

Becky Clay
Dr. Doug Deaver
PHIL-112
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Confucianism

Although there are considerable disagreements concerning the records kept by Confucius, there is still an abundant amount of texts, which can most convincingly be attributed to him. These texts help us to obtain a better understanding of his personality, cultural situation, and political philosophy. The most significant aspect of Confucius' philosophy are the eight key concepts that make up Confucianism. They are the concepts of jen, chun tzu, li, te, wen, chi, hsin, and yi. While each of these "branches" is unique in their own way, they are also very similar and intertwined with one another, and in some cases, entirely dependent of each other. It is this close relationship that makes it possible for one person to live according to all their principles, and potentially achieve the status of the "Ideal Man" or "Superior Person."

Confucius, whose Latin name is KungFuTzu, is the founder of Confucianism and was born in 551 BC in the Chinese state of Lu. He was a large man of great physical strength, married, and the father of a son and two daughters. When he was just a boy he enjoyed imitating gestures of ritual, and by the age of thirty-two he began teaching ancient ritual to a minister's sons. He later went on to study the traditions of the Chou Empire, and at the age of thirty-four voluntarily fled his home to Lu's neighboring states. It was in these new locations that Confucius "heard music, learned how to play, and became so absorbed that he forgot to eat." When he finally returned to Lu just a few years later, Confucius became a minister of justice and eventually, over time, the prime minister of Lu. Thanks to his abilities, the prince of Lu became increasingly powerful and the land of Lu prospered. The prince became so powerful that the neighboring princes grew with intimidation and decided to distract the powerful prince with gifts of beautiful girls, dancing, music, and fine horses. Their plan of sabotage worked, and the prince of Lu indulged himself into these pleasures, neglecting the government that Confucius had helped him build. Eventually, the prince stopped listening to the counsels of Confucius all together, and as a result, Confucius left his position as prime minister and wandered between states for twelve years. He wandered in hopes of finding a place where he could put his political doctrine into practice, but after several unsuccessful efforts, Confucius returned to Lu discouraged and finally died a few years later at the age of seventy-three. (Jaspers 42)

But Confucius' death is what began his glorification. "Within a few generations Confucius was regarded throughout China as 'the mentor and model of ten thousand generations.' Every school child for two thousand years raised his clasped hands each morning toward a table in the schoolroom that bore a plaque bearing his name." (Smith 158) Chinese government was also greatly influenced by Confucius, and more deeply so than any other person. Even some of the highest government offices have required their occupants to have knowledge of the Confucian classics. But what made the teachings of Confucius so influential? The collection of edifying sayings he left behind often appear commonplace, such as "What you do not wish done unto yourself, do not do to others,"

and “To go too far is as bad as to fall short,” yet it is these sayings that had enough power to mold a civilization. Why? It was China’s state of social anarchy and continuous warfare that was taking place at this time. These unstable, sometimes barbaric conditions left the Chinese society open to Confucius’ political philosophy, with great hopes of restoring order to a time that desperately needed it.

Confucianism offered an answer that resides somewhere between the views of Mohism and Legalism. The Mohists believe that “universal love” can solve all of China’s social problems, and that “one should feel toward all people under heaven exactly as one feels toward one’s own people, and regard other states exactly as one regards one’s own state.” (Smith 166) The Legalist’s solution to the problem of social order was a method of penalties and rewards. They believed that “There must be laws that state clearly what is and what is not permitted, and penalties for violation must be such that no one will dare incur them.” (Smith 164) Confucius, unimpressed by both of these methods, proposed a government that was grounded in tradition, which was what he believed to be the chief shaper of inclinations and attitudes. He believed that tradition could “funnel into the present behavior patterns that had been perfected during a golden age in China’s past, the Age of the Grand Harmony.” (Smith 168)

Confucius did acknowledge that “spontaneous tradition” would not be accepted by society and that the “deliberate tradition” he was attempting to deploy needed to be continuous with the past and also adaptable to new social developments. In order to make this shift in society successful, the people would first need to determine what values were most important to their well-being. For the Confucians, having the “correct attitudes” or “jen” was of the highest import, and therefore jen became the foundation and the first of eight key concepts that make up the Confucian religion.

Jen, properly pronounced *ren*, is the first of eight main Confucian concepts. Jen represents inner moral qualities, and encompasses ideal relationships, goodness, benevolence, righteousness, love, humanity, and virtue. Ultimately, Jen is the virtue of all virtues, the dignity of human life, what makes life worth living, and the ultimate guide to human action. A man living the life of jen will sacrifice his life to preserve it, have a feeling of humanity towards others, a self-esteem for himself, and he will also seek to extend jen to others. Although Confucius seems to elude that jen is a state that can be obtained, he admits that he had never seen it fully expressed in anyone.

The second concept of Confucianism is chun tzu, which refers to the “Ideal Man” or “Superior Person” that represents humanity at its best. A chun tzu is a fully mature person, a gentleman, and a person possessing grace, manners, and a deep understanding of propriety (which will be thoroughly outlined in li, the third key concept of Confucianism). It is said, “if jen is the ideal relationship between human beings, chun tzu refers to the ideal term in such relations.” (Smith 173) Basically, a chun tzu incorporates the concepts of jen and li, is fully adequate, poised, and also “armed with a self-respect that generates respect for others.” The chun tzu approaches others not wondering what he can gain from them, but rather what he can do to accommodate them. Few people are capable of attaining the ideal state of chun tzu, but even so the task is not entirely impossible either.

Li, the third key concept of Confucianism, is the principle of propriety that includes manners, courtesy, and the proper ways of doing things. Another way to translate li is to call it “ritual correctness” or “good manners.” Basically, li is the concept

of Confucianism that focuses on one's outer practices and external life, which are essential and will eventually lead to fully expressing jen. There are five main components of propriety and they focus primarily on the openness of people to each other. They are: 1) Shu (reciprocity), 2) Reification of Names, 3) Doctrine of the Mean, 4) Five Constant Relationships, and 5) Hsiao (filial piety).

The idea of "shu" is similar to the western concept of "The Golden Rule." Basically, do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. More completely, shu is the belief that you should use yourself as the analogy when trying to determine how to treat others. For example, what you believe to be harmful to yourself is something that you could reasonably conclude to be harmful for someone else. And likewise, something you perceive to be beneficial for yourself could be reasonably concluded as beneficial for someone else as well. Shu is the thought process one goes through when determining how to treat other people.

"Reification of Names" refers to the proper language that is always to be used, and also how the language should be used. For example, the more proficient you become in language and vocabulary, the closer your words will represent your thoughts, and as a result the final words you choose to speak will be less misinterpreted or considered offensive. The main emphasis of this concept is to be careful in the way that you speak to others solely to avoid any unnecessary miscommunications and hurt feelings.

The "Doctrine of the Mean" component of li states that virtue is a mean between extremes. The goal of the mean is to guide the mind into a balanced state of constant equilibrium, ultimately resulting in a cautious, gentle person that shows no contempt toward inferiors. A person following the Doctrine of the Mean will always act in accordance with what their natural order is, and never exceed or fall short of it. By staying true to the Doctrine of the Mean, a person will be drawn closer to the complete state of li, having a full understanding of propriety with the effortless ability to live according to its principles.

The fourth component of li, called the "5 Constant Relationships," explains the way things should be done in life. The key concept of this component is obtaining the knowledge of how to properly act in every type of relationship – be it romantic, platonic, business, etc. By understanding how to conduct one's self in every relationship, there will always be an order of asymmetry, which eliminates conflict and therefore leaves people with no reason to fight or argue. For example, a child will always be submissive to their parent, a wife to her husband, a younger sibling to an elder sibling, a subject to a ruler, etc. Because there is always one person playing the submissive role in a relationship, there will never be a dispute over how to resolve disagreements. The superior person will always have their way.

The final component of Li is "Hsiao," which translates to filial piety and reverence. The aim of Hsiao is to guide the proper way of treating one's parents, which is accomplished by establishing the fact that the parents are the source of the children's life, and that the parents therefore have made many sacrifices for them. Hsiao states that the responsibility of a child is to make the family name known, respected, and honored, and that they should always provide not only physical care for their parents, but also emotional and spiritual care as well. Furthermore, once the parents have died, the purpose of the children becomes to fulfill whatever achievements the parents were unable to accomplish during their own lifetimes.

All of the five components of Li have the ultimate aim of contributing to Jen, each in their own particular way. Hsiao teaches to revere one's parents, the idea of 5 Constant Relationships focuses on practicing the right way to act in every type of relationship, the Doctrine of the Mean teaches a person to always be in balance with nature, the Reification of Names devotes itself to avoiding misunderstandings, and Shu aims to achieve the "Golden Rule" which means to treat others how you would want to be treated. Once each of these components has been accomplished, and Li has been fulfilled, a person is ready to proceed on the path to Jen. In order to completely fulfill the state of Jen, one must accomplish not only the concept of Li, but also the other five main concepts of Confucianism, which include Te, Wen, Chi, Hsin, and Yi.

Te, the fourth key concept of Confucianism, is the power of the moral authority and example by which men are ruled. For example, Confucians emphasize that government does not need to use force as a method to get its people to obey, but rather if virtuous leaders are governing the people, an obedient society will naturally follow. A successful government to the Confucians is one that is concerned with "economic sufficiency, military sufficiency, and the confidence of the people." Confucius added that trust is the most important, for "if the people have no confidence in their government, it cannot stand." (Smith 178)

Wen, the fifth concept of Confucianism, refers to "the arts of peace," and is the sum of culture in its aesthetic and spiritual mode. Confucius believed that when people take part in the arts such as music, art, poetry, etc., that they become better people. In his Analects he writes, "By poetry the mind is aroused; from music to the finish is received. The odes stimulate the mind. They induce self-contemplation. They teach the art of sensibility. They help to restrain resentment. They bring home the duty of serving one's parents and one's prince." (Smith 179) There is also a political aspect of wen that concerns international relations. Confucius believed that a victorious nation is not one that has the greatest army, but rather the one that has the "finest art, the noblest philosophy, the grandest poetry, and gives evidence of realizing that 'it is the moral character of a neighborhood that constitutes its excellence.'" (Smith 180) For Confucius, the highest society has the highest cultivation of the arts, and teaches appropriate social lessons within the arts as well.

Chi is the sixth concept of Confucianism and deals with the wisdom of knowing how to be proper all of the time. The wisdom of chi is one that can only be achieved through the practice of other concepts, the concepts of li and yi, which are the third and eighth key concepts of Confucianism. Without li and yi, the achievement of chi is not possible as its wisdom requires not only knowledge of the other two concepts, but also complete obedience to them. This obedience enables them to live effortlessly according to their principles. Therefore, to live the life of chi, one must be already living a life in accordance with li and yi. The three virtues are interrelated and impossible to separate if one wishes to wholly accomplish the state of chi.

The seventh key concept of Confucianism is hsin and it deals with the issues of faithfulness and sincerity. Hsin sometimes deals with sympathy and empathy as well, but primarily it is referred to as the inner roots of all relationships. The state of hsin begins its existence within one's self and can spread to include one's family, one's community, one's nation, and ultimately all of humanity. Each of these expansions transcends its corresponding level of self-interest, which begins with selfishness, then nepotism, then

parochialism, and ultimately chauvinistic nationalism is left behind when hsin moves from a national level to all of humanity. The concepts of hsin are related to the concepts of reciprocity (the first component of li), in that they teach if one is not faithful to others they can expect unfaithfulness in return. If one is ever to reach the state of jen, it is essential that the properties of hsin are upheld and practiced in daily life.

The eighth and final key concept of Confucianism is that of yi, which deals with justice and the best way of doing things. In order to achieve yi, one must have the ability to recognize what is right, wrong, good, bad, etc. This recognition does not require the same type of wisdom as the concept of chi did, but it does require a type of “intuition.” This “intuition” gives value to the acts themselves instead of to the consequences of the acts. For example, a person living in accordance with yi would refrain from murder not out of the fear of going to jail, but solely for the purpose that murder is the wrong thing to do. Murder is wrong in itself, regardless of what its consequences may be. Living in accordance with yi is very similar to living the life of jen. In a life of yi, the focus is on performing actions because they are good in themselves, not because they are a means to an end. Likewise when practicing jen, one is concerned about who they are rather than with the individual acts they perform. The individual acts are good in themselves, and are not being practiced as a means to an end. Both concepts (the concepts of yi and jen) are practiced until they become second nature, and it is only at that moment that they become “right.”

Each of the eight concepts of Confucianism are clearly intertwined and related to one another. But when all of their virtues are combined together under one umbrella, they make up the properties of what is known as the chun tzu, or the second key concept of Confucianism. The chun tzu is often referred to as the “Superior Person” or the “Mature Person,” as he encompasses all goodness, truth, beauty, manners, and wisdom. He is in a permanent state of relaxation, completely at home in the world and entirely beyond personal ambition. The Superior Man is intelligent enough to approach anything without fear, and is capable of enduring long misfortune.

Although he is “noble both in birth and endowment,” the chun tzu is no saint. He is born a regular man and then becomes what he is through self-discipline. “‘To have the truth is the path of heaven, to seek the truth is the path of men. He who has the truth finds the right action without pains, achieves success without reflection.’ But he who seeks the truth chooses the good and holds it fast. He investigates, he questions critically, he ponders the truth and resolutely acts on it. ‘Perhaps others can do it the tenth time, I must do it a thousand times. But he who really has the perseverance to go this way- be he foolish, he will become clear headed; be he weak, he will become strong.’” (Jaspers 48) Confucius believed that a perfect society would consist of all chun tzu’s, and that only under those conditions can the world move toward peace.

Due to their inseparable nature, all eight concepts of Confucianism have been compared to individual aspects of a tree, working together to form one perfect life form. It has been said that, “As Jen is the root, Yi is the trunk, Li the branches, Chi the flower, Hsin the fruit.” Basically, this is saying that the inner workings of a tree in nature are similar to those of the Confucian concepts. For instance, in a tree, the roots provide a foundation, the trunk offers support, the branches carry nutrients to the flowers, and the flowers produce fruits that everyone can eat. Similarly, the concepts of Confucianism share the same type of structure.

For example, jen (the root) offers the foundation for Confucianism. It is the “virtue of all virtues” and what makes life worth living. Yi, representative of the trunk, is the closest concept to jen (the root), with its efficient processes of dealing with things. By living a life in accordance with Yi (the trunk), one serves as a support system for all other people who have not yet achieved its state of being, just as the trunk of a tree provides its support for all the components above it. Li, representative of the branches, is comprised of many different elements that outline the proper ways of doing things – similar to how the branches of a tree take on many different lengths and thicknesses in order to provide a balanced state of life for the flowers and the fruits that grow upon them. Chi, representative of the flower, can only be achieved when li and yi are present – similar to how a tree flower can only exist when the tree trunk and tree branches exist. Because the life of the flower is dependent on the branch it is growing on, which is in turn dependent on the trunk it is attached to, the flower exists only because the other two components of the tree exist. Although the trunk and the branches can be present without the flower, the flower cannot exist without the trunk and the branches. Finally, hsin, representative of the fruit, begins its existence in the self but over time can be spread to reach all of humanity. Similarly, the fruit of a tree begins its life solely connected to the tree, but eventually can be picked from the tree and shared across all humanity bringing enjoyment to all.

It is because Confucius kept such detailed records of his life and philosophy that we are able to obtain a good sense of his cultural situation, personality, and the political philosophy in which he believed. And although he was by no means the most successful philosopher of his day, from him grew Confucianism, which became the standard and dominant force in China for almost two thousand years.

Works Cited

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