

America's Encounter with Confucian Thought: Three Trends

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I am going to talk about "three trends" in the way Confucianism has been received and interpreted in the US. These three are the (A) "New Confucian" approach, the (B) Postmodern approach and the (C) Virtue Ethics approach. In each case, I shall explain (1) What is distinctive about this approach? (2) What is the attitude of this approach toward Confucianism? and (3) What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

A.1 What Is Distinctive of New Confucianism?

"New Confucianism" is a vague and disputed term. In fact, Professor John Makeham has recently edited an anthology of essays, entitled *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, in which he argues that the term is used by different people in different ways, that it really has no specific, coherent reference, and that its use is dictated more by political concerns than by any content the term itself has.¹ In other words, Makeham claims that people throw around the term "New Confucian" to legitimate themselves and delegitimize others as spokespersons for Confucianism. I'm going to use the term anyway. I shall try to use it in a way that is helpful for identifying one broad, but definite, trend in contemporary Confucian thought. However, Makeham's points about the lack of a consensus about the meaning of the phrase should be kept in mind.

The Three Epochs

In order to understand New Confucianism, we need to understand some

¹ John Makeham, ed., *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

of its historical background. Mou Zongsan (himself one of the greatest of the New Confucians) identified Three Epochs of Confucian philosophy. The First Epoch was the ancient one, in which the major figures were Kongzi himself (who is better known in the West by the Jesuit Latinization of his name, "Confucius," and who lived around 500 BC), Mengzi (also known as "Mencius"), a later defender of Confucianism famous for arguing that human nature is good, and Xunzi, a Confucian who criticized Mencius, arguing that human nature is bad. This First Epoch of Confucianism occurred before Buddhism arrived in China. Buddhism arrived in China around the first century A.D. For several centuries after that, Buddhism (and to some extent Daoism) were the dominant philosophical movements in China. Eventually, though, there arose a sort of Confucian revivalism which launched a counterattack against Buddhism. This movement is known in China as *Daoxue*, "The Study of the Way," but in English as "Neo-Confucianism." This marks the Second Epoch of Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism reached its greatest philosophical sophistication in the Song and Ming dynasties (which we might loosely think of as China's "middle ages"), in the 10th through 17th centuries. Among the greatest Neo-Confucians were Zhu Xi, whose interpretation of Confucianism became the government orthodoxy, and Wang Yangming, who provided an officially unorthodox yet very profound alternative interpretation of Confucianism. (Even today Confucians argue over whether Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming had the better interpretation.) Although Neo-Confucianism was officially anti-Buddhist, it was, in fact, deeply influenced by Buddhist ideas. This was almost inevitable. All Chinese intellectuals had been deeply conversant with Buddhist ideas, and in particular Zen Buddhism (which originated in China), for centuries. It is natural that when they tried to respond to Buddhism they would employ many

Buddhist notions. One phrase I like to use to describe this situation is that "Neo-Confucianism is Confucianism seen through Buddhist lenses."

Chinese culture was shaken to its very foundations, though, by events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the Opium War of 1839-1842, China was easily defeated by the technologically superior British navy and army, and forced to allow the continued importation of opium into China. (The British, you see, had a very good deal going for themselves. They imported tea from China, to keep British factory workers properly alert for their long shifts, and then produced opium in India, which they forced the Chinese to import, thereby effectively paying for Chinese tea with Indian opium.) Soon China saw its once-proud civilization become the victim of the Western and later Japanese nations, which used their modern technology and military to, as it was often put, "carve up China like a melon," into spheres of influence controlled by foreign powers. In response, many leading Chinese intellectuals joined the "May 4th Movement" of 1919. The May 4th Movement blamed traditional culture, and Confucianism in particular, for making China stagnant and backward in comparison with other nations. In order for China to modernize, it was argued, China had to "Destroy the shop of Confucius!" Not all Chinese intellectuals agreed, of course. One pro-Confucian reply was a document entitled "A Manifesto on Chinese Culture to the World," published on January 1, 1958, by Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan and Zhang Junmai. This work is frequently referred to as "The New Confucian Manifesto" (even though the phrase "New Confucian" never occurs in it). Many would take it as a fundamental statement of New Confucian doctrines, and say that it inaugurates the Third Epoch of Confucianism. So the First Epoch is the foundation of native Confucianism, the Second Epoch is Confucianism's incorporation of and reply to Buddhism, in the form of Neo-

Confucianism, and the Third Epoch is the incorporation of and reply to the challenge of the West, largely in the form of New Confucianism.

A.2 What Is the Attitude of the New Confucianism to Confucianism?

So what is the content of the New Confucian Manifesto? The Manifesto states that Chinese culture possesses a sort of underlying unity that is missing from the West, and that Confucianism is the deepest expression of this Chinese unity. The authors of the Manifesto acknowledged that China has much that it has to learn from the West. In particular, China must modernize and learn Western-style science and democracy. However, this does not, they argue, require the wholesale abandonment of Confucianism. Although Confucius himself knew nothing of physics or representative democracy, the essence of his teachings is not incompatible with these things. In addition, the authors of the Manifesto argued, the West has much to learn from the Chinese tradition. In particular, the West can learn from Confucianism greater compassion, as well as a more all-embracing wisdom that supplements the powerful but limited reason of science and logic. I think this gives us a useful characterization of who would count as a New Confucian: someone who (1) self-identifies as a Confucian, (2) believes that Confucianism has contemporary relevance and value, (3) believes that Confucianism must (and can) be made compatible with science and democracy, (4) thinks that there is some essential difference between Chinese and Western culture, and (5) identifies Chinese culture (or at least Confucianism) with one specific orthodox legacy going back through at least some of the Neo-Confucian philosophers (such as Wang Yangming) to Confucius himself.

A.3 What Are the Strengths and Weaknesses of the New

Confucianism?

In my view, New Confucianism is right about certain things. Chinese culture did need to learn about Western science, technology, capitalism and democracy. (I would add feminism and "pluralism," in Isaiah Berlin's sense, to that list of good Western ideas.) It is also true that Confucianism is, in principle, consistent with these things. However, to my mind, New Confucianism also has several glaring weaknesses. First, it tends to be far too "monolithic" in its interpretation of both China and the West. There is no such thing as THE Chinese tradition. There is not even such a thing as THE Confucian tradition. The word "the" implies uniqueness. But Confucians have argued since the day Confucius himself died over what Confucianism is really about. We see this already in *Analects* 19.12, in which two disciples spar over the correct interpretation of Confucian doctrine. Han Feizi, a critic of Confucianism, observed that by his time, a few centuries after the death of Confucius, there were already eight separate Confucian schools, each claiming to represent the true teachings of the Master. We can see that there is no such thing as THE Confucian tradition if we consider just the Confucian disagreements over human nature. In the First Epoch, Mencius said that human nature is good, because it is like tender sprouts that must be cultivated to grow into full virtues. Xunzi said that human nature is bad because it is like wood that must be forcibly steamed and bent into a virtuous form. Confucians of the Second Epoch had a very different view, one that was heavily influenced by Buddhism. Zhu Xi said that human nature is already complete and perfect goodness that is merely hidden by selfish desires.

New Confucianism also, I fear, misrepresents the West as more monolithic than it is in actuality. Although the New Confucian Manifesto said

that the West had a diversity absent from the Chinese tradition, it treats the West as if it has had one particular essence throughout its history. But there really is no such thing as the one essence of the Western tradition. There are a variety of traditions within the West, including Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, materialist, Platonistic, Aristotelian, Kantian and others. And many of these traditions emphasize compassion and some more all-embracing wisdom. Finally, New Confucianism has been too quick to side with authority and the status quo, and insufficiently quick to advocate positive social change. It is no coincidence that authoritarian social and political movements from Singapore to Taiwan to South Korea and even nowadays Mainland China have been quick to encourage the propagation of Confucianism. I will be proud when Confucian scholars are more quick to live up to their great tradition of condemning government oppression and agitating for reform in the name of the people.

B.1 What Is Distinctive of Postmodernism?

The second major trend in the acceptance of Confucianism is Postmodernism. "Postmodernism" like New Confucianism is best understood in terms of what it is a reaction against. Postmodernism may be understood as a reaction against "grand narratives of progress." What is a "grand narrative of progress"? Well, a "narrative" is a story, and I suspect that many of you in the audience accept something like the following narrative: humans have always known some truths about the world, like the fact that fire is hot, and that lightening can destroy things. Gradually, we have come to build onto these truths, and come to know more truths. For example, we now know that fire is the release of energy when carbon bonds with oxygen, and that lightening is a discharge of electricity from the clouds to the earth. The way that we come to know many new truths is through something called

"the scientific method," an objective method that proceeds from observations to theories that are verified by testing with additional observations. As I say, I'm guessing that most of you agree with some version of this particular grand narrative of progress. The problem is that we have very good reason for believing that this narrative is mistaken. Thomas Kuhn, whose book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is widely cited as one of the most important and influential books of the twentieth century, is thought by many to have demonstrated that scientific knowledge is NOT cumulative. As science advances, claims that *had* been taken as true are abandoned in favor of *new* "truths," which will in turn be abandoned in the next scientific revolution. For example, many claims about fire that were made in early modern chemistry were formulated in terms of "phlogiston," a substance believed to be released by objects as they burned. When the phlogiston theory was superceded, many "truths" -- such as claims about the properties of phlogiston, or how it interacts with other chemicals -- were not *built* upon, but were *abandoned*. In addition, Kuhn is also taken to have shown that there is no such thing as THE scientific method. Precisely what is at stake in times of major scientific change is the issue of *which* scientific method should be followed. For example, part of the issue that divided Galileo, who argued that the Sun was the center of the solar system, from his Ptolemaic opponents, who argued that the Earth is the center of the solar system, was whether the proper scientific method for establishing astronomical truths was deductive in form. The Galileans and the Ptolemaics could not agree on what the proper conclusion was based on the observable evidence because they disagreed about the proper method to use to interpret that evidence. Kuhn expresses this by saying that the Galilean and the Platonistic worldviews are "incommensurable." Among the leading

Postmodern thinkers in the English-speaking world is Richard Rorty. Rorty holds that the proper response to understanding the insights of Kuhn and others is to give up the search for what he contemptuously refers to as "Truth with a capital 'T.'" Rorty also suggests that, with the abandonment of "Truth with a capital 'T,'" we should abandon many of the metaphysical and epistemological concerns that have dominated the West since Plato. It is disputable what ethical and political implications follow from Postmodernism. However, some have argued that, since we are no longer bound by supposedly objective Truths and methods, we should be more open, more creative, more flexible, and less concerned with logical rigor and consistency than we were before.

B.2 What Is the Attitude of Postmodernism to Confucianism?

Where does this leave us in terms of Confucianism? Roger Ames of the University of Hawaii and the late David Hall have written a series of books, beginning with *Thinking Through Confucius*, in which they interpret Confucius as a sort of Postmodern thinker. Confucius, according to Hall and Ames, encourages us to be free and flexible innovators. We study the past only to find inspiration for doing new, original things of our own creation. Hall and Ames's vision of Confucius reminds me of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote the following in his famous essay, "The American Scholar":

Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books. ... Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire.

Confucius -- as portrayed by Hall and Ames -- holds the same view about

tradition and the classics of the sages: they exist only to inspire innovation.

B.3 What Are the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Postmodern Approach?

The major strength of the Postmodern approach to Confucianism is that it correctly sees that many issues that have dominated Western philosophical and metaphysical discussions are NOT concerns for Confucianism. For example, Rene Descartes is a paradigmatic Western Enlightenment philosopher. Descartes sought a point of absolute certainty that he could use as a foundation for all knowledge. He found it in his famous argument, "I think, therefore I am." Even if I am mistaken in believing that I have a physical body, I still *believe* that I have one. And if I believe, then I think. And if I think, even if I think incorrectly, I exist. Furthermore, because we are more certain of our own thinking than of the existence of our physical bodies, Descartes argued that there must be a fundamental metaphysical dualism between mind and body. Descartes was thus an epistemological foundationalist and a metaphysical dualist.² Neither Descartes' metaphysical dualism nor his epistemological foundationalism would have been of any interest to Confucius, because they are parts of a metaphysical tradition that Confucius does not belong to. Postmodernists reject Cartesianism, and are correct to point out that Confucius did not accept it either. However, one of the weaknesses of the Postmodern approach is that it shares with the "New Confucianism" an overly monistic view of the Western tradition. There is far more to the West than Cartesianism. For example, Aristotle sees soul and body as two aspects of one thing. So Aristotle is *not* a metaphysical dualist. Aristotle's views on epistemology are complex, but he

² See Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations 1 and 2, and idem, *Discourse on Method*, Part 4.

is certainly not a foundationalist in the way that Descartes is. Aristotle sharply distinguished between theoretical and practical knowledge. Ethics is a kind of practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is not based on anything like the sort of absolutely certain foundation that Descartes sought.³ In the case of theoretical knowledge, Aristotle says that it should ultimately be expressed in a deductive form. However, he distinguishes between the order of discovery of knowledge and the order of understanding it. You do not discover knowledge by building up from indubitable foundations, the way Descartes argues. Consequently, as the example of Aristotle's metaphysical and epistemological views suggests, one cannot reject everything in the West by rejecting Descartes. Thus, one has not shown that Confucianism is fundamentally different from all of Western thought by showing that it is different from Cartesianism. Finally, whatever the merits of Postmodernism in itself, much of what it says seems to be at odds with the views of Confucians. Confucius himself proudly states in *Analects* 7.1, "I am faithful to and fond of the ancients. I transmit but do not innovate." He also said in *Analects* 2.11 that a truly filial son will not deviate from the Way of his father for three years after his father dies. Nothing could be further from Emerson's call to innovation. Confucius certainly does tell us to follow tradition in a thoughtful way that is sensitive to context, but he still tells us to follow tradition, not just be inspired by it. Simply put, the main problem with any Postmodern approach is that Confucius is not POSTmodern, he is PRE-modern. Postmodernism is a reaction to Western modernism; it only makes sense against that background. Confucius did not have Western modernity to react against; hence, Confucius could not be Postmodern.

³ For his views on the soul, see Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Book 2. For his views on the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, especially Chapters 3, 5 and 7.

C.1 What Is Distinctive of Virtue Ethics?

The third major trend is inspired by Virtue Ethics. "Virtue Ethics" is a movement that has roots going back to Aristotle, although many would say that St. Thomas Aquinas was the greatest of the Western virtue ethicists. This approach to ethics fell out of favor with the Western Enlightenment, but it was revived in the late twentieth century by such works as Alasdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue*. In brief, virtue ethics emphasizes the answers to four questions: (i) What is the best way of life (or what are the best ways of life)? (ii) What virtues of character allow one to lead a good life? (iii) How does one cultivate in a person the virtues necessary to lead a good way of life? And, (iv) What is human nature like, such that one can cultivate those virtues in order to lead that way of life?⁴

Digression: Two Objections

I'm going to talk about each of these aspects in more detail in a moment, but first I want to head off two common misconceptions. It is common for critics of the Virtue Ethics approach to reject it on one of two grounds. First, some suggest that Virtue Ethics is inapplicable to Confucianism, because Confucians do not share the metaphysical views of Aristotle or Descartes. Second, some critics argue that Virtue Ethics is inapplicable to Confucianism because the substantive *ethical* views of Confucians differ so much from those of Aristotelians. The first objection is mistaken because there is a very wide range of epistemological and metaphysical views that one can have and be interested in Virtue Ethics. For example, it would be hard to find four philosophers more different from one another, in any culture, than Plato, Aristotle, Hume and Kant. However, each

⁴ I discuss these in more detail in Bryan W. Van Norden, "Virtue Ethics and Confucianism," in Bo Mou, ed., *Comparative Approaches to Chinese Philosophy* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), pp. 99-121.

of them discussed the questions regarding virtue that I listed. There is a reason for this.

Consider the following simple dialogue. Ben says, "Alice normally seems so happy, but today she seems very sad." Susan replies, "Sometimes you should be sad. There would be something wrong with you if you went around being happy all the time." Ben answers, "Yeah, but I think I'm too sad. I wish I were a happy person like Alice." Susan says, "Try to focus on what's really important in life, like helping others, and then you won't be sad about your own problems." Ben wonders, "But isn't everybody really only concerned with themselves?" Susan replies, "No, if you try to care about others you'll find yourself more and more focused on them and less and less focused on yourself."

Ben and Susan's dialogue is about ways of life ("Sometimes you should be sad"), virtues of character ("I wish I were a happy person"), the cultivation of character ("Try to focus on what's really important in life"), and human nature ("But isn't everybody really only concerned with themselves?"). It is a dialogue that could occur in any human culture, translated into any human language. And the dialogue does not, in itself, tell us what the epistemological or metaphysical views of Ben and Susan are. So one does not need to be an Aristotelian on metaphysical issues, or a Cartesian on epistemological issues, for example, to discuss Virtue Ethics.⁵

Let's go back to the second objection: that Confucianism cannot be a kind of Virtue Ethics because the substantive views on ethics of Confucians differ so much from those of Aristotelians. Here it is important to keep in

⁵ Of course, one's metaphysical and ethical views can interact. Theravadan Buddhist ethics is tied to an anti-substantialist metaphysics. I submit, though, that humans can begin to understand and discuss the issues related to the virtues without being committed to any one particular metaphysical view.

mind that Western virtue ethicists have themselves given very different answers to the questions that I listed. For example, in the West, the major candidates for "the good life" have included the life of theoretical contemplation (advocated by Aristotle in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*), the life of practical activity aimed at the good of the community (advocated by Cicero, in works such as *The Dream of Scipio*), and the beatific vision of God enjoyed by the saved in the afterlife (advocated by Christians such as Thomas Aquinas). Regarding the virtues, Plato gave one of the most influential Western lists in the *Republic*, identifying wisdom, justice, moderation and courage as the four "cardinal virtues," meaning the four virtues that encompass all the other virtues. Thomas Aquinas acknowledged these are the four cardinal "natural virtues," but thought that there were also three "infused virtues," given by the Grace of God: faith, hope and love. (Pop quiz: Q: Who can tell me where Aquinas got the list of faith, hope and love? A: I Corinthians 13:13.) A philosopher's views of ethical cultivation and human nature are typically closely related. For example, Aristotle said that, by nature, humans are neither good nor evil, but are by nature able to acquire the virtues. The basis for acquiring virtue is becoming accustomed to virtue through habituation in youth. In other words, if we are raised with the right habits -- taught to be fair in our treatment of others, sensible in the satisfaction of our physical desires, accustomed to intellectual activities such as reading and reasoning, and perseverant in doing what is right in the face of difficulties -- we will be virtuous as adults. Christian thinkers have held that human nature was grievously damaged by the Fall of Adam and Eve. Augustine thought that this meant that humans are capable of doing evil for the sake of evil. In Book 2 of his spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions*, Augustine tells the story of how he and some other teenagers stole some

pears. Augustine notes that he and his friends were not motivated by hunger or any other normal appetite, since they could have had better pears than the ones they stole, and didn't bother to even eat the pears they did steal. Instead, they stole simply because it was *wrong* to do so. Augustine says that this is an illustration of the fact that humans will inevitably choose evil without the assistance of Divine Grace. Consequently, pagans are incapable of genuine virtue. Even the greatest apparent virtues of Romans like Cicero were merely "shining vices." Thomas Aquinas also recognized the need for the transforming power of Divine Grace. However, in a famous formulation, Aquinas emphasizes that Grace perfects nature, rather than supplanting it. He thus allowed that pagans are capable of a sort of lesser virtue. Although Augustine and Aquinas agree that Grace is required for full virtue, they both would acknowledge the importance of human activities aimed at ethical cultivation. Among these are good habituation in youth, as stressed by Aristotle, but also prayer and Biblical study. None of these human activities is a substitute for Grace, but each is, at the very least, helpful in assisting humans to maintain a state of Grace once it has been achieved.

Despite all these differences, *which are quite substantive*, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine and Aquinas are all interested in the virtues. I hope this demonstrates that thinkers can be interested in the best way of life, virtues and how to cultivate them, and human nature despite having massive disagreement about what the specific content of those notions is. So there is no reason why we cannot apply a virtue ethics approach to Confucianism.

C.2 What Is the Attitude of Virtue Ethics to Confucianism?

What does virtue ethics have to do with Confucianism? Professor Lee Yearley of Stanford has been one of the leaders in studying Confucianism as

a form of virtue ethics. In his book, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, Yearley concluded that the relationship between the views of the Confucian Mencius and the Christian Aristotelian Aquinas is more complex than either simple similarity or simple difference. Sometimes, there are apparent similarities between the two that mask deeper differences; other times there are superficial differences between the two that belie more profound similarities. He expressed this with his slogan that, in comparative studies, we often find "differences in similarities, and similarities in differences."

One major "similarity in difference" involves the very application of virtue ethics to Confucianism. The style of Aristotelian and Thomistic writings on the virtues is radically different from the style of Confucian writings. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is written in essay format (although it is probably originally an elaborate set of "lecture notes" recorded by his students), and that style emphasizes explicit analysis and argumentation. The *Book of Mencius* is a collection of sayings and brief dialogues attributed to Mencius. There appears to be much less explicit conceptual analysis or argumentation in this work. However, appearances can be deceiving. If one reads the *Book of Mencius* as a whole, it becomes clear that Mencius is often saying things to provide evidence for certain conclusions, to anticipate and reply to objections, and to distinguish among different concepts. For example, in passage 2A2, Mencius discusses three individuals who manifest three different kinds of courage. I have argued, in my article "Mencius on Courage," that he is distinguishing between courage as a matter of how you act, courage as fearlessness, and courage as a

commitment to doing what is right, regardless of the challenges.⁶ These are exactly the sorts of distinctions among aspects of courage that Aristotle and Aquinas make, using different styles of writing. Consequently, Mencius's discussion of courage provides an example of a "similarity within differences."

An example of a "difference within similarities" is provided by the apparent similarity between the Confucian emphasis on intellectual, scholarly activities, and the Aristotelian emphasis on theoretical contemplation. As I noted earlier, Aristotle attaches a high value to the study of astronomy, physics, mathematics, etc. This similarity turns out to be superficial, though, because for Aristotle theoretical contemplation is an end in itself; theoretical contemplation is done for the sake of theoretical contemplation. In contrast, for Confucians, scholarly activity is a means to becoming a better person and contributing in a better way to society. Thus, when we examine the role of theoretical activity in Confucian and Aristotelian virtue ethics, we find a difference in a similarity. So if theoretical contemplation is only a means to the good life for Confucians, what *is* the good life itself? The good life for Confucians is participating in the family and in communal ritual activities. This contrasts greatly with Aristotle; for Aristotle, the family is only a means for producing and sustaining individuals who can participate in higher forms of life, such as theoretical and political activity; for Confucius, the family is at the center of the good life. In short, for Aristotle, knowledge is an end in itself and the family is a mere means; for Confucians, knowledge is a mere means, while the family is an end in itself. Many Western philosophers have thought Aristotle was right, but I think

⁶ See Bryan W. Van Norden, "Mencius on Courage," in Peter A. French et al., eds., *The Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 21 of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 237-256.

Confucius is right. This shows one way in which Confucianism can suggest new options in Virtue Ethics.

Just as Plato identified what became the standard cardinal virtues in the Western tradition -- justice, wisdom, moderation and courage -- Mencius identified what became the cardinal virtues in the Confucian tradition -- benevolence, righteousness, wisdom and propriety. Benevolence and righteousness are probably the most important of the four Confucian virtues. Benevolence is taking joy in the happiness of others, being saddened by the suffering of others, and acting in appropriate ways on these emotions. Righteousness is having a proper sense of shame. This is not shame in the sense of looking bad in front of others; it is shame as feeling the disparity between one's ideal self and one's real self.⁷ Wisdom and virtue support benevolence and righteousness in different ways. A person of wisdom is committed to benevolence and righteousness, he is a good judge of the character of others, and he can figure out the best means to achieve a given goal. Propriety is a sort of adornment of the substance provided by righteousness and benevolence. Propriety is manifested in the polite and elegant performance of one's benevolent and righteous obligations.

Confucians have actually taken a wide variety of positions on human nature. Confucius himself was vague. In *Analects* 17.2, he says simply, "Humans are by nature close to one another, by practice far apart." Further evidence that Confucius did not have a detailed view on human nature is the fact that, in *Analects* 5.13, his close disciple Zigong remarked that it was "impossible to get to hear" Confucius talk about human nature. Mencius said that human nature was good, and he meant by this that humans have active

⁷ See Bryan W. Van Norden, "The Emotion of Shame and the Virtue of Righteousness," *Dao* 2.1 (Winter 2002): 45-77.

but incipient tendencies toward each of the four virtues. Using an agricultural metaphor, Mencius called our innate tendencies toward virtue "sprouts." For Mencius, I think a large part of the cultivation of these sprouts was becoming aware that one has these tendencies, and having a positive feeling toward them. As he says (in passage 6A15) "if you concentrate on them, you'll get them; if you don't concentrate on them, you won't." Xunzi, the next major Confucian after Mencius, said that human nature was bad. Xunzi did not mean by this what Christians like Augustine meant by saying that human nature is evil as a result of the Fall. Xunzi meant that humans have no innate tendencies toward virtue, and will -- if left without ethical cultivation -- end up in a mutually destructive war of all against all. Consequently, humans must be reshaped by education, music and ritual practice, just like a board is heated and steamed into a wagon wheel, or a piece of jade is carved into a beautiful statue. The so-called Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming dynasties had still another view. They agreed with Mencius's *slogan* that "human nature is good," but they interpreted it very differently. For Neo-Confucians, human nature is already fully formed and perfectly good. However, this fully formed and perfectly good human nature is "obscured" by selfish desires. Consequently, the task of ethical cultivation is to eliminate selfish desires and reveal our true nature.

In *Analects* 2.15, Confucius himself said that, "If one learns but does not think, then one will be confused, but if one thinks but does not learn, then one will be in danger." In his book *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, Professor Philip Ivanhoe of Boston University argues that we can use this

quotation to identify two extremes in Confucian ethical cultivation.⁸ All major Confucians recognize the importance of both thinking and learning, but some Confucians emphasize thinking or concentrating on what is inside one's own mind, while others emphasize learning or studying the wisdom of former sages. Mencius, because he believed that we have innate tendencies toward virtue, the sprouts, emphasized concentrating on these tendencies to develop them. In contrast, Xunzi, since he believed that we have no innate tendencies toward virtue, emphasized studying and learning from the wisdom of former sages. It is only by such study that we can implant virtue into ourselves. This tension is reproduced in Neo-Confucianism. On the one hand, Wang Yangming, since he believed that we already have a fully formed virtuous nature within ourselves, emphasized concentrating on that nature and using it as a source of ethical guidance. On the other hand, Zhu Xi emphasized learning. Although Zhu Xi agrees that we are all born with a completely formed virtuous nature, he believes that human nature is so obscured in almost all of us by selfish inclinations that we must engage in a long process of training in good habits while very young -- which he calls the "Lesser Learning" -- and study of the great texts of former sages in adulthood -- which he calls the "Greater Learning" -- in order to be able to follow the guidance of our own nature.

Particularism

Ethical systems that emphasize the virtues tend toward what philosophers call Particularism. At its most extreme, Particularism is the view that all ethical generalizations are false. Take a seemingly solid ethical claim such as, "Stealing is wrong." A Particularist will observe that there

⁸ Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000).

may be instances in which stealing might be justified. Suppose, for example, that I have a relative who owns a pistol. I visit him, only to discover that he and his wife are highly intoxicated and quarreling. Despite my efforts at calming them down, the fight escalates, and my relative threatens to shoot his wife. Suppose that I quietly take my relative's pistol from its hiding place and lock it in the trunk of my car, before calling the police to break up the fight. It seems clear that what I have done is stealing. I took something that I did not own, without the permission of the owner, and without any legal authority to do so. Now, some philosophers are Generalists. Immanuel Kant is a prime example of a Generalist. He believes that there are highly general and absolutely binding rules that regulate moral conduct. According to Kant, I must not steal. I believe that Kant would say that I had done wrong in stealing my relative's pistol. However, a Particularist would say that, because of the particular details of the situation in which I found myself, an action of a type that would normally be wrong (taking someone else's property without permission) is justified. At its most extreme, Particularism says that all general moral rules are either false or vacuous. However, there is a spectrum of views from the most generalist to the most Particularist.

The example I gave about the relative with the gun is modeled on an example used by Plato in Book 1 of the *Republic*. In a similar vein, Aristotle states in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "For among accounts concerning actions, though the general ones are common to more cases, the specific ones are truer, since actions are about particular cases, and our account must accord with these."⁹

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Terence Irwin, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1985), p. 46, ii.7 (1107a29-32).

Confucians also tend toward Particularism, as illustrated by a famous passage in the *Analects*: 11.22. Confucius is asked by his disciple, Zilu, whether one should immediately put into practice what one has learned. Confucius replies in the negative, explaining that one should defer to the judgment of one's father and older brothers. Later, Confucius's disciple Ran You asked the very same question. This time, Confucius replies in the affirmative. A third disciple, Zihua, having heard both exchanges, asks why Confucius had given different answers to two disciples with the same question. Confucius replies, "Ranyou is overly cautious, and so I wished to urge him on. Zilu, on the other hand, is reckless, and so I sought to make him more cautious."¹⁰ So Confucius's answer to the question, "Should one

¹⁰ Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, reprint (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), p. 30.

immediately put into practice what one has learned?" is "It depends on the particular individual in his or her particular circumstances." So although there are many differences between the content of Aristotelian and Confucian ethics, they share a belief that an ethically cultivated individual has wisdom that allows her to see and do what is right in a way that no set of rules could fully capture.

C.3 What Are the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Virtue Ethics Approach?

The greatest strength of the virtue ethics approach is that it facilitates a constructive two-way dialogue between Confucianism and Western philosophy. On the one hand, Confucianism has often seemed incomprehensible or merely shallow to Western philosophers. Symptomatic of this is the fact that, as an undergraduate philosophy major, I was told that there is no such thing as Chinese philosophy. The virtue ethics approach allows Western philosophers to understand Confucianism and to see that Confucianism provides profound, challenging alternative views of the good life, the virtues, human nature and ethical cultivation. On the other hand, virtue ethics can help revivify Confucianism itself, by allowing contemporary advocates of Confucianism to express themselves in ways that will allow an entry into contemporary debates. Now, since I follow a virtue ethics approach to Confucianism myself, I tend to see more strengths in it than weaknesses. However, I would acknowledge that one must be careful in using the virtue ethics approach to not overstate the similarities between Western virtue ethics and Confucianism. We should expect to find neither simple identity nor complete incommensurability, but rather, as Lee Yearley suggests, "similarities in differences and differences in similarities."

Summary

So let's see where we've been. The three approaches to Confucianism I have discussed are the New Confucianism, Postmodernism, and virtue ethics. In each case, I discussed (1) What is the approach? (2) What attitude does it have toward Confucianism? and (3) What are its strengths and weaknesses? Whereas the May 4th Movement and some Chinese Communists criticized Confucianism as an outdated relic of the feudal past that China must outgrow in order to modernize, New Confucians defended the contemporary relevance and value of Confucianism. Although the label "New Confucian" is vague and disputed, as I use the term, New Confucians generally agree that the essential nature of Confucianism can be maintained even while Confucianism adapts to democracy, capitalism, and modern science and technology. I agree with this basic claim; however, I worry that New Confucianism is limited by overly simplistic and monolithic visions of "THE West," and "THE Chinese tradition." In particular, New Confucians typically follow a Neo-Confucian understanding of Confucianism, failing to perceive that "Neo-Confucianism" is Confucianism seen through Buddhist lenses. I also wish that New Confucianism would less often simply support the status quo, and do more to be a force for positive social change.

"Postmodernism" is another broad label, but one that refers to a major trend in recent *Western* thought. Postmodernists reject any "grand narratives" that would justify the claims of science, philosophy, or anything else to objective, eternal truth that is guaranteed by proof. In other words, they reject what Richard Rorty refers to contemptuously as "Truth with a capital 'T.'" It is not clear what the political and ethical implications of Postmodernism are (if anything), but some have thought that Postmodernism encourages a sort of playful creativeness. Postmodernist

interpreters of Confucianism think that Confucius advocates studying the past like a jazz musician advocates listening to great jazz performances: merely as exercises to enable one to improvise new "riffs" of one's own. The strength of the Postmodern approach is that it correctly sees Confucianism as uninterested in many of the metaphysical and epistemological issues that have been central to Western philosophy since Plato. One of the weaknesses of the Postmodern approach is that, like the New Confucian approach, it has an overly simplistic view of the variety within the Western tradition. Secondly, Postmodernists fail to recognize the reverence Confucius and his followers had for tradition. Finally, Postmodernists simply forget that Confucius could not have been POSTmodern, because he was PREmodern.

A virtue ethics approach is any one that emphasizes (i) good ways of life, (ii) the virtues that are needed to lead good ways of life, (iii) practices of ethical cultivation that allow one to develop those virtues so as to lead those ways of life, and (iv) views of what human nature must be like, such that one can cultivate virtues and lead those ways of life. Anyone we could recognize as human could understand these issues, regardless of what their metaphysical orientation was. Virtue ethicists see Confucianism as a kind of virtue ethics that gives specifications of these four categories that are challengingly different from the Aristotelian and Thomistic paradigms that have tended to dominate Western discussions of virtue ethics so far. Virtue ethics has the potential to make Confucianism more intelligible to Western philosophers and also to involve Confucianism more fully in a constructive dialogue with Western philosophy. However, advocates of virtue ethics must be careful not to assimilate Confucianism and Western virtue ethics, but rather to always look for "similarities in differences and differences in similarities."

I would like to close by returning to one important *difference* between Confucians and Aristotelians: their conceptions of the good life. One passage in the *Analects* has always struck me as particularly moving for its vision of the Confucian "good life": *Analects* 11.26.

Confucius is sitting with his disciples Zilu, Zengxi, Ranyou and Zihua. He asks each of them to say what they aspire to in life. Zilu, who we saw just a moment ago is somewhat "reckless," immediately speaks up, announcing,

If I were given charge of a state that could field a thousand chariots--even one hemmed in between powerful states, suffering from armed invasions, and afflicted by famine--before three years were up I could infuse it with courage and a sense of what is right.

Confucius simply smiles at Zilu, and then asks the next disciples to speak. Ran You and Zihua seem to have learned the lesson of Confucius's smile, because each explains how they would like to participate in government, but in ways that are progressively more humble and less grand than what Zilu described. Finally, Confucius asks Zengxi what his aspiration is. Here I shall let the *Analects* describe the scene:

Zengxi stopped strumming upon the zither, and as the last notes faded away he set the instrument aside and rose to his feet. "I would choose to do something quite different from any of the other three."

"What harm is there in that?" the Master said. "Each of you is merely expressing your own aspirations."

Zengxi then said, "In the third month of spring, once the spring garments have been completed, I should like to assemble a company of five or six young men and six or seven boys to go bathe in the Yi River and enjoy the breeze upon the

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Rain Altar, and then return singing to the Master's house."
The Master sighed deeply, saying, "I am with Zengxi!"

I am with Zengxi too. Confucians offer, I think, a more attractive vision of the good life than do Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas or anyone else in the Western tradition. But in order to see that they are offering a better answer, we have to understand that they are asking the same question.