part of *ren* that involves attitudinal dispositions. Attitude is not reducible to ritual form even if acting on that form can cultivate and sustain attitude. Moreover, 7.30 emphasizes the connection between desire for *ren* and its achievement ("If I simply desire *ren*, I find that it is already there"). The achievement of *ren* is of course a difficult and long journey, and so 7.30 implies that coming to truly desire it lies at the heart of that achievement. The multifaceted nature of *ren* emerges in Book 12, where Confucius is portrayed as giving different descriptions of *ren*. In 12.1, as already noted, he says that ritual makes for *ren*. But then in 12.2, he says that *ren* involves comporting oneself in public as if one were receiving an important guest and in the management of the common people behaving as if one were overseeing a great sacrifice (the duty to be respectful toward others). 12.2 also associates *ren* with *shu* or "sympathetic understanding," not imposing on others what you yourself do not desire. Here the emphasis is not so much on ritual or not exclusively anyway, but on the attitudes one displays toward others, and on the ability to understand what others want or do not want based on projecting oneself into their situation. In 12.3, when asked about *ren*, Confucius says that *ren* people are hesitant to speak (suggesting that such people take extreme care not to have their words exceed their actions). And then in 12.22, when asked about *ren*, Confucius says that it is to care for people. Such diverse characterizations are appropriate if *ren* is complete ethical virtue or comprehensive excellence that includes many dimensions, including but not reducing to the kinds of excellence associated with *li*.