# Ethics for the 21st Century – The Confucian Tradition
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The Confucian tradition still is largely unknown in the West. If it is referred to in the media or in popular works on East Asia then mostly with a negative connotation (not unlike the Islamic tradition), invoking images of authoritarianism, nepotism, ritualism, male chauvinism and the like. While these objections are certainly not unfounded for the Confucian (as well as for the pre-modern Western) past, to singularly focus on these aspects (which, needless to say, nobody defends anymore) and thereby neglect or discredit the ethical dimension of Confucianism would be greatly misleading; it would, in fact, be just as ill founded as criticizing someone defending the relevance of Christian charity today for backing the inquisition.

Confucianism, even though it is not a religion in the strict sense and historically as heterogeneous as Christianity, can indeed be regarded as a functional equivalent of the Christian faith: Confucian values have exerted a profound and lasting influence on China (and East Asia) over a period of more than 2000 years. Just as Christendom, Confucianism also claimed universal relevance of its teaching; compared to the former it lacked, however, the zealous missionary spirit. Instead, it spread to the rest of East Asia as an exemplary teaching of a harmonious social and moral order.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the philosophy of European Enlightenment challenged, under rationalistic and scientific claims, and in the end "disenchanted" the contents of the Christian faith - a process of secularization through which first a separation of church and state occurred, leading in the end to the marginalization of the churches. A similar process of secularization never took place in China. This does not mean that Confucianism, as its dominant ideology, has not been criticized. As is well known, it was blamed for all the ills of the traditional Chinese society during the May 4th period (1919) and, from a social-Darwinist point of view, was made responsible for China's backwardness in terms of economic, technological, military and political developments. Although critiqued, and, as mentioned at the beginning, for certain features – just as Christianity – rightly so, it never had to go through a process of secularization as such, because Confucianism - as a form of social and political ethics - had always been a secular way of thought. Lacking the supernatural, miraculous and

legendary contents of the Christian religion, which make it so hard to accept for modern man, Confucianism, as a value, system survived the major anti-traditionalist upheavals in mainland China and even the Cultural Revolution. Thus although Confucianism as an institution (unlike the Christian churches) disappeared with the end of imperial China, it formed and, to a certain extent, as post-Confucianism, stills forms the ethical basis of Chinese society.

If we compare the impact of Confucianism in East Asia to that of Christianity in the West, the balance sheet would thus in both cases show a mix of positive and negative factors. Both the Christian faith and Confucianism seem to stand for the best and the worst in the respective traditions, and it might only depend on the ideological bent whether one tips the scale in favour of either the positive or negative side. Let us dwell here, for the sake of a quest for a global ethics for the 21$^{st}$ century, on the more positive aspects of Confucianism, which have become in view again in China with the belated recognition that the wholesale dumping of Confucianism eighty years ago (May 4$^{th}$ period) might have caused as much bad as good. In the following, I shall outline some basic thoughts of Confucianism that could be valid for a discussion of universal ethics, concentrating on the concept of self/individual and moral autonomy in this tradition, showing further the interrelatedness of the important notions of self-transcendence, harmony and reciprocity.

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If we understand 'individual' in its modern atomistic sense as an autonomous entity, marked by its ability and right to choose freely between equal alternatives as well as its potential for unhindered self-fulfilment, then there is no equivalent in Confucianism to the modern Western notion of the individual. And yet we find in Confucian thought the individual person standing at the very beginning of all social and moral considerations. The Confucian "self" is not an "unencumbered self", it is rather a relational self, defined through social institutions and relationships. According to Tu Wei-ming, the Confucian self stands in the midst of partly concentric, partly overlapping circles of relationships - family, seniors/juniors at work, friends, community, country, universe. This kind of interrelatedness is characterized by a sense of mutuality, responsibility and obligation. Finally, the Confucian self is also considered part of a narrative continuity - a "living tradition" - in which the ideas of a common good are transmitted. It thus grows within or rather into a "horizon of significance" (Charles Taylor)

that reaches from the notion of the original goodness of human nature to the idea of the moral nature of the entire universe with Heaven as its ultimate spiritual source and reference point.

The maturing process of the individual - the gaining of an ethical identity - involves, in particular, the claim for moral self-cultivation. This cultivating process does not simply entail overcoming egocentric desires, it rather means that the individual fulfils him- or herself when he or she assists others in their self-fulfilment, in the realization of their respective potentials:

> "Now the man of perfect virtue (*ren*), wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others."[1]

This is the positive version of the Golden Rule (the negative one is found in the classics as well). In *Mencius* we find the metaphors "great body" (*da ti*) and "small body" (*xiao ti*) describing the different states in the process of self-cultivation: The individual has to develop his or her "great body" - an all inclusiveness - in order to grow from a "small person" (*xiao ren*) to a "great person" (*da ren*)[2].

In the Confucian tradition, this concept of maturing to a "great self" or "authentic" (*cheng*) person even comprises metaphysical notions: For it is precisely the "Way of Heaven" to be authentic, that is, great, all inclusive, and true to itself. Confucian authenticity thus puts man into a sequence of responsibilities which finally lets him or her partake in the process of self-fulfilment of the entire universe:

> "It is only he who is possessed of the most complete authenticity that can exist under Heaven, who can give its full development to his nature. Able to give its full development to his own nature, he can do the same to the nature of others. Able to give its full development to the nature of others, he can give their full development to the natures of animals and things. Able to give their full development to the natures of creatures and things, he can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth."[3]

As Tu Wei-ming observed, through the process of self-cultivation the individual self is part of a "fiduciary community" in which all members have to transcend their respective and still limited 'self' (the "self" standing not only for the individual, but also for the family, clan, community, and nation) in order to "realize the deepest meaning of humanity":

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[1] *Lunyu (Analects)*, 6.28
[2] *Mencius*, VIA.15.
[3] *Zhongyong (The Doctrine of the Mean)*, 22, James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I, p. 415f.

"Just as the self must overcome egoism to become authentically human, the family must overcome nepotism to become authentically human. By analogy, the community must overcome parochialism, the state must overcome ethnocentrism, and the world must overcome anthropocentrism to become authentically human. In light of Confucian inclusive humanism, the transformed self personally and communally transcends egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism to 'form one body with Heaven, Earth, and the Myriad Things'"[4]

This is – in a modern interpretation – the quintessence of the short but important Confucian classics *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*) and *The Great Learning* (*Daxue*). Another basic idea of the former is the emphasis on the way of the Mean, both in interpersonal relationships and in the process of self-cultivation; for it is the holding of the Mean, i.e., cultivating an equilibrium between the emotions (very much like the function of the Mean in Aristotle's cultivation of virtues), which will lead to social harmony and "universal peace". The significance of the latter classic (*Great Learning*) is usually put into the formula "sageliness within and kingliness without" (*nei sheng wai wang*), meaning that moral self-cultivation and social/political responsibility in a community are inseparable, leading to a harmonious polity. The path towards the goal of social, political, if not universal harmony thus begins with the cultivation of oneself.

Hence, the ideal of individuation in Confucianism is not self-fulfilment but self-transcendence. This ideal was furthered by the influence of other philosophies on the world-view of the Chinese intellectual elite, such as Daoism and Chan/Zen-Buddhism. In the latter schools (or religions) the very notion of the self was regarded as the ultimate illusion. There, the goal of practice could thus be described as self-forgetfulness. Understood from this point of view, Confucian "authenticity" stands for more than the modern and fashionable culture of self-fulfilment. By transcending individual interests and even anthropocentric views in a most comprehensive way, that is, by playing a responsible part in the functioning of the creative transforming process of the entire universe, the individual self ultimately forms a union with the universe/Heaven (*tian ren he yi*). Because of this ultimate focus the Confucian point of view has also been termed "anthropocosmic". It is an orientation that can be, and traditionally was, interpreted in a metaphysical/religious way, but today, with the pressing concerns about

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[4] Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 115f

the future of the planet Earth, it is also seen from an ecological perspective, i.e., as unity of man and nature.

This, exactly, is the "horizon of significance" which has inspired some of the finest features in Chinese culture: the notion of an all-embracing sense of care, as expressed in Fan Zhongyan's (989-1052) famous lines, "To take everything under Heaven as one's responsibility" and "To be the first one to care about the world's cares and to be last to enjoy the world's joys". It also comes out in Zhang Zai's (1020-1077) influential "Western Inscription" which inspired the Chinese intellectuals for the last millennium:

> "Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. The great ruler (the emperor) is the eldest son of my parents (Heaven and Earth), and the great ministers are his stewards. Respect the aged - this is the way to treat them as elders should be treated. Show deep love toward the orphaned and the weak - this is the way to treat them as the young should be treated. [...] Even those who are tired, infirm, crippled, or sick; those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands, are all my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to. [...] One who knows the principles of transformation will skillfully carry forward the undertakings [of Heaven and Earth], and one who penetrates spirit to the highest degree will skillfully carry out their will. [...] Wealth, honor, blessing, and benefits are meant for the enrichment of my life, while poverty, humble station, and sorrow are meant to help me to fulfillment. In life I follow and serve [Heaven and Earth]. In death I will be at peace."[5]

This short piece has been termed a Confucian "Credo". Its underlying theme is the central Confucian virtue *ren* (love, benevolence, humanness), unfolding from loving care in the family to care not only of all human beings but of all creatures, leading, as mentioned, to the understanding of the unity of man with Heaven (universe or nature). This kind of social virtue of Confucianism, though its central notion and highest goal, is not an absolutist, universal and egalitarian command (like Christian charity) but has a very concrete psychological nucleus:

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[5] Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 497f.

the love between parents and children in the family. According to Mencius,[6] this elementary - and universal - experience can be enlarged and spread throughout the whole world, but with the special love relationship between parents and children remaining of central importance.

To realize the highest good in daily life, thus, is to be, or rather to become, truly human(e) (*ren*). This is in a way a religious message in the worldly context of human relations; and it is, as Fung Yu-lan once said, the main tradition of Chinese philosophy, aiming

> "at a particular kind of highest life. But this kind of highest life, high though it is, is not divorced from the daily functioning of human relations. Thus it is both of this world and of the other world, and we maintain that it 'both attains to the sublime and yet performs the common tasks'".[7]

Just as we have a different view of the self, we also have a different view of the community. The community of man was seen as an integral part of an interdependent organism, which functioned, and had to be taken care of, like a family, with Heaven and Earth being the ultimate parents. Basic to this Confucian concept of universal order is that it is not a conflict model (individual vs. state power) that is at the root of Western political ideas, but a model based on the ideal of holding the Mean through consensus, leading to social harmony. This further implies togetherness, inseparability, balance, reciprocity and also complementarity, very much like the *Yin-Yang*-model. Summarizing, we can characterize Confucian thought as an ethics based on ideas such as self-transcendence, mutual responsibility, family values, relationships and the Golden Mean.

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Let us briefly compare Confucian ethics to the development that took place in the West. First of all, we need to acknowledge the imprint of the Christian tradition on the modern Western value system:

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[6] "Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others shall be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others shall be similarly treated: do this and the kingdom may be made to go round in your palm." (*Mencius*, IA.7)
[7] Fung Yu-lan, *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, London 1962, p. 3. The last words in this quote are "borrowed" from *The Doctrine of the Mean*.

1. Christian ideas and values still form the basis of Western societies, although now mostly in a secularized fashion and therefore not easily recognizable; hence we might better call them post-Christian values.

2. The West has successfully universalized its originally Christian based value system. This was achieved in the age of colonialism and imperialism with the development of science and (military) technology and driven by a quest for discovery.

3. Concerning the universalistic ideals of the Western civil religion, the original missionary zeal and absolutist claim seem unbroken.[8]

During the age of Enlightenment, when the religious absolutism of the Christian faith was replaced by an absolutism of reason, we encounter in the field of ethics a development towards legification: Codified law (going back to the Roman tradition) and a language of rights, beginning with John Locke, came more and more to substitute unwritten rules of moral conduct.[9] Thus, as Charles Taylor once remarked, "Instead of saying that it is wrong to kill me, we begin to say that I have a right to life."[10] The language of rights was reinforced at the time of the French Revolution when rights were understood as claims of the citizens against the state. Because of the history of the *ancien régime*, the state (government) was – and still largely is - conceived of as an, at least potentially, evil force which the citizens had to be protected against with rights. Today we have reached a status in which everything is permissible which is not explicitly prohibited by law or, put in terms of a minimalist ethics: "I can do whatever I want, so long as no one gets hurt". Morality as an unwritten code thus has, as it were, dissolved into written rights and laws and has become, more or less, superfluous.

In the field of Western moral philosophy we can observe a development from virtue ethics over a formalistic deontological ethics to a utilitarian ethics. Today we have discourse ethics and ethics of rights. The realization of the good now means not to limit the possibilities for self-realization of the other and thus to guarantee unforced procedures according to which people can negotiate their respective self-interests and problems. This is a consequential development from the concrete to the abstract, from lived, contextually relevant morality to rational, universal principles. It also shows the mainstream of Western history of ideas to be

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[8] See, for example, William Pfaff, "In America, Radical Globalizers Talk Like Missionaries", *International Herald Tribune*, July 9, 1998

[9] The connection to morality is still visible in the word "right", meaning both "not morally wrong" and "a subjective right to something".

[10] Charles Taylor, "Conditions for an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights" in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell, *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, Cambridge 1999, p. 127

the evolution of the concepts of liberty and individual autonomy, i.e. of the emancipation of the individual subject from the confines of church and state.

Procedural rules and laws sure are necessary in order to safeguard a complex, pluralistic polity made up of individuals who are regarded as standing in contractual relationship with one another. The problem is that the good gets out of view in an ethics of rights. If there still is a common good, it only consist in the guaranteeing that each individual interest ("I can do whatever I want, so long as no one gets hurt") is being treated fairly. Ethics thus has turned into a problem-solving ethics, or in Edmund Pincoff's' words a "quandary ethics".[11] Such ethics might guarantee a minimal ("thin") ethical standard under which a society may not fall. In contrast to this, there would be a virtue ethics aiming for a high ("thick") standard.

As to Confucian views today, although Confucian ethics in its modern form has gone through and changed with the encounter of Western philosophy, it has not experienced a comparable process of abstraction. It has remained, by and large, a holistic and socially based role and virtue ethics, i.e., seeing human beings not isolated but in contexts of relationships, including the whole universe – an aspect which, as mentioned, invites ecological interpretations today. (It is interesting to note that the modern Chinese rendering of the Western concept of "ethics", *lunli*, can be retranslated as "principles of human relationships".) In Confucian ethics we also encounter universalistic traits, i.e. in the already mentioned maxim "to feel responsible for everything under Heaven" and to extend "humaneness" (*ren*) in such a way that "all human beings between the Four Seas are my brothers and sisters;"[12] or take the "antropocosmic" point of view, which, as mentioned, can be and is interpreted today in a significantly ecological way. We also have a rational principle: mutuality (such as in the Golden Rule), but the emphasis is not on abstract principles but on concrete endeavours and cultivation: care, benevolence, humaneness, overcoming of self-centeredness, cherishing human relationships, the way of the Mean and social harmony. Confucian thought, thus, has also universal qualities and tendencies, but it could be classified as belonging more to a soft (aesthetic) universalism in contrast to a hard (rational) universalism in the West.[13]

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[11] Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," *Mind*, vol. 80, pp. 552-71. Reprinted in Stanley Hauerwas & Alasdair MacIntrye (Eds.) *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, p. 92-112.

[12] *Lunyu*, 12.5

[13] See Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Communitarianism and Confucianism - In Search of Common Moral Ground". In: K.-H. Pohl (ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context: A Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 262-286

Today's globalized (if not to say Americanized) world is characterized by the dominance of Western thought, with an abstract notion of the individual person, guaranteeing his or her self-interest by litigious means within a legal or contractual framework. As we know too well by now, this adversarial model has its good but also its bad sides,[14] for people, after all, in reality are not abstract individuals but are being born into and define themselves through certain basic relationships that can only last through such notions as harmony and mutuality – from families to marriages and friendships. An encounter with Confucianism could, at least, make us aware of these basic but universal notions which lately, for some reason or other, have become like blind spots in the Western model. It might even give us the vision of an alternative modernity, one that is possibly less build on self-interest and the notion of conflict but carried by a (re-)discovery of the value of human relationships, particularly in the family and community; transcendence of self-interest (not only for the individual person, but also for families, clans, communities, parties, unions, nations etc.) and last not least a (re-)discovery of the way of the Mean as a means to achieve social harmony.

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[14] See, for example, the phenomenal liability suits in the American legal system today, according to the motto: "Hit me! I need the money."