

Moral Philosophy of Confucius

KONFIÇYUS'UN AHLAK FELSEFESİ

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Summary

This article introduces the moral philosophy of Confucius by articulating his theories of the pursuit of dao, the moral principles of jen-yi-li (humaneness-righteousness-propriety), wu-lun (five basic human relationship), and the moral ideal of chun-tze (the superior man).

Key Words: Confucius, Moral philosophy, Ethics

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Confucius (551-479 BC) is one of the most influential thinkers of Eastern philosophy and could be seen as a representative of Eastern culture. Among the world's great philosophers, Confucius, together with Socrates, Gautama Buddha, and Jesus Christ were regarded as the four paradigmatic individuals by Jaspers owing to their extended influence through two millennia and their extraordinary importance for all philosophy. (1) A brief comparison with Socrates may give us a prima facie idea of Confucius since Socrates is generally called 'the Western Confucius' and Confucius, 'the Eastern Socrates'. They were both earnest and devoted teachers and both interested in the problems of man; they both established ethical theories which were not based on religion; they both advocated the necessity for rulers of competence and virtue; they both demonstrated sensibility

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Özet

Bu makale Konfiçyus'un ahlak felsefesini dao'nun takibi, jen-yi-li (insaniyet-doğruluk-edep) ahlak felsefesi, wu-lu (beş temel insan ilişkisi) ve chun-tze (üstün insan) teorilerini ele alarak tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Konfiçyus, Ahlak felsefesi, Etik

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and the common touch; they were both already famous before their death.

They were different in the following aspects: Confucius took the position of preserving and embellishing traditional cultures, yet Socrates was sceptical and critical of them; Confucius was of the style that strove to save the country and people, whereas Socrates deeply revered the love of wisdom; Confucius emphasised personal reflection in the pursuit of a reasonable social life, while Socrates emphasised the importance of 'definition' and sought accuracy of knowledge and thought (2).

In his lifetime, Confucius was not prosperous or wealthy, nor did he successfully put his moral-political reform into practice. Yet, from him came the Confucianism which for two thousand five hundred years, even down to today, was the dominant force in Chinese thought that has influenced the political, social, educational, and moral aspects of life in Chinese culture. His moral philosophy has re-

cently been developed and applied to the field of bioethics as an indigenous reflection on modern bioethical issues from a particular cultural-historical tradition. A brief sketch of his moral philosophy might be useful for readers interested in comparative ethics.

1. The merging of self-cultivation and social-political reform

In Confucius' works there was a distinctive combination of ethics and politics which showed scepticism for law and law enforcement. He believed that political order must be established on social order, and social order must come from individual cultivation. The main ethical and social problem was clearly that of how to encourage and foster good habits for individuals and good customs for society, since society is composed of individual members. Self-cultivation is not only the basis of social order and peace, but also the starting point for world happiness and harmony. He said, "Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy."(3) For this reason, he emphasised the importance of the governor being righteous and virtuous, and strongly supported the notion of government based on spiritual-moral force.

The fundamental theories of Confucius' ethics may be summarised as 'the pursuit of *dao*', 'the ethical system of *jen-yi-W*', 'the *wu-lun* and the family system' and 'the ideal of *chun-tze* (the superior man)'.

2. The pursuit of *Dao*

The word *dao* generally means road or path, method, way, doctrine, the truth or moral teachings. In Chinese philosophy, *dao* signifies the supreme metaphysical force that exists everywhere in everything and dominates the exercise and function of all things in the universe. Humankind, unexceptionally, is bred and governed by the power and operation of *dao* and should therefore seek the comprehension and pursuit of life in accordance with *dao*. Therefore Confucius said, "What Heaven imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature

is called the *dao*. Cultivating the *dao* is called education."(4)

In addition, *dao* also symbolises the universal moral order and the ideal status of moral achievement for man to define, pursue and accomplish. By living in conformity with this universal moral law, man realises his true self and 'true manhood: the humaneness (*Jen*)', and finds harmony and reaches unity with the universe.(5) Accordingly, Confucius said "If a man in the morning hears the *dao*; he may die in the evening without regret!"(6)

3. The principle of *Jen*

The principles of *jen-yi-li* (humaneness-righteousness propriety) comprise the most fundamental thought in Confucius' ethics. *Jen* (humaneness) and *yi* (righteousness) could be said to be the inner core of morality that motivates and guides man to pursue the *dao*, and *li* (rules of propriety) could be described as the outer form and standard of morality that is concrete for man to abide by in the context of human society.

Jen has been translated into different words such as love, benevolence, humanity, human-heartedness, perfect virtue, true manhood, and humaneness. The Chinese word *Jen* is composed of the two characters meaning 'man' and 'two', thus signifying the ideal relationship between two persons. That is to say, the virtue of *Jen* (humaneness) is meaningless unless it is involved in actual human relationships. In Confucius' reply to his disciples' queries concerning *Jen*, he gave different answers under different circumstances. Firstly, when Fan Chin asked about *Jen*, he gave the most direct and essential answer to him: "It is to love men."(7) Love has been the core of Confucius' concept of morality. Secondly, *Jen* represents Confucius' versions of the golden rule. Confucius defined *Jen* both negatively: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you,"(8) and positively: "A man of *Jen*, wishing to establish his own character, also establish the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent."(9) In combination, *Jen* actually denotes avoiding harm (what they don't wish) to others, being concerned with their welfare as well as helping them to attain what they wish. It hence gives people the motiva-

tion to be beneficent and nonmaleficent towards others and to respect others' autonomy as well.

Thirdly, Confucius stressed *jen* is the foundation of morality that its importance to man is more vital than either water or fire.(10) He said, "One who is not a man of *jen* cannot endure adversity for long, nor can he enjoy prosperity for long."(11) "Only the man of *jen* knows how to love people and hate people."(12) "A superior man (*chun-tze*) never abandons *jen* even for the lapse of a single meal. In moments of haste, he acts according to it. In times of difficulty or confusion, he acts according to it."(13) "If you set your mind on *jen*, you will be free from evil."(14)

Fourthly, *jen* as particular and general virtues: If one can act abiding by the principle of *jen*, virtues of various kinds will naturally accrue unto one. In the Confucian Analects, we find virtues such as filial piety, wisdom, loyalty, altruism (*shuh*), righteousness, learning, propriety, and courage are closely related to the explanation of *jen*. In effect, Confucius' concept of *jen* is bi-directional: in the case of particular virtue, *yew* means love (or benevolence); in the case of general virtue, *jen* is the foundation of morality, the basis of all goodness and the origin of all virtues, hence it means 'perfect virtue' or 'true humanity'.(15) *Jen* is the all-embracing source and the soul of all virtues; according to Jaspers' interpretation, "The nature of man is called *yew*. *Jen* is humanity and morality in one."(16)

4. The principle of *Yi*

The Chinese word *yf* is composed of two characters, a 'sheep' above an T. It symbolises an exalted person holding a sacrificial animal on his head to dedicate it to god. Therefore, *yf* signifies the state of a man carrying an appropriate sacrifice with a respectful mind towards god in a right time, place and way. Hence, *yi* generally means righteousness, appropriateness, obligation and justice. Confucius explained that, as "*jen* (humaneness) is the distinguishing characteristic of man... *yi* (righteousness) is the principle of setting things right and proper."(17) The principle of *yi* generally can be articulated with the meanings of righteousness and justice.

Firstly, *yi* as righteousness: Confucius emphasised the role of *yi* in moral life to be substantial. It is the standard for moral judgement and the way for evaluating whether the application of moral rules is correct. The application of moral rules to an ever-changing situation could be very complicated, since rules may come into conflict with each other and exceptional conditions or circumstances are inevitable. Therefore, the practice of moral rules must not be rigid or obstinate. Believing so, Confucius advocated the importance of flexibility in the practice of moral rules, and this was regarded as a unique contribution to ethical theory.(18) He said, "A superior man in dealing with the world is not for anything or against anything. He follows righteousness (*yi*) as the standard."(19) This was also his personal style in life. He said, "I have no course for which I am predetermined, and no course against which I am predetermined."(20) His disciples described him as follows: "There were four things from which the Master was entirely free. He had no foregone conclusions, no arbitrary predetermination, no obstinacy, and no egoism."(21) Mencius, who was even more radical in this regard, said, "The great man does not insist that his words be necessarily truthful [at all times and under all circumstances] or his actions be necessarily resolute. He acts only according to righteousness (*yz*)."(22) So did Confucius' disciple Yu-Tzu say, "When agreements are made according to what is right (*yi*), what is spoken can be made good."(23) The exercise of virtues could eventually become pointless and unnecessary, unless it is acted upon according to *yi*. Remaining flexible in practising moral rules by adopting the principle of *yi* for guidance is of fundamental value in Confucius' ethics.

Secondly, *yi* as justice: Confucius advocated the pursuit of public interest and was opposed to putting selfish interest first. He said, "The superior man... when he sees an opportunity for a gain, he thinks of justice (*yi*);"(24) "...take when it is consistent with justice (*yi*) to do so, and so men do not get tired of his taking."(25) "He who acts with a constant view to his own advantage (*///*) will be much murmured against."(26) Therefore, in dealing with the taking and distributing of benefit, the principle of *yi* was evidently the guiding principle. In

this regard, *yi* means more in relation to justice than merely righteousness. The priorities in Confucius' ethics seemed to be: first, justice and righteousness, second, profit and benefit; first, the public interest, second, self-interest.

Mencius said, "Humaneness (*Jen*) is the tranquil habitation of man, and righteousness (*yi*) is his straight path."(27) To sum up, *Jen* is the foundation and content of morality, and *yi* is the standard and guidance for the practice of morality. They are both central to Confucius' ethics. Confucius said, "With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and with a bent arm for a pillow, there is still joy. Wealth and honour obtained through unrighteousness are but floating clouds to me."(28) Mencius said, "I like life, and I also like righteousness (*yi*). If I cannot keep the two together, I will let life go and choose righteousness (*yi*)."(29) For two thousand years, it was this lofty sentiment for Chinese Confucian intellectuals to hold on to *Jen* and *yi* in adversity, and to pursue the embodiment of *dao* that distinguished man from beast.

5. The principle of *Li*

The Chinese word *li* is composed of two parts; the left side means the Earth god, and the right side means the sacrificial vessels. *Li* consequently means to hold offerings in the sacrificial vessel to devote to gods. As Legge indicated, *li* "is not easily rendered in another language", (30) many terms have been used for the translation of *li*: ceremony, rites, decorum, courtesy, manners, etiquette, ritual-observing and rules of propriety. At first, *li* represents the ceremonial order, but in the full sense of the term, it connotes the socio-political order.(31) By the fact that Confucianism is also called 'the religion of *li*', it is not difficult for one to imagine how important *li* is in Confucius' ethics. As Schwartz indicated,

If the word *dao* seems to refer to an all encompassing state of affairs embracing the "outer" sociopolitical order and the "inner" moral life of the individual, the word *li* on the most concrete level refers to all those "objective" prescriptions of behavior, whether involving rite, ceremony, manners, or general deportment, that binding human beings

and the spirits together in the networks of interacting roles within the family, within human society, and with the numinous realm beyond (32).

When one sets his mind on the pursuit of *dao* and yearns to attain the perfect moral status of *Jen* and *yi*, *li* gives one the 'concrete forms' and 'objective prescriptions' to follow. Furthermore, it is only by performing according to *li* that one's deeds can be regarded as 'proper' in the specific sociocultural context. So what in reality is the function of *li* in Confucius' ethics?

Firstly, the expression of emotion: We hold wedding ceremonies to celebrate the joining of man and woman and the linking of two families, and express our joy and blessing for them. We give funerals on the death of friends or families to show our grief and remembrance for them. Various forms of ceremonies performed without serve to reveal the emotions within. Therefore, 'the *li*', following human feelings, acts as regulators and refiners of them, so to keep people within bounds.' (33) It is not uncommon for people to express their feelings excessively or improperly, but under the expressive, regulative and refining effect of *li*, the emotions can be presented in a way of appropriateness, elegance and sincerity.

Secondly, the regulation of conduct: *Li*, being rendered as a set of social norms, exerts a normative influence on man's conduct. Confucius emphasized, "By extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety (*li*), one may thus likewise not err from what is right."(34) Confucius once defined *Jen* as "To subdue one's self and return to the rules of propriety (*li*), is *Jen*." He then explained about the details, "Do not look at what is contrary to propriety (*li*), do not listen to what is contrary to propriety (*li*), do not speak what is contrary to propriety (*li*), and do not make any movement which is contrary to propriety (*li*)."(35) In seeking to become a man of humaneness, man's selfish desires and egocentric conduct are usually the origin of agitation and conflict. Unless they can be restrained and regulated by the rules of propriety (*li*), a peaceful mind and harmonious interpersonal relationships are unattainable.

Thirdly, the cultivation of character: A major function of *Li* is to bring enlightenment and civilisation to man, which distinguishes man from beast. *Li* not only passively regulates man's conduct but also actively cultivates man's character. "It is by the rules of propriety (*Li*) that the character is established," whereas, "Without an acquaintance with the rules of propriety (*Li*), it is impossible for the character to be established." (37) For various kinds of characters, *Li* refines them to become virtues and prevents them from becoming flaws. Confucius said, "Respectfulness, without the rules of propriety (*Li*), becomes laborious bustle; carefulness, without the rules of propriety (*Li*), becomes timidity; boldness, without the rules of propriety (*Li*), becomes insubordination; straightforwardness, without the rules of propriety (*Li*), becomes rudeness." (38) In other words, behaving oneself within the realm of *Li* naturally results in the establishment of one's virtue.

Fourthly, the establishment of harmony: Establishing a harmonious society through self-cultivation has always been the goal of Confucius' ethical political ethos. Confucius once described the society that he favoured to be like "the poor man who is happy with the *dao*, and the rich man who loves the rules of propriety (*Li*)." (39) Such a society is a harmonious one, exactly what the *Li* is aimed for. Confucius once explicated *Jen*, "When you go abroad, behave to everyone as if you were receiving a great guest. Employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice. Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you." (40) The actualisation of true humanity is really not far away; it resides in ordinary interpersonal interactions. If one can perform this with an attitude of courtesy, sincerity and reverence, as when participating in a grand ceremony, one will certainly build up a harmonious and delightful relationship with others, which will eventually lead to the establishment of a harmonious society. *Li* is the lubrication and decoration of human society.

6. *Wu-iun* and the family system

Confucius emphasised the 'basic human relationships', which gave form to Chinese society and social institutions. The basic human relationships

are five (*wu-lun*): between father and son there should be affection; between ruler and minister, there should be righteousness; between husband and wife, there should be attention to their separate function; between old and young, there should be a proper order; and between friends, there should be faithfulness. (41) Theoretically, these five relationships have already covered all human relationships, because even a stranger is at least related as a younger or older person. Furthermore, the Chinese always say 'all within the four seas are brothers.'

Confucius believed that putting these basic human relationships right would lead to the success of politics and government. His primary assumption is: if one learns to be a good son, good brother, and good husband at home, automatically, one will become a good friend, good citizen, and good officer in society, because the sense of order and discipline and sense of duty and loyalty have already been established since childhood. (42) As Yu Tzu (Confucius' student) said, "Few of those who are filial sons and respectful brothers will show disrespect to superiors, and there has never been a man who is not disrespectful to superiors and yet creates disorder." (43) Good family breeding naturally leads to good social intercourse. The importance of family values and filial piety (*shiao*) cannot be overstressed.

7. The moral ideal of *chun-tze*, the superior man

Chun-tze in Confucius' ethical theory is the man of high moral achievement who constantly tries to improve and cultivate himself to achieve various stages of perfection. (44) The characters of *chun-tze*, the superior man, were clearly displayed through comparisons with *shiao-ren*, the inferior man in the Analects. *Chun-tze* is concerned with virtues of various kinds and the sanctions of law. He is quiet and serene, congenial without vulgarity, dignified without arrogance, broadminded but not partisan and steadfast in distress. The superior man always strives upward and searches in himself; he brings the good things of others to completion and does not bring the bad things of others to completion. The inferior man does just the opposite.

Moreover, the superior man demonstrates both the qualities of 'autonomous person' as well as 'relational person'. On the one hand, *chun-tze* sees himself as the master of his own life and attributes all responsibilities to himself and not to someone else. He is self-activated, self-determined, self-reliant, and is constantly improving himself via moral self-cultivation. On the other hand, *chun-tze* is a relational, altruistic identity that he emphasises family value and the establishing of harmonious relationship with others. His self-actualisation involves incessant participating in and promoting of the welfare of his fellow persons. Therefore, the superior man is featured with two major components that are mutually dependent-moral self-cultivation and altruism towards others. The ultimate concern and self-realisation of a Confucian ideal person consists in giving security and peace to people, yet in order to achieve this goal one must become a *chun-tze* first, which requires incessant moral self-cultivation.

To sum up, *chun-tze* holds the principle of *Jen*, humaneness, in his heart; makes judgements by the principle of *y*, the righteousness and justice; takes actions according to the principle of *li*, the rules of propriety; thereby to pursue the *dao*, the status of being in harmony and unity with the universal moral order. This is the theme and framework of Confucius' ethics, and *chun-tze* is the man to fulfil this moral ideal by putting the principles of *jen-yi-li* into practice.

From the above summary, we can see that Confucius' ethics demonstrates the distinctive formats of both virtue ethics and deontological ethics. Confucius' philosophy is always both ethical and political in its concern to promote public welfare. This duality of approach inevitably incorporates a utilitarian reasoning on certain occasions. This made Confucius' ethics resemble that of certain contemporary ethicists' mixed deontological ethics, which are basically rule-centred but in such a way as to take account of the teleological aspect of utilitarianism. (45)

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