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Confucian Ideals

What is the Confucian ideal for individual and political life? How do we become the kind of people who live well? What does a good ruler look like and what role do laws play in good government? Is this a good way to think about societal structure? Why or why not?

Confucianism describes its ideal society by defining how relationships with differences in power should work. One common theme for personal interaction throughout Confucianism can be explained through the relationship between a father and his son. Because a father is the elder, the son is expected to respect the wisdom that the father has gained over time. This means that the son should learn as much as possible from the father and have an innate trust of his judgement. In return, the father should seek to pass on as much of his knowledge as possible in addition to nurturing the son. Over time, the relationship between father and son should become more mutual, with the father explaining the reason for his teachings. Similarly, other individual relationships should follow the form of the relationship between father and son. An elder commands more respect than a novice, however the novice is expected to learn as much as possible so that they may too become an elder—and complete the cycle.

In Confucianism, being a well-rounded person is essential to becoming the person that leads an ideal lifestyle, Junzi. The two core concepts that are involved with well-roundedness are Ren and Li. Ren is—in the simplest terms—being a good human being. The ideal person should take the utmost care of his community and encourage the best behavior in themselves and the people in their life. Li are the traditions that create and maintain a well-functioning society, such

as the Confucian relationship ideals. Aside from Ren and Li, Confucianism also holds that people who seek to become Junzi should be well-educated in all core subjects, in addition to having “street smarts”.

In a Confucian society, one person (the Emperor) leads the rest of the population. The relationship between the Emperor and his subjects once again follows the relationship between a father and his son. This brings with it the expectation that the Emperor will provide for his nation in exchange for their respect. Confucianism advocates for the fewest possible laws, on the basis that laws teach people to avoid the prohibited behavior because of the punishment, not because said behavior is unethical. The Emperor is expected to exemplify morality and honesty, so that the citizens attain intrinsic model behavior in the wake of their leader's.

As a whole, I believe that the basics of Confucian societal structure are still relevant today. Given my young age, there has been many times where I have been the novice. I have come to realize that it is important to absorb as much knowledge as possible in the face of someone more experienced than you. Although it can be frustrating at times, being humble is a skill that I think is necessary to be able to build on the wisdom of those who came before you. However, you also need to develop the ability to apply your own judgement to a situation. There are times when an elder can be wrong, and I think this is where Confucian relationship ideals fail. Too much blind following under the guise of respect can stifle creativity and promotes the phrase “but we’ve always done it this way”.

Although I agree with the Confucian ideas on law, I do not think that it is possible in a normal society. We (as a society) would hope that people act virtuously because they're intrinsically motivated by a desire to promote an ideal society. In contrast, I believe that everyone is slightly selfish and will disregard ethical behavior unless it has a direct impact on

them (e.g. anti-mask wearers who switch sides after a family member dies from COVID-19).

Because of this unfortunate characteristic, extrinsic motivators are still needed to enforce a minimum standard of conduct in a modern society.