CONFUCIAN ETHICS

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International Encyclopedia of Ethics (John Wiley & Sons, 2013)

"Confucianism" is generally used as a translation of the Chinese expression *rujia*, or the school of *ru*, to refer to a school of thought that started with Confucius (6^{th}-5^{th} century B.C.) (see CONFUCIUS) and that continues to be influential in China, as well as in East and Southeast Asia, till present times. The character *ru* referred to a social group that had existed well before Confucius' times, a group that was well versed in ancient rituals and that earned its living as professional ritualists and as educators. Confucius was a member of the group, but his influence was due largely to ideas he developed in response to the social and political problems of his times.

China, though officially under the rule of the royal family of the Zhou, had been divided into different states that defied the Zhou rule and waged wars against each other. Influential families also strived for dominance within individual states, and the resulting social disorder brought immense misery to the people. Confucius had the vision of an orderly and prosperous society at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty, and believed that the present disorder was due to the disintegration of the traditional norms and values that had bound people together earlier. The remedy to the present

disorder involved restoring these norms and values, which include norms governing human interaction within the family and state and in other recurring social contexts, as well as values such as respect for elders and love for parents, or being trustworthy and being conscientious toward one's duties. While often viewed as a conservative because of this aspect of his teachings, Confucius also advocated reflecting on the spirit behind these norms and values, and was to some extent open to minor deviations from traditional norms in response to the changing circumstances of life.

Despite his attempts to influence rulers of states, Confucius did not have much success in bringing about the desired social and political reforms, but he had many students who continued to spread and develop his teachings. The Analects, containing a record of his sayings and of conversations with as well as sayings by his students, was compiled over time by disciples and disciples of disciples. A few generations later, Mencius (4th century B.C.) (see MENCIUS) and Xunzi (3rd century B.C.) (see XUNZI) further developed his ideas, though differing in their emphases and in their understanding of the basic human constitution. Along with Confucius, they are generally regarded as the three major classical Confucian thinkers. Confucian thought continued to evolve along with other schools of thought, especially Daoist (see DAOIST ETHICS?) and Buddhist (see BUDDHIST ETHICS) thought, and these three schools of thought exerted mutual influence on each other.

Within the Confucian school, Mencius' and Xunzi's teachings competed for influence, but largely due to the efforts of Zhu Xi (1130-1200) (see ZHU XI), Mencius eventually came to be regarded as the true transmitter of Confucius' teachings. Zhu Xi compiled the Four Books, which include the Analects of Confucius, the Mencius, and two short essays Centrality and Commonality and Great Learning, the last two being originally two chapters in the Book of Rites, probably datable to around the 2nd century B.C.. These texts came to be viewed as cannons of the Confucian school, and Zhu Xi's own teachings also became influential. A few centuries later, another Confucian thinker, Wang Yangming (1472-1529) (see WANG YANGMING), developed ideas that are critical of Zhu Xi's teachings. These two versions of later Confucian thought became influential not just in China, but also in other East and Southeast Asian countries such as Japan and Korea.

While the different versions of Confucian thought that have evolved over time differ in significant ways, including different views of the basic human constitution and different emphases in their understanding of moral cultivation, there are also important commonalities that warrant our referring to them as variants of one school of thought. The discussion below will focus on some of these common ideas, and will seek to bring out some of the more distinctive characteristics of Confucian ethical thought.

As mentioned earlier, Confucian thinkers uphold certain social norms and values that pertain to ongoing social arrangements, such as the family and the state, and to various recurring social contexts, such as the relation between host and guest or people's conduct on ceremonial occasions. The character *li* refers to the rules of conduct involved. Though often translated as "rites" or "rituals" because of its earlier use to refer to sacrificial rites, its scope has broadened by Confucius' times to include such rules as how a host should receive a guest or how to conduct a funeral, as well as obligations that, for example, a son has toward his parents. Early Confucian thinkers already allowed room for minor deviations from *li* as long as the spirit behind it is preserved, and later Confucians thought that ancient *li*, with its detailed complexities, was no longer fully applicable to their times, and advocated a simpler form of *li* that is more practicable.

There is no close western equivalent to the notion *li*, and it might seem puzzling how the diverse range of rules just mentioned can be subsumed under a single term. Probably, what ties them together is a certain attitude that Confucians believe should accompany the observance of *li*, one that is described in the Book of Rites as "lowering oneself and elevating others". This attitude involves one's treating others respectfully, independently of their social positions, as if one were treating someone in a higher social position. One should focus attention on them, treat them with

caution and seriousness, and should not allow oneself to be unnecessarily distracted. The Confucian advocacy of such an attitude probably has to do with a view of humans as beings that have a sense of dignity and sensitivity to the way they are treated. *Li* provides a set of rules that codifies our treatment of others in a way that acknowledges this sense of dignity; it conduces to harmony in human relations and beautifies human interaction. Upbringing in *li* cultivates a proper regard for others, and steers us away from the tempting tendency to over-emphasize our own importance when interacting with them.

Another important ethical attribute for the Confucians is *ren*. *Ren* can be used in a broader sense to refer to an all-encompassing ethical ideal that includes the observance of *li* as well as other attributes, and in a more specific sense to refer to an appropriate affective concern for others. When used in the latter sense, it is often translated as "benevolence". While such concern should extend to all humans, there should be a gradation depending on the different social relations one stands to others – e.g., one's concern for and obligations toward one's parents should go beyond that toward a next door neighbor. For early Confucian thinkers, such concern might also extend to other animals, taking such forms as being sparing in one's use of animals. For later Confucians, it basically extends to all things, as reflected in the explication of *ren* in terms of two ideas: a ceaseless life-giving force that runs through all things,

and one's forming one body with things.

Both ideas have early roots. Early texts present *tian*, a term translated usually as "Heaven" and sometimes as "Nature", as the source of all things. Some of these texts, such as the Book of Change, describe Heaven in terms of a ceaseless life giving force – it continuously gives birth to and nourishes everything. Later Confucian thinkers take up this idea, and believe that humans should be like Heaven in this regard, caring for and nourishing other people and things, including animals and plants. It is as if everything forms part of one's own body; the life giving force in one reaches everything just as it reaches every part of one's own body. The idea of forming one body is also found in early texts, some of which presents both Heaven and the ideal ruler as forming one body with all things; in addition, the ideal ruler is presented as relating to his people in the way that parents relate to their new born infants. This idea reflects the view that the ruler should be caring toward his people in the way that he would be toward his own children or toward parts of his own body. Later Confucians take up this idea and believe that the *ren* person treats all people and things as part of his body in that he would be sensitive to their well being. To be insensitive to the misery of others would be like being insensitive to the pain in parts of one's own body, which in Chinese medical texts is also described as a lack of *ren*.

Thus, *ren* emphasizes one's being sensitive and attentive to the well-being of

others in appropriate ways. Unlike the notion *li* which focuses on a view of humans as having a sense of dignity and as being sensitive to the manner in which they are treated, *ren*'s focus is more on a view of humans and things as having material needs and tangible interests that can be promoted or harmed. Like the emphasis on *li*, the emphasis on *ren* also steers people away from a certain kind of self-centeredness. It moves us away from the tempting tendency to put undue weight on the well-being or interests of ourselves or those close to us, so that we may put appropriate weight on the well-being and interests of others.

Another ethical attribute highlighted by the Confucians is *yi*. The character *yi*, often translated as "dutifulness" or "righteousness", has the earlier meaning of self-regard, a refusal to be subject to disgraceful treatment. While what is disgraceful was often viewed in early China in terms of insulting treatment of oneself as measured against certain generally shared public standards, early Confucians advocated a transformation in our understanding of disgrace. What is truly disgraceful, on their view, is not a matter of how we are treated by others, but a matter of our own behavior, whether it falls short of certain ethical standards to which we should be committed. How we are treated, while it does matter, pales in significance by comparison, and as long as one is aware that one actually conforms to such ethical standards, one can take consolation and contentment in this even in the most adverse

circumstances. This is true not just of the way we are viewed and treated by others, but also of other adverse conditions of life over which we have limited control, such as poverty and sickness, or death of beloved ones.

This kind of attitude is conveyed in a number of ways. The firm commitment to the ethical is conveyed through what the Confucians regard as the highest form of courage – it involves being without fear or doubt in confronting challenging circumstances, based on the realization that one is in the right. The attitude toward unfavorable circumstances of life is conveyed by the term *ming*, usually translated as "fate", "destiny", or "decree". The Confucians use the term to convey a certain attitude of willing acceptance, directed not toward external occurrences in general but toward specific adverse circumstances that one encounters in life. One does not complain or blame others for what has transpired, and does not seek to alter things through improper means. Though one might still be emotionally affected, one does not invest one's emotional energies dwelling on the situation, and instead redirects them to other endeavors. At the same time, one takes contentment in the fact that one is abiding by the ethical. Here, "contentment" is a translation of the term *le*, which is often translated as "joy". "Contentment" is probably a more accurate translation as the state involved is not one of excitement or arousal, but one of flowing along at ease with things. In this case, it is the sense of ease as one flows along with the ethical way

of life, or *dao*, a term often translated as "the Way". Together, these different ways of describing the Confucian perspective on life give a sense in which the perspective involves a certain equanimity, where "equanimity" is understood as a state of mind in which, while one is engaged in and emotionally responding to one's surroundings at one level, one is at the same time emotionally unperturbed at another level. Such equanimity, for the Confucians, has its anchor in the commitment to the Way.

From the above discussion of the Confucian understanding of *ren*, *li*, *yi*, we can see that what the Confucians advocate is not just the maintenance of certain social norms and values, but a total transformation of the individual to embody the kinds of attribute just described. Such transformation is accomplished both through proper upbringing and environmental influences, and through the self-reflective efforts of the individual. The emphasis on self-cultivation, that is, the process of self-reflection and self-transformation that one undertakes in adulthood, is probably one of the most distinctive features of Confucian ethical thought. What guides this process is *xin*, a character usually translated as "heart", "mind", or "heart/mind"; *xin* refers to the organ of the heart which is viewed as the site of what we would now refer to as cognitive and affective activities.

Confucian thinkers have different emphases when elaborating on the process, often based on differences in their views of the basic human constitution, and these

differences led to different branches of Confucian thought. For example, Mencius believes that the human constitution prior to social influences contains certain shared incipient ethical inclinations that, if properly nurtured, will be realized in the Confucian ideal as characterized by *ren*, *yi* and *li*. By contrast, Xunzi emphasizes that the basic human constitution contains self-regarding desires that can lead to disorder if unregulated, and regards the traditional social arrangements that comprise *li* as a means of promoting order and increasing resources, thereby enhancing satisfaction of such desires. Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, both influenced by Mencius but developing their ideas in ways going beyond Mencius, regard humans as in some sense already fully ethical though vulnerable to corrupting influences. The two, in turn, disagree in their understanding of what it is to be fully ethical, holding different views on how knowledge and action are related in ethical conduct. Without getting into the fine details of these disagreements, we can identify several aspects of the self-cultivation process that are given different emphases by these thinkers.

One aspect of the process already highlighted by Confucius is learning, where "learning" is a translation of a Chinese term that has the connotation not just of learning in the contemporary sense, but also of embodying in one's daily life the moral lessons that one has drawn from what one has studied. For the early Confucians, the objects of learning include all aspects of the cultural heritage, including not just

the rules of *li*, but also such items as poetry, history, music and archery. Because of his view that the basic human constitution contains self-regarding desires that can lead to disorder if unregulated, Xunzi in particular emphasizes learning as a way to reshape and transform such desires. In later Confucian thought, because the idea of a set of canonical texts has become well established, the study of classics is particularly highlighted, though there are differences regarding the way to approach such study and the extent to which it is emphasized. Zhu Xi emphasizes the study of classics as a way to get at the true meaning of the teachings of ancient sages, and also advocates the study of history and of contemporary affairs so as to draw moral lessons from them. The goal is not a kind of detached understanding, but the practice and personal experience of what one has learnt so as to deepen one's moral insight. Such insight is often viewed in perceptual terms – the heart/mind can have clearer or less clear insight into ethical standards just as the eyes and ears can perceive sensory objects more or less clearly.

Another aspect of the process, again highlighted by Confucius himself, is to engage in a kind of inner management of oneself, constantly reflecting on and examining oneself to pre-empt or correct one's own flaws. The heart/mind has oversight over the operations of other parts of the person, including regulating and guiding one's desires, and it can also reflect on and reshape its own operations. It can

reshape not just its own thoughts and inclinations, but also the minute and subtle movements of the heart/mind as soon as they emerge, so that any ethical flaw can be detected and corrected the moment it takes shape. Later Confucians in addition highlighted a mental posture of caution and concentration, as a way to pre-empt any problematic activity of the heart/mind when one starts responding to situations one encounters. The underlying thought is that ethical flaws have their source deep within the human psychology, well before manifesting themselves in actual human activities or in decisions and intentions that one forms, and one important ethical task is to pre-empt such problems or to correct them as soon as they arise.

We noted earlier that the attributes *ren* and *li* focus on how one relates to others, and helps to steer one away from certain kinds of self-centeredness, namely, the tendency to put undue weight on one's own well-being and interests and on one's own importance. The attribute *yi*, by contrast, focuses on how one relates to certain ethical standards, and involves a total subordination of oneself to such standards. Still, *yi* also involves a move away form another kind of self-centeredness, one that involves putting undue weight on the external conditions of life that affect oneself, thereby detracting from one's conformity to these standards. Later Confucians highlight the point that different forms of ethical failure ultimately have their sources in self-centeredness of some kind, and used the term *si*, often translated as "selfish", to

refer to such self-centeredness. Every human is in some sense already ethical, though when humans come into contact with the external world, self-centered thoughts and inclinations of the heart/mind may arise and detract from this ethical orientation. The fundamental ethical task, then, is to eliminate such self-centeredness. Zhu Xi describes the different aspects of self-cultivation in such terms, regarding both learning and the inner management of oneself as serving such a purpose. Wang Yangming, who by comparison puts even greater emphasis on this kind of inner management, highlights the idea of directly eliminating the self-centeredness that one detects in oneself.

What have just been described are just some examples of the different aspects of self-cultivation considered by the Confucian thinkers, but they suffice to illustrate how this kind of self-reflective moral exercise that one undertakes in adulthood has a central place in both early and later Confucian thought. One should engage in this kind of exercise to ensure that one's heart/mind is fully oriented in an ethical direction. This complete ethical orientation is conveyed by the term *cheng*, a term sometimes translated as "sincerity" though a more accurate translation is probably "wholeness" or "completeness". The term highlights a state of the heart/mind in which it is really or fully ethical; there is no discrepancy between the inner and the outer nor within the heart/mind itself. Unlike the terms *ren*, *yi*, and *li*, which emphasize different aspects of

the ethical ideal, the term *cheng* describes the heart/mind at a different level, referring to a state in which it fully embodies all these different aspects of the ideal. When the heart/mind attains this state, one will also have a nourishing and transformative effect on others; this idea is continuous with the explication of *ren* in terms of nourishing and forming one body with all things.

Yet another pair of terms, already used by Xunzi but particularly highlighted by the later Confucians, that describe the ideal state of the heart/mind is *xu*, usually translated as "vacuous" or "empty", and *jing*, usually translated as "still". For the later Confucians, in order for the heart/mind to be completely oriented in an ethical direction, it has to be free from psychological elements that exhibit the kind of self-centeredness just described. *Xu* emphasizes the absence of such elements, while *jing* emphasizes the absence of the disturbing effects of such elements. Some metaphors used in connection with these two terms are that of a clear mirror and that of still water. Eliminating the psychological elements that exhibit a problematic form of self-centeredness is like wiping dust off a mirror. Just as the mirror will be clear and can reflect things accurately when the dust has been removed, the heart/mind will be able to respond appropriately to situations it confronts when free from these psychological elements. Also, water can act like a clear mirror when still, but can become muddied when disturbed. Similarly, the heart/mind can become unsettled by

the problematic psychological elements, and be vulnerable to uncertainty or be torn in different directions. One can make the heart/mind still, that is, free from these disturbing effects, by eliminating these psychological elements.

There are several other ideas that are central to Confucian ethical thought and that we have not yet considered. For example, *zhong*, a term that can be translated as "doing one's best", emphasizes our whole-hearted devotion to activities that we appropriately undertake, while *xin*, a term often translated as "trustworthiness", emphasizes the complete reliability in our representation of things, especially of ourselves and our own actions. *Shu*, a term sometimes translated as "reciprocity" and often compared to western versions of the golden rule, emphasizes our using our own likes and dislikes as a way to gauge the situation of others. The understanding of these ideas has also evolved over time, and later Confucian thinkers often invoked a distinction between the 'learner' and the 'sage' to properly situate these ideas. For example, *shu*, which Confucius explains by saying "do not impose on others what one does not desire in oneself", is practiced by the learner who needs to consciously use himself as a starting point to gauge the situation of others, while *ren* describes the sage who cares for others spontaneously and without effort. While this distinction between the 'learner' and the 'sage' is prominent especially in later Confucian thought, and while both early and later Confucian thinkers refer to the 'sage' as a figure who

has embodied the ethical ideal, it is likely that the idea of the ‘sage’ is more a way of indicating certain directions in which humans should set their aspirations, rather than suggesting some kind of endpoint to the self-cultivation process that one can attain and beyond which no further ethical effort is needed. As the potential for deviation from the ethical is always present, the kinds of moral exercise we have described are life long endeavors, and efforts at self-cultivation do not come to an end till one’s death.

From the above account, we see how Confucian thought advocates a total transformation of the self that involves properly relating oneself to others and to certain ethical standards. Such transformation affects one’s whole outlook on life, and the total subordination to the ethical is particularly demanding as it can incur grave personal sacrifices, including giving up one’s own life. At the same time, though living up to this ideal might come at the expense of unwelcome circumstances of life to which one might respond emotionally, one retains equanimity in that one stays emotionally unperturbed at another level, taking as one’s anchor a firm commitment to the ethical. The idea of a life long commitment to a total transformation of the self that exhibits these characteristics explains why Confucian ethical thought has also been described as a kind of spiritual thought, where the spiritual is understood in a way not tied to pietistic and devotional practices.

SEE ALSO: CONFUCIUS, BUDDHIST ETHICS, DAOIST ETHICS?, MENCIUS, WANG YANGMING, XUNZI, ZHU XI

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