Confucius: The Traditionalist As Visionary

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Confucius: The Traditionalist As Visionary
by Todd S. Herwig

It seems only fair to ask if selected aphorisms of a man deceased for some 2000-odd years can possibly be of use to us today. It is easy to look at the technological advances of the last thirty years and feel certain that the developments since the time of Confucius have left us only with a few scant biological similarities to the people of his time. But to look at the world through these lenses is to confuse technological progress with human progress; after close examination of humankind’s general situation we may be much more tempted to think, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” It is for this reason that Confucius is perhaps more topical today than ever before.

Base instincts (tendencies such as selfishness, vanity, etc.) are always easier to give into than their more virtuous opposites are to achieve. How often have we seen that the “lower” a person is willing to sink (that is to say, the more of their morality they are willing to sacrifice) the more likely they are to achieve their goals—whether they be money, power or even the Presidency? It was in Confucius’s day as it is now and may always be: rulers “were in historical fact too often arbitrary and power-mad,”¹ and their lack of virtue set the tone for their subjects and those also competing with them for power. “The sacred bonds of lineage...had largely lost their hold, as had the bonds of loyalty,”² and consequently the political and ethical realms (Confucius thought the two to be ultimately inseparable) were in twin states of rapid decline.

Was Confucius’s world truly collapsing around him, as much of the historical data and Confucius’s own dialogue would seem to indicate? Yes and no. Confucian scholar Herbert Fingarette states, “In short, what Confucius’s idiom and imagery portray as the increasing chaos of a civilization in course of degeneration was, in fact, the inevitable disorder attendant upon the evolution of a new, larger and greater single society out of the various older, smaller, culturally separate and more primitive and provincial groups.”³ Confucius’s world was becoming rapidly smaller—much like our own—and he fought to devise a way of addressing the frustrations typical of “growing pains.” Interestingly

¹ This is the first chapter of Herwig’s as yet untitled senior thesis. His advisors are Prof. Monte Hull and Prof. Lou Lombardi.
enough, as we shall see, Confucius sought to reverse this decline with an ethics which has at its core the principle which may be the lone universal in the world’s sphere of ethics. Unfortunately, most of his attempts to convert local rulers to the Tao (the Way) as he saw it, were unsuccessful; in light of what Confucius’s Tao entails, it is not difficult to see why. Most of the rulers whom Confucius met with came to power through sheer force and were motivated by the very base instincts which Confucius argued against in his teachings.4

In order to better understand what Confucius’s Tao entails, we must first describe the foundations upon which it is built; there is no better place to start than with the concept of person-making, and to make sense of person-making the person must be seen against the backdrop of their respective culture. For Confucius, culture is the natural outgrowth of the community of man, i.e. civilization, and is the primary influence on values, modes of thought, and assumptions. But what is “culture?” More than anything else, we must see it as a product of norms for work and thought within a community; these products take forms such as language, art, and ritual. The language, arts, and rituals which a society weaves through interaction with itself not only give it a means of distinction, but become matters of “social habit;”5 out of these habits grow accepted norms for civilized, participatory, social intercourse,6 which is the backbone of a central Confucian concept: li [rite]. A person is to “make” him-/herself by drawing on the various traditions of culture and perfecting their performance so as to make social intercourse as graceful and dignified as possible. Because a community is the sum of its individual parts, the process of many individuals “making” themselves is of central import the “making” and renewing of the culture’s social fabric.7

Grasping what exactly Confucius meant by li is perhaps the most important step in understanding Confucius’s Tao, but it makes sense to explain the Tao, li and jen, another core concept, simultaneously — so as to see their interrelatedness. Li, as we have stated earlier, is usually translated as “rite,” though “ceremony” is often used as well, and either of these is fine for an abbreviated treatment. But the best description of li is something closer to “rules for civilized, social interaction.”8 Under these rules, one’s correct prescribed behavior in a given situation is determined by the roles of those participating in the interaction;9 for instance, a father would act differently toward a son than toward his ruler. The chief significance of li is that, in
addition to acting as a living warehouse for things cultural, it serves as cultural law for human relationships with normative rules for action based on the roles persons perform. Because all people within a culture are raised conforming to these rules, societal interaction is smooth and predictable, yet still retains a measure of spontaneity reflecting each individual’s unique performance during interaction.

The Tao, which is usually translated as “the Way,” denotes the “Confucian commitment to a single, definite order” the alternative to which is chaos—however, the only things which seem legitimately “definite” about the Tao are some of the chief characteristics which must be present for it to be realized. But what is perhaps most ironic about the translation “the Way” is that there is no “destination” per se to reach. Confucius seems to describe the Tao mostly in riddles, but it is clear that it is the condition of being an ideal-state human being, complete in adherence to li and with the best interests of all humankind in one’s heart. The struggle to achieve and maintain this condition is a neverending battle which ends only with one’s passing away.

Perhaps, though, it is only in light of the final, fundamental piece of the puzzle that we can understand all three concepts in their true light. Jen, which has been translated variously as “the Good,” “the all-inclusive virtue,” “humanity,” and “benevolence,” amongst other things, must I think be thought of as all of these things simultaneously to do it justice. This much seems certain of jen, whereas “li also refers to the particular act in its status as exemplification of invariant norm [within a role]; jen refers to the act as expressive of an orientation of the person, as expressing his commitment to act as prescribed by li.” Jen is also a state of mind and body in which one develops the desire to be in harmony with the Way. A host of virtues lend themselves to the pursuit of jen-ness, and we shall discuss those later, but let it suffice for now to say that the jen person (the “gentleman”) has used li (rite) in order to move from the raw, unnurtured state he/she was born into to a condition closer to the ideal (Tao) state that represents the perfection of humanity. In choosing to undertake this long, arduous journey towards human perfection, one has already taken the first steps towards being jen; achieving jen is not a question of insufficient strength but the will to use one’s strength.

In trying to understand the traditional nature of li (on which the whole system is constructed), the historical context of Confucius’s time must be kept
at the forefront of our attention. One aspect of *li* for which this is especially true is the deference to elders which so characterized and defined relationships in terms of authority and respect in Confucius's day. In the context of our situation today, two chief factors which could conceivably influence the amount of respect we hold for a given individual are their level of experience and level of education. Experience, in its general sense, would seem more or less directly related to age — so it seems only logical to show respect for experience on a level relative to age. Education, in its formal, general sense, would seem related to years spent in school or otherwise formally, actively learning — but this follows no rhyme or reason in regards to an easily identifiable unit of measure such as age. In Confucius's day, because almost no one had any formal education (and those that did were almost always members of the noble class looked up to by the common people anyway), experience was the only major influence determining respect, so respect for those more advanced in years follows a certain kind of practical reason. Today, children often acquire more formal education than do their parents, so respect on that level seems less automatic; but this situation did not arise in Confucius’s day, so consequently we must put it out of our mind and appreciate the reasons for tradition as it was.

Obligations of respect were compounded (again, under *li*) with obligations towards others “in proportion to the benefit received from them,”13 and this almost certainly meant considerable obligations to members of one’s own family. The obligations shared between members of one’s family — the lowest common denominator among all members of society — Confucius made the basis of the general morality.14 In light of this, is it at all surprising that political allegiance had familial allegiance as its foundation?15 The family provided, in keeping with practicality and *li*, a system of upwardly-directed respect which all could relate to; and because the ruler was also simply fulfilling a role as prescribed in *li*, the people were obliged to show allegiance to him. This will not be the last instance we see where tradition/*li* appears to have practical foundations, either. The result is a system that is predictable (i.e., in keeping with *li*), prescribes duties for all in relation to one another’s readily perceivable social roles, and which everyone has a relation to via their own life’s experiences (which makes it very easy for the common person to subscribe/adhere to). This system has obvious benefits.
As was alluded to above, the subject ('common person", translated from min) is not the only person who must fulfill duties prescribed by li; in fact, the ruler is the person with the proportionally greatest number of obligations to fulfill. In keeping with this level of responsibility, Confucius advises the ruler to see himself as a father to his people\textsuperscript{16} — this will not only give both he and his subjects a means by which to relate to him, but will help define the solemn nature of his task at hand. Like children, subjects have a variety of needs, which the ruler must provide for.

The most basic of these needs is the general welfare of the min, though, interestingly enough, this welfare extends beyond the mere provision of material goods to include such intangibles as the ability to trust the ruler. In fact, when asked to rank (in order of importance) the needs of the people, trust of the ruler wins out over food and arms; Confucius says, 'For from old death has been the lot of all men; but a people that no longer trusts its rulers is lost indeed."\textsuperscript{17} If trust is the most important thing which a ruler must provide for his people, then the next most important intangible would have to be his own good moral example.

Trust and meeting the immediate physical needs are most important for establishing some semblance of order, but without the proper exemplary behavior of the ruler the sophistication which culture has begun to bring to the people cannot be sustained. Confucius's statement that, "The common people [min] may be made to follow it (the Way) but may not be made to understand it,"\textsuperscript{18} underscores the all-encompassing leadership role which he felt the ruler needed to fulfill. Again, the parental imagery is applicable here: the ruler serves as a father in giving his children (the min) the morality which they need for virtuous social intercourse; without it, societal progress, harmony, and order come to a close. Confucius operates under the assumption that the ruler sets the tone (moral and otherwise) for his empire, if the min see that lawlessness and dishonorable actions go unpunished or even encouraged by the powers at be (and remember that li teaches the people to look upward for guidance), then this will become the norm throughout the empire. \textit{[Analects: II:19, XII:17, 19, 22, XIII:6]}

Being constantly wise and virtuous in the position of ruler may seem too much of a task for one mere mortal, but Confucius does not think that it need be so; in fact, if the ruler is truly adept he will have to do very little, for his
empire will virtually run itself if he merely “face[s] south.”19 Obviously mere facing south will not help the empire, but here Confucius uses it as a metaphor for following li (facing south was considered ritually appropriate for the ruler). In addition, the ruler should take particular care to surround himself with ministers who also are jen, as they will be seen as extensions of him and must carry forth his plans to the min.

Very little is said about how much virtue the min need for the Tao to prevail in a given state — presumably the more the better. This much seems certain: one, because it is a common theme in The Analects that the people will behave jen-ly if their leaders do, it seems only logical to think that the people will behave jen-ly in proportion to the degree of virtue they sense in the behavior of their leaders; and two, enough virtue should be present (ideally) so that the empire runs itself. Confucius’s notions about shame (ch’ih), which can only be cultivated through some sense of virtue, underscore this sentiment. Shame is but one example (and will have to suffice for the purpose of our discussion here) of a virtuous characteristic necessary for the Tao to prevail in a state. Confucius’s sentiment is:

Guide them [min] by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.20

Confucius, while not averse to using punishment as a last resort (if the wrong-doer will only understand that means of dissuasion), does not see it in the Western sense of clearing a “moral debt.”21 Not only does he see punishment as being less effective than shame, but shame — which is the perception of failing in the duties of one’s role — should ideally lead to self-reeducation to overcome the previous defect in one’s actions. Thus, if a ruler has cultivated virtue by setting a virtuous example through his own actions, the min should acquire a sense of shame and therefore be able to reeducate themselves (as opposed to requiring the government to reeducate them); this is plainly a more efficient and utopic situation for both ruler and subject alike.

To summarize, then, what are the most important features of a government in keeping with the Tao? First, the ruler must provide for the needs of his people, while these definitely include the physical things necessary for survival
— such as food, shelter and arms — a basis for trust between him and his people is preeminent. After all, “[The] rectification or cultivation of virtue can be brought about only after the satisfaction of the fundamental necessities of life...are uniformly stressed.” Secondly, a ruler must always be cognizant of the fact that he is an example to all of his subjects — even his educated ministers; he alone sets the “tone,” moral and otherwise, for his government and state. Third, the ruler is the chief treasurer of the traditions of his culture. In acting in accordance with li he passes down the culture to those below him (i.e., the min); “facing south” is but a metaphor for promoting li and letting these rules for social interaction do the real work of attending to the kingdom. Lastly, the ruler must succeed in giving some notion of virtue — of right and wrong — to his subjects; if he should accomplish this (and li, the system of cultural traditions and rules for social interaction, should help him immensely) then his state should be able to run itself, for the most part. As was evidenced in the discussion of shame (ch’ih), government runs much more efficiently when the people can “police” themselves. D. C. Lau’s statement that, “The sole test of a good ruler is whether he succeeds in promoting the welfare of the common people,” hardly seems revealing to us at first, but some Confucian notions about what constitutes “welfare” seem quite progressive and innovative even today.

There remains only one piece of the Confucian Tao left to be discussed, and that involves describing the features and traits of the jen man (“gentleman”) more completely. This section was left until now because I think that the jen man’s characteristics only make sense in light of what has been described above. Just as becoming jen is the climax of a person’s life, so too it must be seen as the climax of this chapter and of all Confucian thought in general, I believe.

A couple of things must be said at the outset of our discussion of the jen man/gentleman. First, in contrast to Western ethical philosophy, most of which prides itself on its applicability to the entire spectrum of humanity (from prince to pauper), Confucius’s earlier statement about the common people being able to follow the Way but not understand it speaks volumes. Confucius has no delusions that real jen-ness is for everybody; many will achieve degrees of virtue, but at best only a few will attain jen’s complete state. The fact that Confucius admits to never having met either a Sage (the highest
ideal, seen only in figures of antiquity) or a Good Man \(^2^5\) (a truly enlightened despot, the next highest ideal) only confirms this. However, and this I think reinforces the idea that the pursuit of jen is what is important rather than attainment of its ultimate state, the realistically ideal moral character is the gentleman — and Confucius mentions him in more than 80 chapters of The Analects.\(^2^6\) In light of the difficulty of being jen, then, we must always remember that this is really intended as an ethics for the privileged and enlightened few.

Lastly, in order to give the virtues expected of the jen man “their fullest realization” a gentleman must take part in government.\(^2^7\) Realizing that most jen men will, at best, reach the ministerial ranks, as was evidenced earlier, the ministers are still a particularly important part of the government because their actions represent the ruler. It is due to this that they must possess a number of critical virtues vital to carrying out this function. Let us turn our attention now to the virtues critical to the making of the jen man, all the while remaining aware of the fact that jen is a state of mind and therefore not achievable by qualities alone.

First of all, “A gentleman, in his plans thinks of the Way; he does not think how he is going to make a living”\(^2^8\); that is to say, a jen man has more important, lofty concerns than making money. If the Way prevails in his state, the ruler should provide for a person’s basic needs and thus contribute to an atmosphere in which the pursuit of jen can have a person’s full attention. Where profit is a person’s objective they will justify anything to achieve its procurement, but the nature of jen makes it such that nothing should be sacrificed for it, but whatever sacrifices are called for will adversely affect no one else.

Second, reliability and accuracy in speech \(\text{hsin}\)\(^2^9\) are considered major virtues. “Not to carry out a resolution is to fail to be \(\text{hsin};\) to have a statement not borne out by facts...is equally to fail to be \(\text{hsin}.”\(^3^0\) Confucius’s general advice is to be quick to act but slow to speak.\(^3^1\) [see I:14, IV:24, IX:24]

Third, reverence \(\text{ching}\) is a virtue which describes the frame of mind a person would have if taking part in a ceremony.\(^3^2\) The following description of ching, by D. C. Lau, bears a striking resemblance to the nature of li in that it is preoccupied with fulfilling the duties of certain roles:

_Ching...is born of awareness of the immensity of one’s responsibility to promote the welfare of the common people. It is a combination of the fear of failing in the responsi-
bility one is charged with and the solemn single-mindedness towards the satisfactory discharging of that responsibility.\textsuperscript{33}

Fourth, the virtues of wisdom/intelligence (chih) and courage (yung) are important to jen.\textsuperscript{34} Not only does the wise person know almost intuitively what right and wrong are in a given situation, but he is a good judge of character as well.\textsuperscript{35} [see XII:22] Courage is a double-edged sword, and thus must be used in the pursuit of jen (or some other such noble pursuit) to be a virtue; but it is indispensable to the gentleman in seeing through his goal of becoming jen.\textsuperscript{36} [see XVII:23]

Fifth, hsiao (the respect and love owed to one’s parents) is of prime import because, “...[Being] a good father will also make a good ruler. Love for people outside one’s family is looked upon as an extension of the love for members of one’s own family.”\textsuperscript{37}

But the most important virtue of all — and what I have come to believe is the guiding principle of Confucius’s morality, if not all morality — is jen itself, which is often translated as benevolence. What then, is the most important trait of benevolence? “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.”\textsuperscript{38} In most Confucian texts this is referred to as mutuality and reciprocality, but most Westerners will recognize it by its more biblical designation: it is the Golden Rule. If we constantly keep at the forefront of our minds the way in which we would like to be treated ourselves, how can our outlook be anything but good in dealing with those around us? If we realize that our own welfare is interdependent on the welfare of others (and vice versa)\textsuperscript{39} we have indeed reached a notable milestone in the history of human development. This is particularly important to the ruler and his ministers because they are charged with providing for the welfare of the people - what better maxim to use in governing fairly, justly, and in keeping with li?

These are the most important virtues characteristic of the jen man, though this is by no means to say that no other virtues are necessary, \textit{au contraire}. Nevertheless, as pertains to these virtues, what remains is for the jen man to see them and implement them in accordance with li. But what about tradition and the rules for social interaction — do all of these rites waste many of the jen man’s virtues by binding and confining the him to old-fashioned ways of addressing problems to the exclusion of creative, new approaches? I think not. We have already discussed the value of li — by having normative rules for
social interaction which take into account the distinctiveness of our culture we emerge from and break with the world of mere animals. In keeping with this, *li* is the bridge between humans in their unnurtured state and the ideal state (in harmony with the *Tao*) which they can aspire to; it is "the great civilizer." We must also remember that as each participant in *li* "derives meaning and value" from it, they simultaneously strengthen and develop *li* (yes, *develop* tradition) by their contribution of 'novel meaning and value.'

Would it make sense for Confucius to use *li* to bind us to traditionally paradigmatic ways of addressing problems if he wanted us to continue to evolve into more perfect human beings? I think not.

Lastly, what I would also point out about *The Analects* is that Confucius's approach is obviously very general. While he does give a certain sense about many concepts, the construction and compilation of his collected sayings is appropriately unfocused; that is to say, it follows little rhyme or reason. *Jen* is discussed throughout, as are many other ideas, rather than in specific books designed to convey all there is to know about each concept. This is in stark contrast to the neo-logical and organized fashion in which most Western ethical texts are organized; this belies their posture as all-knowing, "this-settles-it-once-and-for-all" works, which typically outline a very specific path to be taken in order to achieve Truth. It was Confucius's genius to sketch a picture of what virtues and qualities the political leader of the future would need, yet remain timeless enough in his scope to assume that with these qualities a person could be expected to display proper innovation when necessary to deal with problems as he encountered them. By having a particularly acute sense of his own culture, the gentleman could not only be a good judge as to what would work with his people, but his sense of *li* would serve as a valuable history as well. We must know where we have been to see where we are going, and Confucius’s *jen* man would be more than acutely aware of this; consequently there is no better qualified leader for the future.
Endnotes

8. *Confucius — The Secular As Sacred*, pp. 48-49.
11. Ibid., p. 42.
15. Ibid., p. 18.
16. Ibid., p. 18.
19. Ibid., [XV:4], p. 43.
27. Ibid., p. 31.
30. Ibid., p. 25.
31. Ibid., p. 25.
34. Ibid., p. 22.
35. Ibid., p. 22.
37. Ibid., p. 18.
39. Ibid., [VI:28], p. 122.