Ethical Principles of Confucianism

Consideration in Ethics
April 25, 2013
Life and Times

Key Principles

History of Confucian Thought

Applications to Contemporary Issues
Biographical Details

• Born around 551 B.C. and lived 72 (?) years
• Warring States Period
  – Known for resolving dispute between his states, Lu and Qi
  – Kings from regions constantly fought against one another, formed shifting temporary alliances and diplomatic relations were “plagued by deceit, ruse and subterfuge.” During Confucius’ life, Kissinger writes “Greed and violence were unchecked. All Under Heaven was again in disarray.”
• Followers recorded his teachings in the Analects
Foundations of Ethical System

Despite the lack of a systematic presentation of his philosophy, Confucius maintained that there was a single principle that connected his moral teachings; although Confucius does not actually tell us what this principle is, one of his main students, Zengzi, explained this principle in terms of two interrelated concepts: zhong and shu.
Zhong (loyalty)

One’s moral duties shift as one adopts various roles in life, of which there will always be several in accordance with one’s various relationships with different people. However there is one moral obligation that applies to all roles and all people: the virtue of zhong (loyalty)....Loyalty is not a devotion directed specifically toward one’s superior: rather, it is directed toward the role one plays—being loyal means doing one’s best in whatever one does. In this sense, loyalty can be defined as “doing what one is supposed to do” or “being loyal to one’s role.” In other words, a social role is not simply a social assignment; it is also a moral assignment....The notion of zhong, as applied in the Confucian moral hierarchy, comprises a moral theory that focuses on moral duties or obligations, rather than on rights or entitlements. It constitutes a basic tenet of Confucianism, which is an ethics built on demands on oneself rather than on others.
Shu

The other half of Confucius’ “single thread” is the notion of *shu (empathy)*. One needs to be loyal to the different roles one plays relative to the other person. Now with *zhongshu* (empathy), one can also extend oneself to appreciate what the other person in the opposite role would desire. For example, a father can do his best as a father to edify his son. But if he remembers how much he resented his father’s dictatorship, then he should modify his discipline and not impose too much restraint on his son.... [Similarly,] if we do not wish our family members to be harmed, then we should not harm any stranger who is also a family member to someone else.... *Loyalty to one’s own role is not sufficient for securing social harmony unless it is accompanied by everyone’s empathetic understanding of other people’s wishes. In this way, the two notions, zhong and shu (loyalty and empathy), are equally essential to the establishment of Confucius’ ideal society.*
Ren (humanness)

Confucius' social philosophy largely revolves around the concept of ren, “compassion” or “loving others.” Cultivating or practicing such concern for others involved deprecating oneself.
Ren (humanness)

With regard to humaneness: wishing to establish oneself, one helps to establish others; wishing to develop oneself, one helps to develop others. The ability to take what is close (i.e. what one wishes for oneself) as an analogy [for what others would also wish for] — this may be called the method of cultivating humaneness.
What is the Difference

Confucius: “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.”

Bible: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

And more: …
THE GOLDEN RULE

HINDUISM
This is the law of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain to you.
Mahabharata 3.3.34

BUDDHISM
Treat not others in ways that you would not find harmful.
Udana-Veda 5.10

CONFOCULIANISM
One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct...telling kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.

ISLAM
Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you will for yourself.
The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

JUDAISM
What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary.

JAINISM
One should treat all creatures in the world as you would like to be treated.

ZOROASTRIANISM
Do not do to others what is injurious to yourself.

NATIVE SPIRITUALITY
We are as much alive as we keep the earth alive.

UNITARIANISM
We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

This is a diagram illustrating the Golden Rule from various world religions.
Li (ritual)

The way to maintain and cultivate such royal ‘virtue’ was through the practice and enactment of li or ‘rituals’—the ceremonies that defined and punctuated the lives of the ancient Chinese aristocracy.

(e.g. toasting and gift exchanges)
Confucius taught that the practice of altruism he thought necessary for social cohesion could be mastered only by those who have learned self-discipline. Learning self-restraint involves studying and mastering *li, the ritual forms and rules of propriety through which one expresses respect for superiors and enacts his role in society in such a way that he himself is worthy of respect and admiration*. A concern for propriety should inform everything that one says and does.
How do Ren and Li fit together?
Yan Yuan asked about humanness. The Master said, “To overcome self-centerededness and return to ritual propriety is the way to become humane. If one could overcome self-centerededness and return to ritual propriety for a single day, the whole world would return to humaneness.”

Does the implementation of humaneness depend on oneself or on others?” Yan Yuan said: “May I ask about the details?” The Master said “If it does not accord with ritual propriety do not look; if it does not accord with ritual propriety do not listen; if it does not accord with ritual propriety do not speak; if it does not accord with ritual propriety do not act.”

Yan Yuan said: “Though I am not clever, I will try to put these words into practice.”
Jia (filial piety)

Central to all ethical teachings found in the Analects of Confucius is the notion that the social arena in which the tools for creating and maintaining harmonious relations are fashioned and employed is the extended family. Among the various ways in which social divisions could have been drawn, the most important were the vertical lines that bound multigenerational lineages. And the most fundamental lessons to be learned by individuals within a lineage were what role their generational position had imposed on them and what obligations toward those senior or junior to them were associated with those roles.
The Master said, “It is the moral character of a neighborhood that constitutes its excellence, and how can he be considered wise, who does not elect to dwell in moral surroundings.”
For Confucius, what characterized superior rulership was the possession of de or ‘virtue.’ Conceived of as a kind of moral power that allows one to win a following without recourse to physical force, such ‘virtue’ also enabled the ruler to maintain good order in his state without troubling himself and by relying on loyal and effective deputies. Confucius claimed that, “He who governs by means of his virtue is, to use an analogy, like the pole-star: it remains in its place while all the lesser stars do homage to it.”
Analects on De

The Master said, "Man is born for uprightness. If a man lose his uprightness, and yet live, his escape from death is the effect of mere good fortune."
Teaching

• A hallmark of Confucius' thought is his emphasis on education and study.

• While he also emphasizes the “Six Arts” — ritual, music, archery, chariot-riding, calligraphy, and computation — it is clear that he regards morality as the most important subject.

• Confucius' position appears to be a middle course between learning and reflecting on what one has learned. “He who learns but does not think is lost. He who thinks but does not learn is in great danger” (Lunyu 2.15).

• Confucius' pedagogical methods are striking. He never discourses at length on a subject. Instead he poses questions, cites passages from the classics, or uses apt analogies, and waits for his students to arrive at the right answers.
“Only for one deeply frustrated over what he does not know will I provide a start; only for one struggling to form his thoughts into words will I provide a beginning. But if I hold up one corner and he cannot respond with the other three I will not repeat myself” (Lunyu 7.8).
Analects on Learning

The Master said, "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it."
The Master said, “Learning without wisdom is useless, Wisdom without learning is dangerous.”
On Leadership

• “If your desire is for good, the people will be good. The moral character of the ruler is the wind; the moral character of those beneath him is the grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends”

• “If the people be led by laws, and uniformity among them be sought by punishments, they will try to escape punishment and have no sense of shame. If they are led by virtue, and uniformity sought among them through the practice of ritual propriety, they will possess a sense of shame and come to you of their own accord” (Lunyu 2.3; see also 13.6.).
The Master said, “If you govern the people by laws, and keep them in order by penalties, they will avoid the penalties, yet lose their sense of shame. But, if you govern them by your moral excellence, and keep them in order by your dutiful conduct, they will retain their sense of shame, and also live up to this standard.”
The Master said, “In archery, piercing the target is not the essential, for men are not of equal strength. Such was the rule of yore.”
A Brief History

- Mencius
- Legalism
- Neo-Confucianism
- Communist purging
- Resurgence
The Chairman and the Master

Kissinger writes, “Mao generated a pervasive assault on traditional Chinese political thought: where the Confucian tradition prized universal harmony, Mao idealized upheaval and the clash of opposing forces in both domestic and foreign affairs ... the Confucian tradition prized cultivation of balance and moderation ... Mao, by contrast, sought radical and instant transformation and a total break with the past ... He was passionately and publicly anti-Confucian.” Mao did not just proclaim his hate for Confucianism but put it into practice during the Cultural Revolution where he ordered writings destroyed, eliminated study of the Analects from the schools and both brutally punished and exiled thousands of scholars and even ordinary citizens for supporting Confucius ideals and principles in even casual conversations.
Confucius Makes A Comeback

• Today, Confucius is more popular than ever in China. “Confucius makes a comeback” proclaimed a 2007 article in the *Economist*. He is studied by millions of Chinese beginning in elementary schools and continuing to where they are “most popular,” Confucian scholar academies have sprung up around China, Confucius Institutes have been established in America and throughout the world, a book on Confucian Analects and a television series based on the book were wildly popular. As Sunny Lee notes, “*Books written by a TV Confucianism lecturer, Yu Dan, have sold 10 million copies -- much more than the number of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.*”
北京精神
Beijing Spirit

爱国 创新 包容 厚德
Patriotism Innovation Inclusiveness Virtue
Ruiping Fan writes: “The moral insights of Confucian thought are precisely those needed to fill the moral vacuum developing in post-communist China … to approach moral challenges within a moral vision that gives accent to a life of virtue (de, ), the autonomy of the family (jia, ), and the cardinal role of rituals (li, ), the social rites that define and sustain social interactions.”
The Master said, “The wise man is informed in what is right. The inferior man is informed in what will pay.”
Analects on Government

Ji Kang asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, "To govern means to rectify. If you lead on the people with correctness, who will dare not to be correct?"

Ji Kang, distressed about the number of thieves in the state, inquired of Confucius how to do away with them.

Confucius said, "If you, sir, were not covetous, although you should reward them to do it, they would not steal."
Ji Kang asked Confucius about government, saying, "What do you say to killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled?"

Confucius replied, "Sir, in carrying on your government, why should you use killing at all? Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good. The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it."
Zi Gong asked about government. The Master said, "The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler."

Zi Gong said, "If it cannot be helped, and one of these must be dispensed with, which of the three should be foregone first?"

"The military equipment," said the Master.

Zi Gong again asked, "If it cannot be helped, and one of the remaining two must be dispensed with, which of them should be foregone?"

The Master answered, "Part with the food. From of old, death has been the lot of men; but if the people have no faith in their rulers, there is no standing for the state."
Sources

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