

## Confucius

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## Themes

- Virtuous Person
- Virtuous Civic Life
- Good Rulers
- The Good Life

## Human Nature

- As we saw from the *I Ching*, human nature comes from heaven and is naturally good
- Human goodness means following our natures and our natures are in harmony and equilibrium with nature
- The way the world is is the way humans ought to act, and vice versa
  - Nature manifests its nature and goodness and human nature and goodness can be observed in natural phenomena
  - The universe is not simply a mechanistic or physicalistic world, but a world with moral properties as part of its very fabric

## Aim of Chinese Philosophy

- The aim of Chinese philosophy is the pursuit of the perfection of human beings
- The guiding idea is that through the realization of full human potential, humans could live in harmony with themselves, others, and nature
- Confucianism advances the idea that human potential is realized through the development of human nature and social virtues

## Confucian Philosophy

- Confucianism is concerned with human beings and human society
  - Humans are the ultimate source of value
  - This stands in contrast to (i) naturalism which claims that nature is the ultimate source of value, and (ii) supernaturalism which says that god or some supernatural entity is the source of all value
  - How human goodness can be achieved is discovered by appeal to the noblest ideals in human actions

## Basic Ethical Questions

- Two basic ethical questions
  - What is the best way to behave? (Kant, Mill)
  - What makes for a good life? (Plato, Aristotle)
- Confucius would have considered the second question the correct question to ask
  - Living a life in harmony with the nature of things would produce a good life and good behavior

## What Makes for a Virtuous Person?

- A virtuous person is one who finds psychological/emotional satisfaction in being virtuous itself
- A virtuous person is not troubled by adversity or temporary gains or losses
  - What matters to a virtuous person is one's long-term character, which cannot be taken away
    - Fame and fortune are temporary achievements and are always under threat
    - Virtue is a long-term achievement that cannot be taken away
- Long-term happiness is found in a virtuous character

## Virtue and Motivation

- A virtuous person is not simply a good, happy person
- A virtuous person possesses the correct values and motivations that will enable one to perform the correct action even in times of adversity
- A virtuous person will do the right thing because it is the right thing, and not for extrinsic reasons

## Virtue and Emotional Satisfaction

- One's own virtue is something to be valued
  - One's own virtue, which is the result of the person's will, is something in which one can find comfort and peace
  - Unlike fame and fortune, the virtuous person will not live in fear of losing virtue, will not be anxious about what might happen next, and will not fear life's challenges
- Being virtuous and focusing on acting virtuously will produce inner harmony
  - The virtuous person is more at peace and more serene than one who is not

## Complexity of Being Virtuous

- For Confucius, being virtuous does not mean being perfect
- In fact, Confucius seems to admit that the virtuous person is full of failings and weaknesses
  - What he does seem to endorse is that the virtuous person will constantly be mindful of his actions, aware of his faults, and attentive to the factors that will lead to actions not consistent with a virtuous character
- Being virtuous also does not mean being insistent on rule following, like "thou shall" or "thou shall not"

## Human Perfection

- Inner perfection: human perfection is realized in the inner calm and contentment of the individual and the harmony of one's relationship with others and nature
- Outer perfection: excellence in the ethical actions of the person in daily social relations
- All aspects of human activity are covered in this philosophical system
  - So, philosophy is embedded in living one's life
    - Practice and theory are inseparable

## Loyalty As Structuring Morals

- One of the key unifying principles of Confucian moral teachings is the notion of loyalty (*zhong*)
  - While loyalty is mostly thought as dedication to a person or superior, the Confucian notion is one of dedication to one's role or adhering to one's duty arising from one's role
- Loyalty is always understood in relationship to one's place in a social structure and the duties and obligations that arise from those relationships
  - e.g., ruler to subjects; father to son; teacher to students
  - One's role in this social structure places duties and obligations upon one which specify how one ought to act and behave within this social system

## Becoming a Good Person

- Kupperman thinks that Confucius and Aristotle have similar views about becoming a good person
  - Becoming a good person requires having the right upbringing
    - Stage 1: Early childhood training provides the appropriate psychological foundation upon which to build a virtuous character
    - Stage 2: Later training and experience require that one achieve the moral maturity to appreciate the value of a virtuous character and makes decisions based upon this understanding

## Confucius and Stage 1 of Becoming a Good Person

- In Stage 1, Confucius thinks that the training of a good person arises from the social network in which one lives
  - The family and community networks are the basis of ethical training
- Aristotle thought that the basis of ethical training was the teaching and training of young persons in an established set of rules
  - Confucius doubted the usefulness in training to follow a set of rules

## Empathy (*shu*) as a Golden Rule

- Confucian Golden Rule: “Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire” (15:24)
  - The restriction placed upon one's behavior by this rule requires one to determine what one does not want, and act accordingly
    - This differs from the Christian Golden Rule, which endorses actions toward others which are in agreement with one's own desires
    - While perhaps not morally superior, it seems the Confucian Golden Rule is more applicable in that there seems to be more uniformity in what people don't want as opposed to what they desire (e.g., don't want to be humiliated, laughed at, cheated, disrespected, etc.), expresses more humility, and is less likely to lead to harm to others

## Empathy and Ethics

- Loyalty requires that one be respectful of one's role in the social hierarchy in which one is situated
- Empathy provides the means for understanding how those above and below oneself might desire and how they want/want not to be treated
  - If you don't want your family harmed, then you ought not to harm another's family
  - If you don't want to be cheated by others, then you ought not to act in ways that might cheat others
  - If you don't want your loved one's to starve or go without basic needs in desperate times, then you ought not to deprive others of charitable resources and aid when they are in need

## Confucius and Stage 2 of Becoming a Good Person

- The pursuit of human perfection is achieved through the pursuit of *ren* for oneself and for others
  - Pursuing one's own moral virtues is not enough
  - One must assist others in the pursuit of their moral virtue as well
- The pursuit of *ren* in oneself and in others is to seek to become better, more virtuous people
  - One cannot seek *ren* without also assisting other in their pursuit of moral virtues

## Uniquely Human

- What makes us uniquely human?
  - According to Confucius, it is *ren*
- *Ren* can be translated as virtue, goodness, humanity, benevolence, moral character, or human-heartedness (latter is Koller's preference)
  - *Ren* is the highest ideal of human conduct
- What is *ren*? "Love your fellow men." (12, 22)
  - Awareness of and living toward the development of one's moral attributes as part of the process of assisting in the same awareness in others
- The ideal (superior) human lives according to *ren* even in difficult times (4, 5)
  - Forsaking *ren* is to give up on what makes one truly human

## Reciprocity of Ren

- *Ren* expresses the ideal state of human existence and humanity
- Pursuing *ren* is not an isolated, individualistic activity
  - Pursuing *ren* requires that one encourage this same attribute in others as well as oneself
  - *Ren* is concerned helping others become better people, which is part of the process of oneself becoming a better person
  - "An individual cannot achieve the state of *ren* if he or she does not also try to help others reach that same goal." (Liu, 58)

## Propriety and the Way

- How do we know how to act appropriately? How does one pursue the Way if one's knowledge of it is less than perfect?
  - Rituals are the means of determining the right action in any given social situation
  - Disciplining oneself to act appropriately in social contexts is part of the pursuit of *ren* (12, 1)
  - Rulers should strive to teach the people to act accordingly and to do the right thing, and this will lead to people wanting to improve themselves (2, 3)

## Propriety

- Propriety (*li*) is about knowing and doing the right thing in a given context
- The desire to act appropriately in any given context arises when one has *ren* as one's goal
- Self-restraint is the natural and correct means of expressing propriety
  - Propriety should arise from within the person
  - Restraint arising from laws and social convention is not a true expression of *ren*/humanity
    - Rituals are external reminders of the ideal expression of propriety

## Ritual and Virtue

- There are two areas which Confucius finds conducive to virtue
  1. Ritual
  2. Music
- Ritual was an important part of Chinese society and Confucius emphasized the ritual practices of the time
  - But, rituals performed inappropriately are empty
  - Confucius emphasized having the correct attitude when performing rituals
    - One's attitude while performing the rites should be natural, sincere, and "harmonious"

## Harmonious Ritual

- “Ritual is a kind of social dance, in which people are constrained by established forms but at the same time do express themselves. If someone participates in a ritual that is meaningless to her or him, and feels nothing, then this ritual is empty and useless. What is best is when someone, so to speak ‘gets into’ a ritual and makes of it a performance in which something genuine is well expressed. The ritual as a social dance may have the function of drawing people closer together, thereby strengthening a sense of community and encouraging feelings the opposite of loneliness and alienation. But it doesn't really work unless there is some sense of community to begin with, and there are some appropriate attitudes and feelings already.” -Kupperman (68-69)

## Ritual, Music and Refining the Self

- Ritual and music are meant to refine the individual into an even more virtuous person (I, 15)
- Both ritual and music are forms that structure action and emotion and help refine that which is good into something better (I, 15)
- Ritual and music connect the individual to one's community and culture

## Law and Civic Virtue

- Westerners tend to think that good laws will increase either good acts or virtuous people
- While Confucius thought society needed good laws, he did not think laws made virtuous people or a healthy society
  - A society focusing on rule by law will produce individuals who will follow the rules but have no shame. Better to have a society focused on virtue because they will feel both shame and the desire to become more virtuous (II, 3)

## Human Nature and Civic Virtue

- Confucius thought few people were truly bad or truly good
  - Most people are good or bad given certain situations in which they find themselves
- Building civic virtue requires two elements
  1. Virtuous Rulers: virtuous leaders who establish the correct ethical model set the tone for a harmonious society
  2. No poverty: If there is a shortage of food or basic needs, it is unlikely that a person will be capable of acting virtuously
- Having the correct social context is important for civil virtue
  - Thus, the rulers of a society have the responsibility to create a society free from poverty and conducive to civic virtue

## Good Rulers

- Effective rulers will cultivate a society that is conducive to civic and personal virtue
  - Greedy rulers will lead to greedy people who will commit crimes to acquire goods
- Effective rulers will:
  1. Lead by example by being a good person
  2. Create a context conducive to good living
  3. Act with wisdom: a good ruler cannot be simply "meaning well"; a good ruler must carefully and conscientiously act so as to benefit the people
  4. Benefit the people: good rulers must act with the benefit of the people as their obvious purpose, otherwise good rulers will not have the trust of the people

## Good Life

- Confucius recognized that a good, balanced, happy life requires being a virtuous person
- Being a virtuous person is not accomplished in isolation, but depends essentially on the community and culture in which one is raised and lives
- So, the structure of society is fundamental to a virtuous life
- Since rulers structure and lead society, good rulers are essential to living the good life
- A good life involves a harmonious social context with all contributing to virtuous living

## Cultivating Human Perfection

1. Human perfection requires the cultivation of individual virtues
  2. Cultivation of individual virtues originates in the family structure
  3. Family structure is most harmonious in a virtuous civil society
  4. A virtuous civil society is possible under the rule of a virtuous ruler
  5. So, the cultivation of human perfection requires the rule of a virtuous ruler
- Humans and society can be transformed through the cultivation of virtue

## Tolerance and Inclusiveness

- Confucianism and other East Asian philosophical traditions (Daoism, Buddhism, and Neo-confucianism) saw truth arising from the combination of multiple, partially true views
- This presumption to synthesize multiple views leads to tolerance and sympathy for differing views
  - Tolerance to other views is an attempt to find and appreciate the value in other views