

## Family Reverence (*xiao* 孝) as the Source of Consummatory Conduct (*ren* 仁)

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Does “family reverence” (*xiao* 孝)—the ground of the Confucian vision of a moral life—lead inevitably from nepotism to cronyism and then in turn to political corruption? Or is *xiao* a necessary condition for the cultivation of consummatory conduct (*ren* 仁)? We have read with interest and have gained insight from many of the recent articles proffered in response to this timely issue.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as the Leviathan China continues to struggle on a long march to democracy, it is perhaps endemic corruption that is its greatest challenge.

Professor LIU Qingping and his supporters have mounted a well-reasoned attack on a position Confucius and Mencius endorse that would seem to protect law-breaking family members from state retribution. Such obstruction of justice would, on anyone’s definition of the term, seem to be a rather egregious form of “corruption.” To oversimplify somewhat, according to the Liu position, the culprit that ultimately produces corruption is *xiao*, conventionally rendered “filial piety” in English (but we render it as “family reverence,”

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<sup>1</sup>Articles by LIU Qingping and GUO Qiyong are published in *Dao* 6.1. Additional articles by them and others in debate, in English translation, can be found in a special issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought* (39.1, Guo 2007, Fall) on “Filial Piety: The Root of Morality or the Source of Corruption?” with an introduction by guest editor HUANG Yong. GUO Qiyong edited a collection of articles in Guo (ed.) 2004. There is a relatively complete collection of the articles in this debate at [www.confucius2000.com](http://www.confucius2000.com).

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or “family feeling” to avoid the close Christian associations with the word “piety” today).<sup>2</sup> That is, *xiao* as the privileging of intimate relations is the source of immoral conduct. Ably defending the Confucian tradition, on the other hand, is Professor GUO Qiyong and others who claim that the priority given to family feeling does not necessarily lead to any untoward favoritism, and hence should not be seen as leading inevitably to corruption.

In the end we will offer a defense of the Confucian position. However, we will do so by approaching the debate at least initially from a meta-ethical position. That is to say, we will argue that to the extent that the classical Confucian texts—the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi*—are being interpreted in this debate against the background of modern Western moral theory, they can provide neither an adequate account of the passages under scrutiny nor the vision needed for a way forward in moral thinking that they might otherwise yield. Indeed, we will attempt to show ways in which these ancient texts, taken on their own terms, offer a perspective on key ethical (and political) issues that are at least as worthy of our attention as any of the competing Western views.<sup>3</sup>

Let us take the first of the three passages referenced in this debate—(*Lunyu* 13.18 and *Mengzi* 5A3 and 7A35)—as a representative example that we can draw upon in our discussion:

The Governor of She in conversation with Confucius said, “In our village there is someone called ‘True Person.’ When his father took a sheep on the sly,<sup>4</sup> he reported him to the authorities.”

Confucius replied, “Those who are ‘true’ in my village conduct themselves differently. A father covers for his son, and a son covers for his father. And being true lies in doing so.”<sup>5</sup>

In the first instance we must be clear about what is at stake in the dispute as we see it. Within a (roughly) Confucian framework, the contributors to the debate so far seem to have structured the discussion around the question of whether it is “family reverence” (*xiao*) or “consummatory conduct” (*ren*) that should be taken as most fundamental for the Master and his illustrious successor. Liu and the critics claim that this emphasis on family is at the expense of *ren*: after all, consummatory human conduct can hardly be made to square with tolerating or indeed abetting illegal and immoral activity (and hence corruption). Upholders of the canon like Guo, on the other hand, claim that there is no inconsistency between the ways *xiao* and *ren* are employed in the texts. The priority of *xiao* is necessary for the

<sup>2</sup> For details of our semantic and philosophical analysis of this term, see Rosemont and Ames (2008).

<sup>3</sup> We are acutely aware that many, perhaps most, of our Chinese colleagues *on both sides of this debate* may disagree with much of our stern critique of modern Western moral and political philosophy. Having enjoyed the moral and political fruits of these theories in a democratic society throughout our own lives, we can feel comfortable in criticizing these views in ways that perhaps our fellow philosophers in countries who have yet to enjoy such fruits would not want to do.

<sup>4</sup> This passage goes to the centrality of both family reverence and moral imagination in Confucian role ethics. On ZHU Xi’s reading, the father is in dire straits—*rang* 攘 means “to steal when in difficult straits”—and thus steals out of abject need. However, on such a reading, the putative “crime” of the father evaporates, and the son is just rotten. Perhaps Confucius has a more serious situation in mind: indeed, a hard case.

<sup>5</sup> See interesting and amusing developments of this anecdote in *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 49.9.2 (Han 1982), *Lüshichunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (1955), 449, and *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (1992) 13/125/14.

achievement and maintenance of *ren*, that is, family feeling is a prior and necessary condition for later extending and developing fellow feeling for all others.

However, concern about the respective priority of *xiao* and *ren* does not address the fundamental problem. In all three cases referenced and analyzed in the debate, it is clear that *xiao* is central—that is, protect family members at any cost, even when they are wrongdoers. While we believe that GUO Qiyong and the defenders of the canon are taking the argument in the right direction, there is a missing subtext to this debate on which the matter turns.

This subtext is discernible by noting that in all three textual examples familial loyalty trumps loyalty not to *humanity* writ large—as focusing on *ren* would require—but rather, family reverence takes priority over loyalty to the *state* (those who govern, and the regulations they enforce). This is a crucial distinction. The charge of nepotism *qua* corruption carries little opprobrium if it is merely the favoritism I show my cousin in hiring her as the bookkeeper for my store. It only becomes an issue if my cousin is the less competent candidate for keeping the books in the district for whose financial concerns I am the responsible political person, appointed by the government.<sup>6</sup>

More directly to the textual examples from the *Mencius*, few would question the morality of our decision to carry our father or brother off to some remote place if they were abusing our mother or sister-in-law, but in the three examples given in the classical Confucian texts, it is not familial but legal wrongdoing that is under consideration: robbery, manslaughter (if not murder), and attempted fratricide. To be sure, spousal abuse is and ought to be a crime, and it might well be that in the extreme case we would be obliged to call in the police to halt the violence. However, as far as our family is concerned, and very probably our neighbors and friends as well, there are priorities in our response to situations. Calling in the police is not what we would do *first*, but only as a last resort; initially at least we would almost surely try other means to remedy the problem.

This question of one's ultimate loyalties is a very old one in Western philosophy, beginning at least with the *Euthyphro* (Plato 1961: 4a–b). Socrates seems to be only mildly interested in the criminal charge of murder that Euthyphro is bringing to the court until he discovers that Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father, and that he has justified this indictment as an act of piety demanded by the gods. Only then does Socrates speak of how uncommonly advanced in spiritual wisdom the young man must be to know that his religious duty requires him to accuse his own father of murder in a court of law. The elderly stonemason is clearly incredulous that Euthyphro would do such a thing. However, by the end of the dialogue, only at the meta-ethical level is it illuminating for us (although illuminating it surely is). On the

<sup>6</sup> It might be argued that LIU Qingping and his pro-*ren* colleagues would claim that the alternative to the family is the community (other persons) rather than the state. The two—the community and the state—may indeed be distinguished (as we have done in our example below). However, the moral issue in the passages under discussion remains one between the family and the government representing the community rather than the community of persons itself, whether that community is local, state, or national. LIU Qingping himself clearly sees the opposing sides just as we do when he argues that “it is wrong to obstruct the legal punishment of a relative’s criminal act,” and further, that protecting wrongdoing of relatives “is an abuse of the law.” Again, Shun’s concern for his father “protected [the father] from just legal punishment and deprived his victim of his right to justice” (Liu 2007: 6). What else is the state besides the impersonal enforcer of community norms? What else could it be? However, there is another issue here. “Remonstrance (*jian* 諫)” —that is, the obligation that a child has to protest the conduct of an erring parent—has a prominent role in the Confucian literature on *xiao* 孝. That being the case, we would have to assume that in each of these cases (indeed, this is made clear in the case of the banishment of Shun’s brother), an effort would be made by the concerned son to set the ledger right with members of the community who had suffered any loss on account of the conduct of the members of his family.

practical level, we gain no insight from the *Euthyphro* as to whether our highest loyalty should be to the family or to the state; all we learn is that Euthyphro cannot give good reasons for doing so.

It is perhaps a distinguishing characteristic of the history of Western philosophy that Plato is not alone in this regard: *No* later thinker has answered the question of divided loyalties between family and state at all satisfactorily, and indeed, for most of the past two and a half centuries, none of our philosophers have even asked it.<sup>7</sup> The reasons for this neglect are, we believe, instructive for everyone participating in the debate on the relationship between *xiao*, corruption, and *ren*. Throughout the Western philosophical narrative evolving with the discovery of the soul by the classical Greeks, the dominant view of human beings has tended to be that of abstract, individuated selves: autonomous, rational, free, and (usually) self-interested. This view of what it is to be human has been pretty much unquestioned from the time of Locke, and has become thoroughly entrenched as an unannounced presupposition by the time of Hume and Kant.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a foundational individualism is the Enlightenment model of humanity, and has been a key motivating factor in those populist revolutions instigated to curb the excesses of authoritarian governments. At the same time, appeal to the institution of family as a source and model of moral order has been markedly absent from the Western philosophical tradition.

If we understand what it means to be human in this individualistic manner, it would seem to follow that in thinking about how we ought to deal morally with our fellows, we should seek as abstract and general a viewpoint as possible. If the dignity of *everyone* is derived from the (highly valued) qualities associated with this individualism—autonomy, equality, rationality, freedom—then it is just these qualities we must respect at all times, and hence gender, age, ethnic background, religion, skin color, and so on, should play no significant role in our decisions about how to interact with others.

On this orientation it is thus incumbent upon us to seek universal principles and values applicable to all peoples at all times. Otherwise the hope of a world at peace, devoid of group conflicts, racism, sexism, homophobia, and ethnocentrism will never be realized. Moreover, the best way to arrive at these universal principles is to transcend our own

<sup>7</sup> The history of moral ideas pertaining to family has been studied at length by Jeffrey Blustein, who noted: “After Hegel, philosophers did not stop talking about the normative aspects of parent-child relations altogether. What happened was that they no longer attempted to systematically apply their most dearly held moral and social values to the study of parenthood. The resolution of problems relating to the upbringing of children and to our expectations of them became a sideline, and the most profound issues of the lives of human beings in society were seen to lie elsewhere” (Blustein 1982: 95). Blustein does not, however, attempt to account for the philosophical neglect of such a basic pattern of human interaction.

<sup>8</sup> This concept of the abstract and universal individual has become a commonplace, and as such, is often insinuated into interpretations of classical Confucianism. For example, HUANG Yong in his “Introduction” rehearses an argument by LIU Qingping that Mencius is inconsistent because he allows for the possibility of love itself not being based on family love. That is, on Liu’s interpretation, Mencius’s notion of *renxing* 人性 articulated by appeal to the “four beginnings (*siduan* 四端)” defining a universal conception of human individuality that is more fundamental than family relations. Although Huang disputes this particular example of a Mencian inconsistency, he provides his own in citing the “child in the well” passage as a more compelling case for a love for others that is not derived from family love (see Huang 2007). For us, the problem here lies in ascribing a conception of discrete individuality to a classical Confucian tradition that understands person as irreducibly relational. The “four beginnings,” for example, describe the initial conditions of a person as lived within a family context. For the debate on Mencius and the ongoing arguments against essentializing Mencius’s notion of person and of *renxing*, see Behuniak and Ames 2005. For an argument against this individualistic reading of person in classical Confucianism, see also Ames (2008).

spatio-temporal location and cultural tradition—to overcome, that is, our personal prejudices, hopes, fears, likes and dislikes—and on the basis of impersonal reason alone ascertain beliefs and principles that should be compelling to all other rational persons equally committed to transcending their specific locations, backgrounds, and biases. Our differing heritages, personalities, sexual orientations, religious beliefs and many more that divide us are all sources of possible conflict. However, normal human beings have the capacity to reason that thus unites us all, and consequently offers a greater hope for a less violent human future than has been the case in the past, and at present.

This emphasis on reason, objectivity, impartiality, and abstraction has provided a strong impetus for seeking universalism in ethics. Many people, and most Western philosophers, have been influenced by this perspective, and not unreasonably so; it is complete with a vision of peace, freedom, and equality. From this position, the rare challenges to it heard within the corridors of the Western academy seem either hopelessly relativistic, authoritarian, or both. The two dominant universalistic ethical theories, grounded in the concept of the individual we have just outlined, reflect this orientation: deontological ethics, emphasizing our moral duties, and utilitarianism, which focuses on attending to the consequences of what we do in the moral sphere. While the participants in the current *xiao* debate are no doubt familiar with these theories, we want to rehearse them briefly in order to make clear how we contextualize them in the tradition of moral philosophy.

The deontological theory is associated with Immanuel Kant, whose fundamental moral principle, the Categorical Imperative, is roughly “Always act on a maxim you could will to become a universal law.” Kant sought to establish a certain, universally valid basis for human moral behavior that could withstand relativistic and skeptical challenges: that is, he believed he had structured the logic of moral arguments such that they would reveal our unconditional moral obligations without reference to historical experience, inclination, or personal values. The substance of our autonomy, for Kant, is thus an inner rational faculty uncorrupted by external circumstances, enabling us to develop and then comply with moral imperatives; an autonomy, that is, devoid of our particularities as unique individuals living in a specific time, place, and culture, grounded only in the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>9</sup>

Utilitarianism was developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill three-quarters of a century after Kant, and its most fundamental principle is to act so as to maximize the utility or happiness of the greatest number of people (with the minimal disutility and unhappiness for the rest). For Kant, logic reigns, the primary focus being on compliance and consistency more than on consequences; for Bentham and Mill, the situation is more nearly—but not quite—reversed, since inductive probabilities instead of deductive certainties must weigh heavily in a moral agent’s calculations about the consequences of his or her actions in accordance with the Principle of Utility. For Bentham and Mill, calculating benefits or happiness is the proper employment of reason as applied in our moral deliberations. Like Kant’s Categorical Imperative, however, the Principle of Utility is universal, based on reason alone, and applicable to any and all moral situations; each individual counts for one, and no one counts for more than one. It is only by ignoring individual particularities—again, time, place and culture—that Utilitarians believe true justice and equality can be achieved.<sup>10</sup>

Both of these universalistic ethical theories have had and continue to have numerous champions in philosophy, theology, and political theory, and they have had and continue to have

<sup>9</sup> The *locus classicus* for Kant’s views here are *The Critique of Practical Reason*, various editions.

<sup>10</sup> The *locus classicus* is Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, various editions.

a great deal of influence in other circles as well. In general, the influence of Kant can be seen fairly clearly in the courts of the United States, where consistency and precedent are prized, even if at times the consequences of the decision are untoward (witness famous cases such as *Dred Scott*, or *Miranda*). Legislators, on the other hand, typically look to consequences when enacting laws and find no problem in repealing a law when the consequences of the law appear to become adverse (repeal of prohibition, the draft, and so on).

If our analyses of these positions and issues have merit, we can begin to see not only why questions of family versus state loyalties cannot be answered by these Western moral theories: they cannot even be asked. Indeed, *no* moral questions concerning the family can even be framed for examination because, by definition, family members are not abstract, autonomous individuals, parts of the public, but are flesh and blood, highly specific young and old, male and female fellow human beings related to ourselves in highly intimate ways.<sup>11</sup> Thus all moral questions pertaining to family matters have been swept under the conceptual rug of a “private” realm that involves personal matters of taste and religious belief—a realm wherein moral and political philosophy do not enter.

Only by divesting persons of any uniquely individuating characteristics can we begin to think of developing a theory of moral principles that will hold in all instances. With respect to family, this is precisely what we cannot do if we are even to attempt to formulate the relevant moral questions about loyalties and obligations coherently, for as soon as we use the expression “my mother” in a moral question, we are not dealing with an abstract, autonomous individual but one who carried us, brought us into this world, nurtured and comforted us, giving of herself extraordinarily for our benefit. Thus to search for a universalistic principle of some sort in the Confucian writings is to try to square the circle, for Confucianism is paradigmatically particularistic—resolutely particularistic—just as Kant, Bentham, and Mill endeavor to be universalistic. To seek a principled ground for moral judgments in the classical Chinese texts is, to our minds, like expecting a Kantian to take specific cultural differences into account as conditions that qualify his Categorical Imperative, when in fact the Categorical Imperative is the very test for principle as unconditional universal law. Stated succinctly, we cannot appeal to Western moral theory to adjudicate the decidedly Confucian problem of family loyalty versus loyalty to the state.<sup>12</sup>

Against this meta-ethical background, we should like now to advance some arguments that suggest that the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* offer insights into our manifold moral and

<sup>11</sup> An excellent, although surely unintentional example of this conceptual difficulty was the comment by feminist philosophers Martha Minow and Mary Lyndon Shanley in a special issue of *Hypatia* on the family, when they note “a paradoxical characteristic of family life,” namely, that “the individual must be seen simultaneously as a distinct individual and as a person fundamentally involved in relationships of dependence, care, and responsibility” (Minow and Shanley 1996: 22). Unfortunately, it is no more possible to “see” others simultaneously in this way than to see the Wittgensteinian image as both duck and rabbit at the same time.

<sup>12</sup> As we will note below, it is of course possible to derive generalizations from the Confucian canon, but these are a long way from claims about universal “principles,” because the latter can be refuted by a single counterexample. Generalizations, however, are defeated not by a counterexample—or even several of them—but rather by a better generalization; we should not be thinking of English “all” so much as “many” or “most.” Some might wish to claim that the “negative golden rule” found in *Analecets* 1998 5.12, 12.2, and 15.24 is paradigmatically a universal principle. We believe it is more correctly and incisively seen as a rough generalization about an attitude one should have for determining what is most appropriate in one’s relations with others that does not presume to know from the beginning what is right for everyone. We cultivate a sense of deference (*shu* 恕) initially in our family relations, and then extend this sensibility with imagination to those who are much different from us as our lives unfold. Indeed, far from being an argument *for* universalism in ethics, it is an argument *against* it. However, this is the topic of another paper.

political predicaments that Kant, Bentham and Mill (and John Rawls, for that matter) cannot provide, and taking this a step further, that these dominant Western views are in significant measure *responsible* for much of our contemporary moral and political malaise. If this be true, then a sensitivity to the Confucian persuasion is not only important for the Chinese world today, but to everyone.

In order to make these arguments, we will have to understand the several passages from the Confucian classics that focus this debate from within their own interpretive context. We will argue that, taken on their own terms, these classical Confucian texts appeal to a relatively straightforward account of our actual life experience rather than to abstract principle, and in so doing, provide a justification for reinstating the intimacy of family feeling as the concrete ground of an always emergent moral order. We will argue further that there is a difference between Western ethical theories that are directed at best at enabling people to think and to talk about ethics more coherently, and a Confucian vision of a moral life that seeks to inspire people to be better persons. We will refer to this Confucian vision as a *Role Ethics*, although we do not intend to advance it as an alternative moral *theory* so much as a vision of human flourishing, one that integrates the social, political, economic, aesthetic, moral, and the *religious* dimensions of our lives.<sup>13</sup> In this view, we are not individuals in the discrete sense, but rather are interrelated persons living—not “playing”—a multiplicity of roles that constitute who we are, and allow us to pursue a unique distinctiveness and virtuosity in our conduct. We are, in other words, the sum of the roles we live in consonance with our fellows.

Let us begin then with a reconstruction of the Confucian project as it is enunciated in the seminal texts of classical Confucian, the *Four Books*. The central message of these canonical documents is that while familial, social, political, aesthetic, and cosmic (religious) cultivation is ultimately coterminous and mutually entailing, still it must always begin from the Confucian project of personal cultivation. We become moral not by divesting ourselves of our particular roles and relationships in order to apprehend those universal principles that provide moral justification, but on the contrary, we become worthy by cultivating these same roles and relations that constitute us as the ultimate source of moral meaning. Each person is a unique window on their own family, community, polity, and so on, and through a process of personal cultivation and growth, they are able to bring the resolution of their relationships into clearer and more meaningful focus. That is, the production of meaning is both radial—beginning from one’s own roles and relations—and collateral, because it is resolutely contextual. Cultivating one’s own person grows and adds meaning to the cosmos, and in turn, this meaningful cosmos provides a fertile context for the project of one’s personal cultivation.

Another way of putting this point is to say that personal cultivation is what we should see as the basic spiritual discipline in Confucianism, coming to a deepening and broadening sense of *belonging*, a strong feeling of being a part of something larger and more enduring than ourselves, a feeling that begins in and with the family (*xiao*) and, with increasing

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<sup>13</sup> Many if not most contemporary comparative philosophers, especially in the English-speaking world, are now portraying Confucianism as a “virtue ethics,” more or less on the model of Aristotle and his contemporary champions. Our own view is that Confucianism no more fits a Western “virtue” model of ethics than a deontological or consequentialist one, and, indeed, that it is not a “moral theory” in the Western sense. For discussion of this point, and for an extended argument on how Confucian role ethics differs from a classical Aristotelian model of virtue ethics, see our forthcoming translation and commentary on the *Xiaojing*.

effort, can culminate in a feeling of close affinity with all fellow human beings dead and alive, and with the cosmos (*ren*). However, the family must clearly be the basis of this discipline.<sup>14</sup>

Such personal cultivation is prerequisite not only for one's own personal life and family, however, but also for the development of a better world. This is the fundamental message of the *Great Learning*. This shortest of texts asserts unambiguously that it is only by committing oneself to a regimen of personal cultivation that one can achieve the quality of intellectual understanding that can change the world, and ourselves, for the better. In this singularly important respect, we must get our priorities right. The priority is that the cultivated person as constituted by intimate family relations, far from being in competition with the state, is the root of effective governance, and as such, must be properly tended in order to sustain a healthy political canopy. This continuity between family and state is clear in the concluding paragraph of this text:

From the emperor down to the common folk, everything is rooted in personal cultivation. There can be no healthy branches when the root is rotten, and it would never do for priorities to be reversed between what should be invested with importance and what should be treated more lightly. This is called both the root and the height of wisdom.

In the same way, in *Analects* 1998 14.35, Confucius insists that moral order starts here and goes there: "I study what is near at hand and aspire to what is lofty," and again in 12.1 he is adamant that becoming consummate as a person must be self-originating. It is this local nature of the source of consummate conduct that makes any moral guidelines not principles, but generalizations from particular situations. In the *Analects* 1998 1.2, Youzi claims that becoming *ren* begins at home. That is, the ground of our consummate humanity is family feeling:

Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way will grow therefrom. As for family reverence (*xiao*) and fraternal responsibility (*ti* 弟), it is, I suspect, the root of becoming consummate in one's conduct (*ren*).

Since family feeling is the ground of Confucian role ethics, and since polity in this tradition is a direct extension of the family—literally "country-family" (*guojia* 國家)—Confucius can further claim that being a responsible and productive member of one's family is tantamount to governing the country:

Someone asked Confucius, "Why are you not employed in governing?"

The Master replied, "*The Book of Documents* says: 'It is all in family reverence! Just being reverent to your parents and a friend to your brothers is carrying out the work of government.' In doing this I am employed in governing. Why must I be 'employed in governing?'"

This passage can be easily misunderstood as minimalist—each one of us in our families makes our own small contribution to the greater political order. Confucius's point, however,

<sup>14</sup> Whether speaking cosmologically (the cosmos), or religiously (a sense of belonging), we wish to make clear that we are speaking of *this* world, the world in which our family ties are bound, the only world of classical Confucianism. There is no transcendental realm, in the Judaic-Christian sense of something on which our world is utterly and wholly dependent, but which is in no way dependent on us or our world. For the cosmological side, see Hall and Ames (1987), and for the religious, Rosemont (2001).



is quite the opposite. Most of our political lives are lived out close to home. If we ask about the relative importance of the state and the family in effecting cosmic harmony, we must allow that family is the ultimate ground of political order, and without it, political order is a sham. It is for this reason that any formal pretence to democracy independent of the flourishing community is hollow, what Whitehead would call “misplaced concreteness.” Taken one step further, any discussion of a flourishing community without reference to a robust family life is again an empty abstraction.

This “idea” that personal cultivation pursued within the context of the inherited world is the ultimate source of cosmic meaning is reiterated in *Focusing the Familiar* (*Zhongyong*), providing us with a moral vocabulary:

This notion of equilibrium and focus (*zhong* 中) is the great root of the world; harmony (*he* 和) then is the advancing of the proper way in the world. When equilibrium and focus are sustained and harmony is fully realized, the heavens and the earth maintain their proper places and all things flourish in the world.

To repeat what we have said earlier, Confucian role ethics is not an abstract theory that provides principled moral judgments for those particular problematic situations we might encounter along the way, nor does it suggest developing a deliberate rational means to some moral end. Rather the Confucian project is a vision for developing the moral life as a whole, in which one *acts* morally in order to *be* moral (and aesthetic, religious, and so on). It is a way of trying to live consummately through relational virtuosity (*ren* 仁). It is the ongoing cultivation of an aesthetic, moral, and religious imagination that will enable one to achieve optimal appropriateness and significance in what one does (*yi* 義). It is an attempt to use personal artistry in one’s roles and relations to live life most significantly.

This being the case, the Confucian issue in these several passages is not a legal one about an individual’s conduct. To take the example above, the Confucian question is not “Is it just for a son to cover for a father who has committed a crime?” It is rather a matter of priorities: what the *Great Learning* describes metaphorically as setting the roots as a precondition for a luxurious canopy. Indeed, the focus is not upon the father as a discrete, autonomous individual perpetrating a crime against the state, but rather on how the mutually constitutive father–son relation can continue to be “true” when strained by circumstances. How should one behave to best sustain the quantum of harmony within the existing configuration of roles and relations that constitute this family and this community, and by extension, this state?<sup>15</sup> The assumption here would be that endorsing a litigious course of action on the part of a son as the appropriate way to act in such cases would not only be anathema to the ultimate interests of familial and communal harmony, but ultimately it would be detrimental to the prospects of a prosperous state.

We might take a case perhaps more familiar in our modern world. If a person discovers that his or her child has been shoplifting, what is the most efficacious response? Should one dial 911 and the city desk to allow the authorities and the public to resolve the situation by trying the criminal in the courts and in the press, thereby bringing the criminal quickly to justice? Surely there are laws against stealing.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to frame the question in this way, for it might be tempting to ask instead, based on a Western orientation, “What should we do when the other person is not keeping his or her side of the role bargain?” However, this, of course, is to beg the question against the Confucians by demanding a principle, and if we are correct, such cannot be found in the early canon. Even those who would appeal to principle have the idea of extenuating circumstances, or excuse conditions. In a previous footnote, we suggest one possible case, and the fact that Shun’s father is blind might suggest another; but we can only speculate here.

A more imaginative approach to the situation might be to accompany a good child who has done a bad thing back to the scene of the crime, and allow the child to negotiate the situation with the shopkeeper whose property has been taken. The outcome presumably would be to remedy the situation for the short term by restoring the property to its rightful owner, and for the long term by not only educating the child, but also by reinforcing the communal solidarity of all concerned. It is in everyone's interest—the parent's, the child's, the shopkeeper's, and the state's—that this case be resolved in an imaginative manner that makes the best of a bad situation. It is in no one's interest, because of a lack of imagination, to abandon a child to a path that might well lead ultimately to a career of crime.

Perhaps an immediate objection to this position would be the putative differential in moral competence between the child and the adult father who stole the sheep. The rejoinder would be: Where did the adult come from? The Confucian tradition is preemptive in trying to establish a social fabric that would reduce the possibility of crime, rather than adjudicating hard cases after the fact. We might be better off creating a community that does not give rise to spousal abuse rather than struggling to find a fail-safe procedure for retribution after the victim has been injured or worse—all the more so as the preponderance of the evidence shows that the threat of retribution is not really a deterrent against criminal activity.

In *Analects* 1998 1.13 we read: "Making good on one's word (*xin* 信) gets one close to being optimally appropriate (*yi* 義) because then what one says will bear repeating." When we ask about the source of moral meaning, the answer might lie in exhorting the community to embrace honesty as a way of life rather than in a *post hoc* auditing procedure for weeding out corruption. In the Confucian tradition, it is the fabric woven of strong family bonds rather than inviolate laws that enables the community to thrive. In fact, appeal to law is perceived broadly as a dehumanizing (although sometimes necessary) last resort. In this world, invoking the law is a clear admission of communal failure.

In setting priorities, then, the initial response in Confucian role ethics is to appeal to the moral resources within our family and community to reestablish a communal harmony that has been diminished by sometimes thoughtless conduct. The challenge is how to draw upon these resources most imaginatively to make the best of the situation. Family reverence (*xiao*), far from being the source of corruption, is our best hope in avoiding it by serving as the ground for consummate human conduct, and is the best hope for a social and political order much more humane than those in which we currently live.

Of course there are tradeoffs in surrendering the individual autonomy that undergirds much of Western ethical and religious thinking. This way of thinking about the human experience brings with it much that we hold in high regard: A quality of individual freedom and independence, equality, privacy, rights and entitlements, personal integrity, and indeed the sacredness of human life, are, for most of us, good things. However, it must be seen that when we give these qualities pride of place in prioritizing our values, we do so at an important cost. Individualism can bring with it a diminished sense of shame and responsibility and a reduced appreciation of our interdependence. Each of us has a moral obligation to respect the civil and political rights of all others. Governments have often been remiss and worse in granting such respect; but for persons, it is very easy, for we can fully respect those rights simply by ignoring the others: You surely have the right to speak, for example, but not to have us listen. Indeed, individualism in its extremes can precipitate feelings of alienation, depression, and selfishness, and a continuing tendency to "blame the victim" when confronted with gross social injustice, despite the absurdity of the denial of community responsibility. Too much freedom becomes license, too much independence

becomes loneliness, too much autonomy becomes moral autism, and too much sacralizing of the human being comes at the cost of massive species extinction.

Our overall argument here is simple. A careful consideration of Confucian role ethics prompts us to ask about the benefits that come with an increased awareness of the centrality of family feeling. What do we get in exchange—ethically, socially, politically, and religiously—for what we have to give up when we surrender in degree our emotive attachment to personal autonomy and all that it entails? Is the tradeoff worth it? This then is the question that we have raised and reflected upon in these pages and is the question that we would leave with our readers for their own consideration.

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