Chapter 2

Confucius (Kongzi) in the *Analects*

Introduction

In the Western world, Confucius (551–479 BCE) is generally regarded as the founder of the moral and political philosophy known as *Confucianism*. The connotation is that this philosophy is *his* philosophy. The name "Confucianism" is less commonly used in China. In the Chinese tradition, Confucius is seen as the pioneering leader of a school of intellectuals known as "*Ru*-ists (*ru-jia*)." *Ru*-ism is the product of joint efforts by early "Confucians" including Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, and the author (or authors) of two classics: the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Great Learning*. *Yijing* is also standardly taken to be a foundational text for *Ru*-ism. Confucius himself did not write any systematic philosophical work. His thought is mostly preserved in the collection of his remarks (the *Analects*), supposedly recorded by his students. Some other philosophical documents were historically attributed to Confucius (such as the *Commentary on Yi*). However, the exact authorship of these documents cannot be established. In this chapter, we will only deal with Confucius as portrayed in the *Analects*.

Confucius lived in a time of chaos and corruption, and he spent most of his life traveling from one nation-state to the next in an unsuccessful attempt to morally transform their rulers. His loyal students followed him in his travel so as to receive his teaching. In traditional Chinese society, the completion of education normally leads to political careers, since an intellectual's ultimate goal is to better the world. Some of Confucius' students did manage to obtain official positions and did try to put his political ideal into practice. But in a world where rulers were intent on amassing their power and expanding their territory, the chance of success for a Confucian political program was marginal. Confucius was once described by a contemporary as "the one who knows a thing

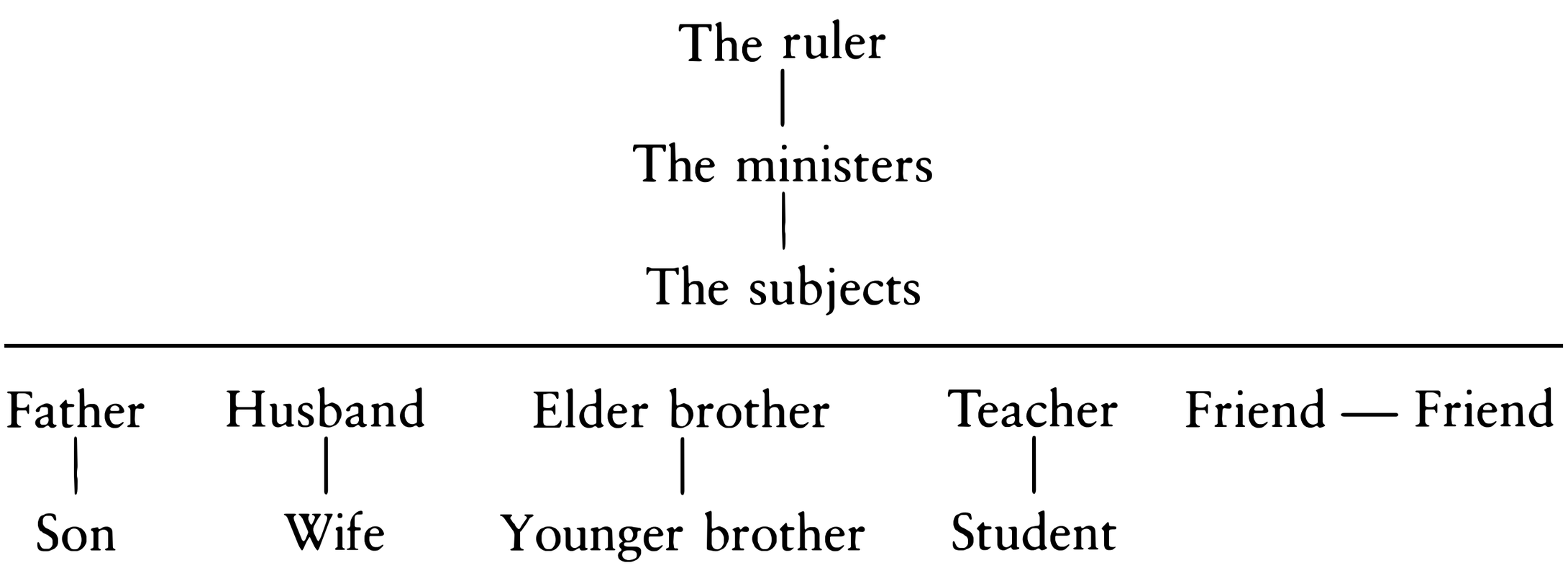
cannot be done and still wants to do it."[1] This spirit of "persevering in the good" becomes the defining character of all Confucians.

In analyzing Confucius' philosophical concepts, we need to realize that he did not take a definitional approach. As Antonio Cua remarks, "One main difficulty in understanding Confucian ethics lies in the absence of systematic exposition of its basic ideas, such as *ren* (humanity; humaneness), *li* (propriety), and *yi* (rightness)."[2] Confucius did not think that there could be a universal definition for a moral concept, which would be applicable to everyone in every situation. When students asked him to explain an ethical principle, Confucius would give an answer appropriate to each one's particular strengths, shortcomings, or personal background. Hence, we often see him giving different answers to the same question, when such questions were raised by different students, concerning the meaning of a certain ethical concept such as "filial piety." If we try to find a universal definition for a moral concept in his usage, we may end up concluding that he did not have a coherent conception. To understand his moral philosophy, we need to go beyond mere analysis of his moral concepts and look at the whole picture.

Confucius says that there is a single unifying principle linking all his moral teachings.[3] According to one of his leading students, Zengzi, this principle can be explained in terms of two key elements of Confucius' moral philosophy: one is called *zhong*, literally translated as "loyalty"; the other is called *shu*, literally "empathy."[4] Why would loyalty and empathy be regarded as the "single" thread that unifies Confucius' moral philosophy? How are the two concepts related? In this chapter, we shall see that the basis of Confucius' moral philosophy is his construction of a moral/social hierarchical structure, and that both loyalty and empathy must be understood in relation to this structure.

Moral Hierarchy and the Notion of *Zhong* (Loyalty)

The goal of Confucius' moral philosophy is to construct a moral structure for society. Within this structure, individuals are not all equal in relation to one another. This moral structure corresponds to the political hierarchy, with the emperor on the top, the ministers in the middle, and the people at the bottom. It also corresponds to the familial hierarchy of parents and children, husband and wife, and sibling relationships, as shown in the chart.



In this moral hierarchy, everyone is assigned a moral role depending on how he or she is related to others. One's moral duties are defined in terms of the roles one plays in the political/social hierarchy. For example, the duty of an emperor is to behave in a kingly fashion and to take care of the people's basic needs. A minister's duty is to assist the emperor in governing the people. The duty of an ordinary citizen is to obey the superiors. In the family, parents have a duty to love their children, while children have a duty to exemplify filial piety toward their parents. The husband's duty is to support the family, while the wife's duty is to manage household affairs. Siblings have a duty to love one another and younger siblings must respect or even obey the elder ones. Such relations can further extend to strangers: seniors should be respected by their juniors; the young should be loved and cared for by the adults. One's moral duties shift as one adopts various roles in life, of which there will always be several in accordance with one's various relationships with different people. However, there is one moral obligation that applies to all roles and all people: the virtue of *zhong* (loyalty).

"Loyalty" is generally understood to be a feeling or an attitude of devotion toward one's superior. In a political context, it is specifically defined as an allegiance to the ruler or the state. However, in the *Analects*, this notion has a broader dimension. For example, Confucius' student Zengzi says: "Everyday I examine myself on three points: whether in counseling others I have not been loyal; whether in intercourse with my friends I have not been faithful; and whether I have not repeated again and again and practiced the instructions of my teacher."[5] Being loyal and being faithful are seen as interrelated virtues and they have a significant place in Confucius' teaching. Confucius is said to teach only four things: culture, conduct, loyalty, and faithfulness.[6] He says: "[The superior person] holds loyalty and faithfulness to be the guiding principle. He would never regard his friends as inferior to himself. He would never be afraid to acknowledge and correct himself when he has made

a mistake."[7] In all these quotes we do not see "loyalty" defined as a notion suitable only for a political context. Even in a political context, "loyalty" is defined as an attitude toward a task, not toward a person. When a student asks about politics, Confucius says, "Over daily routine, do not show weariness, and when there is action to be taken, [perform with loyalty]."[8] Loyalty is not a devotion directed specifically toward one's superior; rather, it is directed toward the role one plays – being loyal means doing one's best in whatever one does. In this sense, loyalty can be defined as "doing what one is supposed to do" or "being loyal to one's role." In other words, a social role is not simply a social assignment; it is also a moral assignment. Being loyal to one's role means being able to act in accordance with whatever moral obligations come with the social role. Loyalty is thus being loyal to one's moral obligations and fulfilling the duty that one's role dictates. When asked about how to govern, Confucius replies: "Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son."[9] This is not a trivial tautology. It compares the actual social role one adopts with the ideal moral role one is supposed to exemplify, and asks everyone to act up to the latter. Being loyal to one's role in relation to others is the meaning of *zhong*.

David Nivison analyzes the notion of *zhong* as merely a relation "directed toward superior, or at most toward equals."[10] A. C. Graham has a similar interpretation of *zhong* as "especially of devoted loyalty to a ruler, but also of wholeheartedness on behalf of inferiors."[11] But this understanding only grasps one aspect of the virtue of *zhong*. Subjects should naturally show respect toward their superiors, since that is what the role of a subject commands. A ruler or a minister, however, should do their best to govern the people so as to command respect from them. Both ways of fulfilling the duty appropriate to one's role are covered under the notion of *zhong*. Confucius once discussed someone who showed no sign of delight when he was three times appointed officer and showed no sign of resentment when he was thrice removed from office. When this man was replaced by someone else, he always made sure that his successor knew how to take over his job smoothly. Confucius thinks that we may not say this person is wise (in that he does not know how to keep his job), but he does have the virtue of *zhong* (loyalty).[12] This loyalty is not targeted toward whoever appointed or dismissed him; it is directed toward his job. At the same time, one should not meddle in any job or social role which is not one's own. Confucius says: "Do not concern yourself with matters of government unless they are the responsibility of your office."[13] This notion can be compared to Socrates' notion of a just city, as expressed in Plato's *Republic*: "A city is just when everyone does his own job." When

people meddle in the affairs of others, then chaos and injustice ensue. If everyone does his own job and does it as best as he can, then the social structure will be harmonized and well ordered. As Chad Hansen puts it, it will be a "correct" structure.[14]

The "correctness" of a social structure is obtained when the name of each social role and its actuality correspond. This is what Confucius calls "the rectification of names." Confucius once said that if he were ever offered a governmental position, his first priority would be to rectify names, because,

> [i]f names are not correct, speech will not be in accordance with actuality; when speech is not in accordance with actuality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practice and music will fail to flourish; when ritual and music fail to flourish, punishment and penalties will miss the mark. And when punishment and penalties miss the mark, the people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves.[15]

It is obvious that he takes the rectification of names to be the first step toward establishing social order. Why is it so important to make *name* and *actuality* correspond with each other? Benjamin Schwartz explains this relationship between social roles and names in this way:

> Thus the language of familial and social roles – words that refer to father, ruler, son, or minister – do not refer simply to bare biological or political facts but . . . every role is the bearer of its own role-norms. The word "father" carries the implication that the father will "act like a father" as well as the assumption that the language will provide information on how to do so.[16]

In other words, the function of "names" in the Confucian language plays not just a descriptive role, but also a prescriptive role – they establish rules of conduct appropriate to each name. In such a moral language, names of social roles do not just pick out the social assignment of various roles; instead, they refer to the ideal categories of "father," "son," "ruler," "minister," etc. Once this language is imposed on human society, it regulates society's relations and its members' behavior. Therefore, the rectification of names is not about language per se; it is about action and ethics.

Using the rectification of names as a means of establishing a correct social structure, Confucius defines universal expectations for each social role. That is to say, there are some general guidelines on how to be a father or a mother, how to be a husband or a wife, how to be a brother or a sister, etc. If everyone follows these guidelines and aims to be loyal

to his or her role as a parent, as a spouse, or as a sibling, then social conflicts resulting from anyone overstepping their boundaries would disappear. The notion of *zhong*, as applied in the Confucian moral hierarchy, comprises a moral theory that focuses on moral duties or obligations, rather than on rights or entitlements. It constitutes a basic tenet of Confucianism, which is an ethics built on demands on oneself rather than on others. In contrast to the rights theory, Confucianism is a form of deontology.

Of all moral duties that Confucius advocates, the duty of filial piety is one that has penetrated Chinese culture the most. There is no fitting translation of the Chinese notion "*xiao*" other than the commonly used "filial piety," which stands for a strong sense of respect and loyalty to one's parents. Such a sense of loyalty extends beyond the parents' lifetime. Confucius says: "When a man's father is alive, look at the bent of his will. When his father is dead, look at his conduct. If for three years [of mourning] he does not change from the way of his father, he may be called filial."[17] Confucius stresses the importance of a lengthy mourning period for one's parents – three years is the proper length to mourn for one's father. If a person changes his demeanor as soon as his father has passed away, then it shows how pretentious he had been in the presence of his father. Confucius thinks that we are fully dependent on our parents for survival and nourishment at least in the first three years of our life; hence, it is only natural that after they depart from us, we should spend three years keeping them in constant regard. During our parents' lifetime, Confucius says, we should "never disobey" them. When a student asked him to explain further what he meant by this, he said: "When parents are alive, serve them according to the rules of propriety. When they die, bury them according to the rules of propriety and sacrifice to them according to the rules of propriety."[18] The first comment, "never disobey," has often been taken to mean that parents can demand absolute obedience from their children. In traditional Chinese society, this expectation did prevail among parents. However, from Confucius' elaboration of the first comment, we can see that he does not advocate blind obedience. Filial piety should be checked by "the rules of propriety." Hence, it is a moral duty bound by the role one plays as a son or a daughter, and the rules of propriety should apply to parents and children alike. If parents act *improperly*, then children should be relieved from their duty of filial piety. Confucius further emphasizes the importance of the right mental attitude with regard to filial piety. He says: "Filial piety nowadays means being able to nourish one's parents. But we nourish even those dogs and horses that we raise. If there is no feeling of reverence, wherein lies the difference?"[19] From this remark we

can see that in as early as Confucius' times, there was already an expectation that sons should support their parents in their old age.[20] "Supporting one's parents with reverence," in today's context, would probably mean that we should not simply give our parents money or send them to a nursing home and let others perform our duty for us. We should serve them with reverence for as long as they live. This teaching was instrumental to the development of the large multi-generational family structures in traditional Chinese society.

Shu (Empathy): A Confucian Golden Rule

The other half of Confucius' "single thread" is the notion of *shu* (empathy). The importance of this virtue in Confucius' moral philosophy can also be seen in another exchange he had with a student. When asked to give one word that can serve as the guiding principle for one's entire life, Confucius replied that it is "*shu*", and further elaborated: "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire."[21] This moral guideline is sometimes called the Confucian Golden Rule, in contrast with the Golden Rule in the Christian tradition: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The Christian Golden Rule commands what one ought to do, whereas the Confucian Golden Rule states what one ought not to do. Are the positive and negative formulations morally significant? If so, which one is a better moral principle? According to Allinson, the positive and the negative Golden Rule are different, and the latter is superior to the former in that (1) it expresses modesty and humility, (2) it does not presume that one necessarily has knowledge of what the good is – what is good for oneself and whether it would be good for other people, and (3) it is less likely to lead to abuse or moral harm to others.[22] Ivanhoe calls the Christian Golden Rule "the principle of reversibility." He says:

> Reversibility might be regarded as a *formal principle* which guides me, in the performance of specific actions, to only proper actions – that is, if before I perform a given action, I first conduct a kind of "thought experiment" and imagine how I would feel if I were in the place of the person or persons who will be affected by my proposed action. If I would be willing to be treated in the way I imagine, then I can act in the proposed way.[23]

But one problem with this moral principle, as Ivanhoe points out, is that "it can end up being a disguised way of advocating the adoption of one's personal preferences. For example, 'the principle of reversibility

would seem to urge a masochist to become a sadist – to adopt the motto: 'hurt others as you would have others hurt you'."[24] The Confucian Golden rule, on the other hand, does not seem to have this problem. At first appearance, the negative formulation seems to be a better moral principle. But to see a deeper comparison, we need to consider their applications.

Both the Christian and the Confucian Golden Rules concern actions, not just preferences, in interpersonal interactions. They are not asking others to adopt an individual's maxims or moral preferences; they are simply asking for the individual's sanction of her own behavior. Both principles are stated as a form of *categorical imperative*, that is, they are to be followed not because of some other desired consequences for oneself. Both principles presume that I do not act in a certain way toward others simply because I want them to do the same for me. Both principles are based on the assumption that people's wants and desires are similar and thus we can use ourselves as the measure to gauge other people's minds. Furthermore, any moral consideration formulated in accordance with the Christian Golden Rule can easily be converted into a moral consideration in the spirit of the Confucian Golden Rule, and vice versa. For example, "wanting others to treat us with respect" can be rendered "*not* wanting others to treat us with disrespect"; "not wanting to be robbed by others" can be rendered "wanting others to show consideration for our property." Therefore, a good case can be made that the two formulations are basically identical. But a case can also be made to show that the two principles are slightly different.

If the Golden Rule is to be used as the only moral principle for our action toward others, then there is no universal guideline for us other than our own wishes. Whether our judgment is morally permissible thus depends on what kind of people we are. The positive formulation of the Golden Rule commands us to do unto others what we would have them do unto us. What would we have other people do unto us? At a minimal level, we would want others to respect us, to help us when we are in need, to show us love and concern, etc. It is a reasonable demand on us that we do the same for others. However, if we are of the greedier type, then we might want more from others. We might like it that others give us their money, that others forgive all our shortcomings, that others do us great favors with no strings attached. But at the same time, we find it difficult to do so unto others. In this case, the Christian Golden Rule becomes an impossible command. A reclusive person may simply want to be left alone. Following the Christian Golden Rule, that person would not do anything for anyone else. Other conceivable problems

with this moral principle might be the masochist becoming a sadist, a one-directional love turning into a pathetic clinging, etc. Basically, people's desires and wishes are so various that we cannot simply impose on others what we ourselves wish them to do for us.

Would Confucius' notion of *shu*, or the negative Golden Rule, fare better? It commands us not to do unto others what we ourselves do not desire. What don't we want others to do unto us? At a general level, we do not wish others to humiliate us, to laugh at us, to steal from us, to harm us, or simply to mistreat us in any way. It is reasonable that we do not treat others in these ways either. And even if we desire others to act in a certain way toward us, the Confucian Golden Rule does not counsel us to act this way toward others too. It thus avoids the problem of subjective imposition of preferences that we see in the positive formulation. It is arguable whether we know what is undesirable more than we know what is desirable, since people's displeasure can be just as idiosyncratic as their preferences. However, there seems to be more common ground in what people do not desire than in what they do desire. If we gauge others' wishes by checking what we ourselves would not desire, we would have set a reasonable constraint on our action that would affect others. Hence, the Confucian Golden Rule, even if not morally superior to the Christian Golden Rule, is at least more applicable.

How does this notion of *shu* (empathy) fit into Confucius' moral hierarchy, and how does it link up with the notion of *zhong* (loyalty) to constitute his unifying principle? As explained earlier, in this moral hierarchy individuals are interconnected in a social web that includes multilayers of relationships. One needs to be loyal to the different roles one plays relative to the other person. Now with *shu* (empathy), one can also extend oneself to appreciate what the other person in the opposite role would desire. For example, a father can do his best as a father to edify his son. But if he remembers how much he resented his own father's dictatorship, then he should modify his discipline and not impose too much restraint on his son. A student might wish to cheat in her studies. However, once she realizes how disappointed she would be as a teacher, she should understand that her duty is to work honestly instead. The extension of oneself can go beyond the person of an opposite role to reach people of similar roles. For example, if we do not wish our family members to be harmed, then we should not harm any stranger who is also a family member to someone else. If we do not want our children to starve or freeze, then we should give charity to other parents who cannot afford food and clothing for their children. If everyone were to think and act this way, society would have no theft, robbery, rape, murder, or hunger. Loyalty to one's role is not sufficient for securing

social harmony unless it is accompanied by everyone's empathetic understanding of other people's wishes. In this way, the two notions, *zhong* and *shu* (loyalty and empathy), are equally essential to the establishment of Confucius' ideal society.

Moral Cultivation and the Establishment of the Moral Ideal: From the Superior Person (*Junzi*), to the Man of Humanity (*Ren*), to the Sage (*Sheng*)

In the Confucian moral society, people are categorized into different groups according to their varying degrees of moral cultivation. One who is morally exemplary is called "the superior person" (*junzi*, sometimes translated as "the gentleman"). Those who not only have superior moral characters themselves, but also help others to cultivate themselves, are men of humanity (men of *ren*); and finally, those who can extend benevolence to all people and bring succor to the multitude, are the sages (*sheng*).[25] The complete moral self-cultivation is a process that one is committed to undertake throughout one's life. Very few people can actually attain the final state of *sheng*. If moral perfection is the end-state of our being, then we are not born perfect. Under Confucius' view, however, we are *perfectible*.

How to define human nature is one of the most vital issues in Confucianism. But unlike later followers, Confucius himself seldom discusses human nature. He focuses more on the pursuit of moral cultivation instead. In other words, Confucius is more interested in *what we can become* than in *what we are born with*. But before we understand our moral goal, we need to have a look at what we are born with. One thing Confucius affirms about human nature is that people are alike by nature. "Men are close to one another by nature. They diverge as a result of habituation."[26] If we are similar by nature, then what is our nature? Confucius holds the view that we are born with righteousness, but we have many desires that can lead us astray. Even he himself could not claim to have all his desires stay within the bounds of propriety until he had reached the age of 70.[27] Therefore, in his view, we are not born perfect, but we can *become* perfect.

Confucius uses "habituation" to explain the varying degrees of goodness and badness in people. Habits are formed through repeated practices. What kind of practice leads to goodness and what kind of practice

leads to badness? In Confucius' distinction of *junzi* (the superior person) and *xiaoren* (the petty person) we get a clue: the concern with what is right or virtuous itself leads to superior personhood, while the concern with profit or possession leads to inferior personhood. As Confucius says: "The superior person is concerned with virtue; the petty person is concerned with property. The superior person is concerned with sanctions; the petty person is concerned with personal favors."[28] Confucius is not necessarily against wealth or profit, but he is against wealth accumulated, or profit made, through improper ways. If one wishes morally to cultivate oneself, one needs first to set one's priority on doing the right thing, not on amassing one's own profit. When the priority is on profit, it is tempting to forgo principles just to make a few more bucks. If someone is intent on getting rich, then she may feel ashamed the first time she embezzles money. But through repeated practices, she will eventually become habituated in gaining wealth improperly. Hence, without a secure moral principle, one can easily sink into the category of *the petty people*.

Confucius also says: "The superior [person] seeks the Way and not a mere living. . . . The superior [person] worries about the Way and not about poverty."[29] To learn the Way (*Dao*) is the ultimate goal in life; furthermore, the pursuit of the Way is a never-ending process. If we desire material goods and physical comfort, then we cannot pay full attention to the cultivation of our moral attributes. Confucius says: "A fellow who is ashamed merely of shabby clothing or meager food is not even worth conversing with."[30] To pay full attention to one's moral growth is constantly to examine oneself. Have I failed to cultivate my virtues? Have I failed to delve more deeply into what I have learned? Have I been able to move in the direction of what I just learned to be right? Have I been able to rectify my own misdeeds? A person interested in the pursuit of the Way is thus always diligent and never self-excusing. As Benjamin Schwartz puts it: "The moral cultivation is a long and difficult process, not everyone can accomplish the final goal."[31] Those who aim for the final goal are called *junzi*, the superior person. They are superior not by nature, but by their constant practice of self-examination and self-reform.

Why must we seek to learn the Way and to morally cultivate ourselves? Why can't we rest content with our physical comfort? For Confucius, the goal in life has to do with the meaning of being human. He has an all-embracing moral notion that depicts what it is to be human: *ren* (humanity). It is difficult to find a single moral concept in Western ethics comparable to the notion of *ren*. *Ren* is not a moral principle that gives us specific guidance in life; nor is it accomplishable by a single act.

Ren is not about action; rather, it is about a state of being. To be more exact: *ren* represents an ideal state of human being. Ideally, human beings subsist between Heaven and Earth, playing the same roles that Heaven and Earth play. In the Confucian cosmology (as explained in the context of *Yijing*), Heaven and Earth are ascribed many moral attributes, the most prominent of which is *ren*.[32] While Heaven nourishes all living things and Earth sustains them with no discrimination, we should aid our fellow human beings and other creatures in their quest for self-completion. In this context we can understand why Confucius says, "If one sets one's heart on [*ren*], one will be without evil."[33]

Seeing the meaning of "*ren*," we can realize that simply cultivating our own moral attributes is not a sufficient aim in life. We need to help others fulfill their moral personhood as well. This is how Confucius defines "men of humanity": "If one wishes to establish one's moral character, one also establishes the moral characters of others; if one wishes to obtain one's goal, one also helps others obtain their goals."[34] To be a man of humanity is thus the common goal of all superior people. As Confucius says: "The superior person aims to help others fulfill what is good in them; he does not help others carry out what is bad in them."[35] Confucius once explains *ren* as "to love one's fellow men."[36] To love others is not simply to be benevolent or compassionate toward them. One can be benevolent or compassionate by helping others in practical ways: giving them money, providing them with comfort, offering them kind words, etc. The Confucian ideal of *ren*, on the other hand, is to help others to become better people themselves, or, put another way, to help others in their attainment of the state of *ren*. An individual cannot achieve the state of *ren* if he or she does not also try to help others reach that same goal.

The person who can not only help those nearby cultivate themselves but can also spread this effort to the multitude must be more than someone of humanity; that person must be a *sage*. The difference between a person of humanity and a sage could be in the sheer number of people such altruistic efforts can reach. Confucius seems to think that only when the person of humanity also has the status of a king can he be deemed a sage. He regarded ancient kings such as Yao and Shun as sages. His own student, Yan Hui, could not be seen as a sage, however morally perfect he was. Today, the Chinese people regard Confucius as the *Ultimate Sage* (*Zhi-sheng*). This could be seen as testimony to the idea that far-reaching altruistic efforts in helpings others cultivate themselves could also be accomplished through philosophy and education.

All the moral principles discussed so far (being loyal to one's social role, not imposing on others what we ourselves do not desire, helping

others establish their characters or obtain their goals) rely heavily on the individual's subjective judgment. An obvious difficulty is this: if we are not born with perfect knowledge of the Way, if the pursuit of the Way is a never-ending process, then we cannot know what we should be doing at any given moment in our life. It seems that we do need some external guidance from time to time. This is where another important Confucian moral concept, *li* (propriety, rituals), comes in. *Li* is about propriety, about what is the right thing to do in a given context. The formalized aspect of *li* is rituals and rites, but there has to be more to it than this. Rituals and rites are a matter of social conventions, and sometimes they can become inflexible and frivolous. Herbert Fingarette wrongly interprets Confucius' notion of *li* to represent some kind of "sacred ceremony" or "holy rites" that have a magical power to shape people's daily behavior.[37] Confucius could not possibly think that we should simply do whatever social conventions prescribe without any personal moral judgment. As Antonio Cua points out, "it is ritual, as comprising customs, conventions, or formal rules of proper conduct, that provides the starting point of individual morality."[38] In fact, textual evidence shows that Confucius does not interpret *li* to consist merely of formal ceremonies, and he does not think that morality simply lies in observing the rites. He says: "The superior person regards righteousness as his essence, and practices it in accordance with propriety."[39] In other words, the observance of propriety has to come from an internal moral sense – righteousness. Confucius only uses rituals as an external amendment to one's subjective state of mind. It is the ideal mental state, *ren*, which bestows value on rituals. Confucius says: "A man who is not *ren* – what has he to do with the ritual?"[40] It is because a person has *ren* as her goal that she would want to do what is proper in each context. She would "refrain from looking at that which is contrary to propriety, from listening in a way that is contrary to propriety, from saying things that are contrary to propriety, and from making any move that is contrary to propriety."[41] For example, it would not be proper to look at what other people do, or listen to what they say, in their private quarters. It is not because we have no means to do so; we should simply choose not to do it. I may have a strong urge to peep or to pry, but I should use self-restraint so that all my actions are in accordance with propriety. The essence of propriety comes from self-restraint. The sense of propriety should be established from within a person, not from a rigid set of public rules and social conventions.

In our society today, many people do not consider propriety as a standard for their conduct. They might use obscene language in public simply because they feel like it. They might insult others for no reason

other than that they are in a foul mood. They might act vulgarly simply because they consider it their "right" to do whatever they please. They don't observe social contexts or assess whether their behavior is improper. They regard self-restraint as a restriction on their personal freedom, and they believe that self-expression takes precedence over social etiquette. However, Confucius teaches that to restrain oneself as a way to return to propriety is simply *ren* itself. He says: "To master oneself and return to propriety is humanity (*ren*). If a man (the ruler) can for one day master himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will return to humanity. To practice humanity depends on oneself."[42] Social standards of propriety and social conventions of rites and rituals serve a different function from that of the law. There are many ways in which propriety can be violated. However, for one reason or another we prefer not to establish laws that would ban them altogether. If everyone were concerned with whether or not his or her actions were proper in all situations, there would be less indecent behavior around us. The formalized aspect of propriety – rites and rituals – should serve merely as a reminder of the importance of propriety itself. Through propriety, we preserve human decency – that is how we maintain our humanity (*ren*). Therefore, for Confucius, to establish a society that has all its members fulfilling their moral ideals, an emphasis on propriety would be much more effective than the employment of laws and punishments. Here we turn to the final topic, the political ideal for Confucius.

From the Self to the State: The Confucian Political Ideal

An ideal political state is one that is governed by a ruler who has reached the ultimate goal of moral cultivation. This ideal ruler is called the sage king. In Confucius' opinion, the proper role of government is not just to keep its people materialistically gratified and physically secure, but also morally to cultivate them. Confucius says: "To govern is to rectify."[43] That is to say, the ruler's job is primarily to rectify his people's conduct. To do this, the rulers themselves must first be morally correct. Virtue and rulership are thus inseparable in Confucius' political philosophy. Raymond Dawson describes the Confucian model of government in this way: "[I]t is an agency for ensuring that the influence and example of men of superior moral qualities is brought to bear on the population."[44] Confucius thinks that this ideal of a sage king is not a mere ideal that can never be realized (unlike Plato's "philosopher

king") – in ancient times before him, there had been sage kings (Yao and Shun), who had maintained a moral, harmonious state.

From our contemporary perspective, we might ask: how does virtue guarantee political success? To answer this question, we have first to understand that Confucius' political ideal is designed for a small monarchic polity. Within a small nation-state, as those existed in his times, the ruler's virtues were easily observed by the people. Confucius believed that if people respect the ruler, then they will be more likely to follow his rules. He says: "If a ruler sets himself right, he will be followed without his command. If the ruler does not set himself right, he will not be obeyed no matter how many orders he issues."[45] At a time when rulership was not backed by any theory of the divine right of the sovereign, the ruler needed to "earn" the respect of the people. By "setting himself right," Confucius meant not just that the ruler should be correct in his personal conduct, but also that he should be correct in his administrative judgment. Confucius says: "If you promote the straight and set them above the crooked, then the people will be obedient."[46] If the ruler has good judgment on the ministers he chooses to manage the state, then the people will not contest. If the people see that those governing them are all morally upright, then they will be inspired to be righteous themselves. Such an inspired moral transformation is not the result of an ulterior motive: if I *act* in a righteous way, I too could be promoted to a high position. Confucius believes that the people will readily emulate a morally exemplary person, because virtue has the power of moving and transforming people. He says, "Virtue never stands alone. It is bound to have neighbors."[47] This remark gives an interesting portrayal of the power of virtue. If a single person acts with impeccable virtue, then those around him will gradually be inspired to act virtuously. Eventually, the whole neighborhood will be occupied by virtuous people. If a virtuous civilian could have such an impact, then a virtuous sovereign would have an even greater impact on the people. Confucius uses two analogies to describe how effortless such virtuous rulership could be. He once said that the virtuous ruler can be compared to the Pole Star, "which commands the homage of the multitude of stars without leaving its place."[48] He also said that if the ruler himself wishes to be good, his people will be good, because "the character of a ruler is like wind and that of the people is like grass. In whatever direction the wind blows, the grass always bends."[49]

Finally, according to Confucius, law and punishment can only restrain people's behavior; it cannot alter their mind. Under strict laws and punishments, people will simply want to avoid being caught. But if they are taught to observe *li* (propriety), then they will develop their

own moral sense and will want to do the right thing of their own accord. Confucius says:

> If you try to lead the common people with governmental regulations and keep them in line with punishments, the law will simply be evaded and the people will have no sense of shame. If, however, you guide them with virtue and keep them in line by means of [propriety], the people will have a sense of shame and will moreover reform themselves.[50]

Confucius' political philosophy can be sharply contrasted with that of Machiavelli. According to Machiavelli, a ruler need only be virtuous when doing so will be to his advantage, and sometimes the ruler must learn how not to be virtuous. Machiavelli also says: "It's far better to be feared than loved if you cannot be both."[51] He argued that the ruler cannot be idealistic and must deal with the actual conditions of the world. People in general are selfish, fickle, forgetful, and greedy. When the ruler's behavior is bound by virtue, he cannot always use the most efficient means to deal with his people. But if he uses harsh law and stiff punishment, then he can at least be sure that they would not dare to violate his rules.

Confucius' political philosophy is exactly the opposite of this kind of Machiavellian politics. He does not see the reality and the ideal as two separate realms. For him, the goal for an individual as well as for a state is always to strive for the ideal. As we saw earlier, this affinity toward the good is innate in us. When properly inspired, everyone will want to be good and to act in the correct way. It is only when we rest content with the present state and concede the impossibility of improvement that we fail to follow the Way. If, under the moral model of a sage king, everyone were constantly to practice self-examination to see if he were truly loyal to his roles (*zhong*), if he were to extend himself to empathize with others (*shu*), if he were to help others attain their moral personhood (*ren*), if he took care to observe propriety in all situations (*li*), then the Way (*Dao*) would prevail and we would have an ideal world.

Conclusion

Confucius depicted a lofty ideal for individuals and for the state. His ideal human being is one who never lapses in the pursuit of self-improvement. Our moral cultivation is like climbing a virtue ladder – we can always become better since there is always room for improvement.

Learning to know the Way (*Dao*) and to lead a life in accordance with the Way are the ultimate goals in life. Knowledge is for the moral growth of the individual learner; education is for building moral character. But at the same time, Confucius also focused on the moral duty to make others better. A Confucian always thinks of himself or herself as a member of human society. To better oneself is not as good as bettering the whole human race; to have a happy life oneself is not as good as making everyone's life happy. The most efficient way to accomplish these ends is to improve the politics of the state. Therefore, the ideal Confucian is one who is inwardly a moral sage, outwardly a *humane* king. By setting up a "moral king" as the ideal, the Confucian political philosophy treats virtue and politics as inseparable from each other.

On the personal level, what Confucius teaches is an adherence to virtue in the way one conducts oneself on a daily basis. A virtuous person does not seek recognition from others. As Confucius says, "Do not worry that you are not known to others; worry rather that you yourself lack ability."[52] Hence, Confucians should scrutinize themselves constantly. What one should care about is only whether one's words and deeds correspond to each other, or whether one's reputation matches the truth. Some people only appear to be virtuous and thus earn the respect from their peers, but Confucius calls such a person "the thief of virtue."[53] Later on, Mencius would give a nice explanation of this phrase:

> If you try to condemn them, there is nothing you can point to; if you try to censure them, there is nothing to censure. They are in agreement with the current customs; they are in harmony with the sordid era in which they live. That in which they dwell seems to be loyalty and [faithfulness]; that which they do seems to be blameless and pure. The multitude delight in them; they regard themselves as right. But you cannot enter into the Way of Yao and Shun with them . . . [Confucius] says, "I hate that which seems but is not."[54]

We can thus conclude that a Confucian is a person who is true to virtue, true to the Way, and true to him- or herself.

Further discussion questions

1 What is the moral justification for a Confucian hierarchy? Is democracy compatible with such a hierarchical structure?
2 What are the different implications between the positive Golden Rule in Christian ethics and the negative Golden Rule in Confucian ethics? Both principles demand that we gauge others' preferences or dislikes on the basis

of our own; hence, both differ from the Kantian moral principle that requires us to think of everyone, including ourselves, as disinterested, purely rational beings. Which approach could generate a more universal application?

3 What virtues does Confucius stress in his moral teaching? How are these virtues different from other virtue ethicists' recommendations?

4 How does Confucius define "filial piety"? How is it different from the common Western expectation of sons or daughters? What is the expectation on children within your own family tradition?

5 Joel Feinberg (1980) discusses an imaginary *Nowhereville*, where people are compassionate, sympathetic, honorable, and are endowed with a strong sense of duty, but the notion of *rights* is lacking. Would a Confucian society be like this *Nowhereville*? What would be missing if a moral society did not have the notion of *rights*?

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Further readings

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