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Philosophy

1-1-2008

# Confucian Ethics in the Analects as Virtue Ethics

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### Recommended Citation

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**Philosophical Ideals and Artistic Pursuits in Asia and the West**  
**NEH Module**  
**Dr. John Santiago**

**Confucian Ethics in the *Analects* as Virtue Ethics**

**Introduction**

The Confucian tradition embodies one of the most enduring and influential moral traditions in world history. Yet for Western readers Confucius remains little known, and perhaps even less approachable than the major thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition. While it is difficult to overstate his influence, Confucius himself left little if any written account of his moral outlook. What we know of the man and the origins of the Confucian tradition come from brief accounts of his life and teachings compiled primarily in the present text, the *Analects*. As such, Confucian ethics is best thought of as a tradition more than an explicit ethical theory. In contrast to most Western philosophical treatments of ethics, Confucian ethics contains no first premises, no central and clearly defined guiding principle, and no set formula by which moral judgments are pronounced. Omitting such principles is often more explicitly advocated than the few instances in which we do get something akin to a single formula (2.16, 4.10, 14.1, 18.8). Confucius lived a moral life, and by his example a moral tradition was forged. From studying the *Analects*, the accounts of his manner of engagement with others, a follower of Confucian ethics gains insight into how to live morally. The *Analects* form a reserve of direction and support for reflection on one's lifelong journey to live ethically. Thus, this emphasis on the guidance from a moral exemplar suggests that Confucian ethics can be construed as a form of virtue ethics. That is, Western readers can benefit by approaching the *Analects* from the framework offered by the theoretical elements of virtue ethics. In the Western traditions, especially in the writings of Aristotle, the basic theoretical components of virtue ethics are more explicitly outlined. The hope is that couching the Confucian tradition in the structure of Western virtue ethics will allow a beginning student swift access to pull together the seemingly disparate accounts found in the *Analects*, and thereby grasp the overarching moral tenets of the Confucian tradition.

**The Virtue Ethics Approach**

Virtue ethics is old, indeed in the contemporary Western climate (both philosophical as well as social) it is old-fashioned. The ancient Greek approach to moral philosophy was oriented towards overall character development, what one could think of as a global approach to morality. The central question is "How should I live?" To which the answer is quite succinctly, "Live genuinely happy." Yet we should note that in this approach the person's life is being characterized, not merely his or her specific actions. That is, the "rightness of action" is not the main focus. Being a good person is not merely reducible to doing the right thing or making the right decision. In this older form of philosophy actions are mere markers or reflections of what has genuine moral value, the character of a life fully lived. The moral *worth* of *persons* takes precedence over the *rightness* of *actions*.

In contrast, modern treatments of morality (and much of the contemporary assumptions regarding morality) focus on assessing certain kinds of questions that favor actions as the center of moral inquiry, what one could think of as a local approach to morality. In the modern developments of ethical theory in Western philosophy, the triad of intent-action-consequence dominates our treatment of moral investigation. Did the agent have the right intention? Did the agent's action bring about the best consequence? Was their action intended to be pleasurable, did it originate from the proper principle of action? Answering these highly formalized and theory-laden questions is often facilitated by the use of situational dilemmas that are meant to elicit our moral intuitions. Take the famous trolley car example. You are witness to a trolley car, full of twenty people, running out of control towards a split in the tracks. You hold the lever to guide the car in one direction or another. Down one track is a fallen bridge, down the other is a small child stuck in the tracks. Which choice do you make, send the twenty passengers to plummet to their doom or sentence the small child to a certain death? Such high-stakes moral theory can work exceedingly well at penetrating the basis of our choices when our backs are against the wall, but it does little to address how we live on a day to day basis. More importantly, thinking about the high-stakes dilemmas that are common in contemporary philosophy depends upon mining the moral intuitions that we have already established. Perhaps this is what makes such dilemmas so successful and popular today; we already tend to think that morality is about making the right choice or doing the right thing, so our intuitions are primed for such an approach. The notion of living a moral life, of thinking about morality in a global context is a bit odd for many. Indeed, for many the notion of striving to "live honorably" sounds old-fashioned. This is because it is old-fashioned, its origins are quite ancient. This notion of regarding yourself as an "honorable man" or "virtuous woman" is so out of popular fashion as to strike some as arrogant or self-righteous, or reserved only for our grandparent's generation or the devoutly religious. Yet this is precisely what both the Aristotelian and Confucian moral traditions advocate. The virtue ethics approach prompts us to consider our moral standing in broader terms than simply doing the right thing. Rather, the virtue ethics approach moves us to (at least attempt) to carve out a life that is right or good from its basic contours through the specific choices and actions that we make. That is, virtue ethics demands that we work to build a good person and inhabit our world in the right ways.

### **A Brief Primer on Aristotelian Virtue Ethics**

For the ancient Greeks "living well" meant living happily. As is the case today, there were many conceptions of what sort of life pursuits lead to a happy life. Moral philosophers and lay people alike debated the merits of these different conceptions. For Aristotle this debate hinged on a notion of being genuinely happy and not merely happy or pleased due to incidental fortunes or satisfactions. Living genuinely happy was tied to our real purpose or telos. Since Aristotle did not take this issue of a real purpose to be an individual quest, he set for himself the task of determining our purpose as human beings. Living according to that purpose would be genuine happiness for any human being. Once you define what "human being" or "person" means, you gain insight into an appropriate notion of happiness for that sort of being.

Aristotle held a notion of personhood that was defined in a pre-scripted nature. That is, persons are beings that possess a unique property, an essence, that distinguishes them from other types of beings. Other types of beings held different properties that defined their essence or “true nature.” Horses, for example, may possess the essence of something associated with swift running. In a sense, to be a horse is to be a creature that is born to run, meant to be swift, naturally fast. To be sure, there are horses born crippled or unable to run, but this only shows how some members can deviate from their nature or their true essence. For any given being, knowing their essence provides a rationale for ascribing a purpose to that being. This purpose defines the ends to which these beings serve, the telos of their existence. The more one is able to serve this purpose the more one is able to serve one’s highest and truest calling. This would constitute true happiness. One might imagine that a horse is happiest when it is running on the open field, wind in its hair, with the open horizon before it. For this it seems is what a horse is meant to do. The important point to note, however, is that this purpose is built into the very notion of a horse, independent of its actions, choices, or circumstances. A horse is a horse regardless of the year or era in which it was born. A horse is a horse regardless of what it eats, who sired it, and what accidents or good fortune it may encounter. Should the horse become lame, it remains a horse because it retains its core essence even though its incidental qualities have changed. A horse was born fully a horse in all the essentially relevant respects.

Something like this applies to humans as well, but our purpose is not that of a horse. We are meant to do more than run. Aristotle says that we are unique in our capacity for reason. Aristotle concisely claims, “The function of man then is the activity of soul in accordance with, or not without, rational principle.”<sup>i</sup> Thus, we are meant to reason, and in the use and development of reason we live happily. This asserts far more than the practical claim that if we use our reason we will be better able to accomplish the things that bring us joy. Aristotle claims, “human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence.”<sup>ii</sup> A virtue is an excellence of some activity generally speaking, but the overall virtue of a being is grounded in that being’s essence. Aristotle is claiming that our highest calling is living in accordance with our true nature, which is to reason. This is the foundation of living well, to live in the way we were meant to live. That is, the good of man is to live in accordance with reason, not merely to achieve the goals we set for ourselves and “find happiness,” but to live as the sort of being we really are underneath all our incidental qualities. Of course, reason does help us to discern specific courses of action that are in accordance with our essence. So reason also helps us in local ways to succeed at specific goals in a way that keeps us true to our nature. Aristotle understands this function of reason to be one of discerning the mean between options, so that we neither fall into excess nor deficiency in our conduct.

However well we use reason in our day to day affairs and mundane activities, Aristotle is clear that this use of reason is not the highest one. We recall that there were several competing notions of the good life that were present in the ancient Greek world, and Aristotle began his account and eventual defense of his own view by looking to our essence first. This led him to posit that a life of contemplation is in fact the best life.

That is, the best life is one in which we are free to use our reason for the sake of pondering deep philosophical issues and gaining greater wisdom and understanding. This might at first sound like a philosopher tooting his own horn, as though Aristotle was simply claiming his own lifestyle was the best. However, two main points in his defense of the life of contemplation are instructive for our understanding of the Confucian tradition. First, Aristotle claims that the life of contemplation is superior to other lives because it is a finished end. That is, contemplation need not be pressed into the service of anything further to be a meaningful practice. Unlike, let's say, the practice of making saddles, which only makes sense as a means to riding horses, contemplation can be done for its own sake, that is, for the value of knowing. Contemplation can be done in the service of nothing but itself. Second, a person is self-sufficient in the life of contemplation. That is, strictly speaking one needs no other people to do it. Contemplation can be done alone. Thus, a person living the best of lives, the happiest of lives, is one who increases his self-cultivation by increasing his own personal powers of contemplation and faculty of reason. An exemplary man, according to Aristotle, is a pillar of reason dedicated to the highest calling of contemplation.

### **The Confucian Person**

The morally exemplary man in the Confucian tradition is significantly different from that of the Aristotelian tradition. This is, in no small part, due to the different starting point of how a person is understood. For Aristotle, the person was essentially defined (i.e. defined in terms of a unique essence one has that makes one a full-fledged person). In the Confucian tradition the person is progressively defined. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont put this well as, "The human *being* is not something we are; it is something that we do, and become...not an essential endowed potential, but what one is able to make of oneself."<sup>iii</sup> The "doing" of this Chinese conception is how one is imbedded in one's relationships so as to mutually define and refine one's own nature as well as the nature of the other persons. That is, an individual's nature is not pre-scripted simply in virtue of being born with a unique quality. One is born into a unique position relative to other people, that is, one is born into a family, a community, and a nation. However, that unique quality alone does not define an essential inalterable trait. That quality merely presents a range of opportunities for growth; they provide a set of possibilities for the ongoing development and maturation of one's changing nature (12.8). The *Analects* makes frequent references to increasingly developing people who have travelled further and further on the path of excellence. A human being is not born with a fixed pre-defined and unalterable quality, but becomes a refined person as he or she grows in his or her relationships. Failing to do so, as we so often do while young, qualifies us as brutish in our selfishness. The petty person (*xiaoren*) appears as the contrast to the exemplary person (16.9). Attending to the formalities of our relationships alone demonstrates at least a minimal amount of development, but not much more than the masses of people whose virtue and character is indistinguishable from one another (8.9). The more creative we become in investing ourselves in those relationships, the more determinate we become, the more distinguished we are as sources of value to ourselves and those around us. When we become genuinely innovative in our relationships we bring to our societies (local or broad) new ways of understanding the possibilities of our relationships.

Confucius refers to this type of figure as junzi (4.10). In the most advanced cases we see an authoritative figure who stands well above others, leading an entire civilization by example. These are the shengren, the sages (6.30, 7.26, 16.8, 19.12).

Furthermore, the authoritative person understands that our relationships are not mere means to our ends. People are imbedded from birth in coterminous relationships. That is, others are means to our ends as we are means to their ends. The ends of both sides of our relationships are necessarily being served as we relate to one another, for this is how we come into the very development of our natures. Under the Aristotelian tradition, and much more so as the Western tradition develops historically, other people may serve to benefit our ends, such as close friends who enjoy conversing about philosophy, but they are incidental to our essence. Indeed, even when those others are necessary to our existence or growth they remain conceptually external to the essence of the agent. For example, Aristotle claimed others were instrumental in the education required for the full development of our deliberative capacities. However, they merely serve to facilitate *our* contemplation, the growth of *our* understanding and accumulated knowledge. They are not part of the very thing that defines *what* we are as persons, for our capacity for reason does this first and foremost. We see the theoretical primacy of reason as an essential quality that defines the person most notably in the cases where Aristotle *denies* this quality to some human beings. For Aristotle, natural slaves did not possess the fullest capacity for reason (part of the justification for their enslavement), and thus could not attain the most virtuous life. That is, regardless of the quality or content of a natural slave's relationship to others (including any education or learning they may enjoy as a result), the highest calling of man, the "good life," was forever beyond them. Relationships cannot alter one's essence under the Aristotelian tradition.

The Confucian tradition comes out of earlier Chinese traditions in which the notion of what it is to be a person is intrinsically and constitutively social. That is, a person is never alone, could never exist alone, for *to be* a person is to be in relationships. Herbert Fingarette's account bears repeating, "For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings."<sup>iv</sup> Stripping away all of our relationships would not yield insight into an underlying core essence that still defines our nature (as Descartes proceeded). Doing so would only result in destroying any claim to understanding our nature, as it would radically undermine our ability to understand how we had progressed in those very relations that make us what we are, that comprised *our* nature.

### **Virtue in the Confucian Tradition**

Since personhood has been defined in such different terms, it should come as no surprise that what is good for us (persons) is also different. In the Confucian tradition, virtue is fulfilling our potential. Since our potential is at least partially given to us in the range of relationships we are born into, our first and most important virtues revolve around family. Generally speaking, virtue is striving for quality in our relationships, and in the quality of our familial relationships above all (1.2). For the most part, all relationships invite some common opportunities for improvement, and so their quality can be evaluated

accordingly (17.2). How we meet these opportunities determines the degree of quality in our relationships, for this is how we invest ourselves in those relationships.

Three main relational themes occur frequently in the *Analects*, being humane, conscientious, and kind. I would suggest that these three are the closest analog to the cardinal virtues in the Western tradition of virtue ethics. However, in the Confucian tradition the building up of one's virtuous character is not the accumulation of one agent's quality (for Aristotle, the storing up of the habits of acting in these ways), but rather in the dissemination of one's attentiveness to one's relationships (12.16). You become a better person by giving more of yourself (at least the best parts of what you have to offer) to your relationships (6.30, 14.42). There is very little of the sort of "storing up" model of virtue, and much more of a releasing model of virtue. Perhaps better put, the virtues of humaneness, conscientiousness, and kindness are qualities of the way that we invest ourselves in relationships, not simply qualities we *possess* in increasing or decreasing amounts (12.10).

In our relationships we should strive to be humane. For Confucius this boiled down to following what we call the Golden rule. In the *Analects* we read, "do not impose on others what you yourself do not want" (15.24). Being humane is recognizing that another requires like consideration. Alternatively, being humane is recognizing the relationship that you and others possess in common with one another, which immediately implies that you are not an exception to the standards of right conduct. You are not the only one that deserves to be treated well, nor are you the only one who is permitted to do certain things.

With regard to being conscientious in our relationships, in the simplest terms we can construe the lessons in the *Analects* as recommending that we must be aware of others and of their needs and interests (1.16). Awareness is central to our capacity to invest ourselves in our relationships. As we've noted, relationships merely provide opportunities for mutual development, and quite frequently these are very easily looked over in the rush of daily affairs. That is, the rich ground upon which we are planted at birth can be poorly used, if we *fail to see* the other people that make up the nexus of relationships defining our lives. This may sound odd at first, but we are all familiar with examples of not seeing other people in our surroundings. In contemporary popular discourse, we frequently hear people lament that one can live in a large metropolitan area, surrounded by people, and yet we feel alone. This is not likely an idiosyncrasy on our part; we are feeling the result of being ignored by so many, for they take little time to be aware of our presence. When we too contribute to this by failing on our own part to be aware of others, we are cut off from opportunities to grow. We are as they say, "*lost in our own world,*" pent up in our individualistic perception of the world and quite without help and resource to fulfill our potentials.

Being generous or sympathetic in our relationships springs naturally from being aware in them, or at least this is what Mencius believed. Kindness is part of the innate human goodness that Mencius argued sprang forth from any well developed person. Confucius did not seem to hold a strong or explicit opinion on the innate goodness of humanity, but

kindness was a central factor in living well in our relationships. If conscientiousness is to be aware of those around us and their needs, kindness is to respond from that awareness with warmth and generosity towards others. In some respects, being kind is having an interest in the welfare of the other, of caring what happens to the other. This can take the form of an interest in both the other's objective welfare as well as for their subjective welfare. That is, sometimes we care about what is in their interest regardless of what they think or feel about their condition, and sometimes we care about their own feelings on the matter. Sometimes we do both. Which one we do depends upon what is appropriate for the actual conditions. The term *yi* is translated by Ames and Rosemont as "appropriate" or "fitting." The emphasis on one's attentiveness to the specific conditions one encounters lends great flexibility to the manner in which kindness can be reflected in one's conduct (4.10, 9.4). For example, caring for a drug addict would likely prioritize objective welfare concerns over the addict's subjective preferences for the drugs. On the other hand, caring about someone who has just been publically humiliated would likely prioritize a concern for the victim's subjective welfare. One's overt conduct towards another in these different scenarios can vary greatly while still maintaining a high degree of kindness. In all cases, however, the *Analects* reflects a general imperative for kindness to underlie one's conduct.

### ***Li*: Propriety and Reverence**

While the preceding discussion of the virtues may lead us to believe that any individual could invest their relationships with these qualities as they saw fit, this is not the case. The virtues of humaneness, conscientiousness, and kindness are not ungoverned qualities of the way that we invest ourselves in relationships. These qualities are invested in relationships according to existing cultural practices, or rituals, that formally organize interactions among people. People in the West are familiar with the manner in which such cultural rituals govern large life events (such as weddings and birthday celebrations). You are *supposed* to bring a gift to each celebration, and dressing in your finest clothes is often required. You would be rude to do otherwise. However, for the Chinese, such ritual observances of the proper ways to interact can be established for very minute exchanges between people, such as bowing to greet another.

The Chinese term for this is *li*, translated by Ames and Rosemont as propriety. This correctness of adhering to the cultural practices has a two-fold nature. On the one hand we have the formality of following customs and traditions. While on the other hand we should have reverence in our conduct to bring forth a substantive investment of ourselves within our relationships. These two aspects of *li* provide a clear social code along with a robust standard of success. The first, adhering to the formal traditions, provides people with a template that specifies their societal obligations and benefits (8.2). These are the basic rules conveyed throughout a society, and in Chinese society there are many minute rules governing life. The second aspect of *li*, having reverence for our relationships, recommends that our participation and fulfillment of these rituals be conducted with the full engagement of our character (9.24). That is, far from admitting the mechanical "going through the motions" of a ritual, *li* emphasizes the investment of our best attention, desire, and talents into these practices (1.12, 17.11). This later aspect needs to



be considered in light of how human nature is construed. Our nature unfolds as we participate in the assorted relationships that constitute our life, especially those that are well-defined within our society, and our virtue is continually disclosed by the quality of how we meet the demands and obligations of these relationships. However, the emphasis here is in how “we” imbed ourselves in these relationships. That is, the unique individuality of our character (our traits, strengths, and insights) is called for in living up to the ritual practices that govern our relationships (12.1). The uniqueness of the individual is the substance that is poured into the form of the ritual template. So, as our nature unfolds in this form/substance governed way, we see that our own self-cultivation demands the full use of our faculties in our relationships. A simple way to put this is that the creativity we exercise in our social roles is the means by which we increase self-cultivation (15.29). Rather than the Western mode of increasing self-cultivation by increasing personal powers and faculties of reason and knowledge (contemplation), in the Confucian tradition one increases his or her self-cultivation by pouring one’s creative energies into the relationships that constitute our self (12.8).

### ***Ren*: The Confucian Exemplary Man**

In the Aristotelian tradition we find that the central moral question betrays already an individualized, if not individualistic, approach to questions of morality. The ancient Greeks asked, “How should *I* live?” The agent was already assumed to be an individual, and so an individual response flowed from the very formulation of the question. In the Confucian tradition, the answer to the central question also flows from the way the question is construed, for it too betrays the underlying assumptions about the nature of a person. However, in the Confucian tradition the moral question is formulated differently. Here we find throughout the *Analects* something closer to “How shall *we* attend to others properly?” (15.6, 15.8). The answer must therefore include others as constitutive of the right outlook on living well, for they are assumed in the very question. A life of contemplation, potentially serving no other end and being self-sufficient and independent is not a viable answer for the Confucian question. Indeed, for Confucius abstract contemplation is derided as a waste of time (15.31). For the Aristotelian tradition, not only is such a life a possible answer to the central moral question, it is the *best* answer, reflecting not merely some values but the highest values in Aristotle’s thought. This is the standard by which all other life-attempts can be judged and ranked accordingly.

In the *Analects* we also find that students (those of Confucius or those reading the *Analects*) are also referred to standards by which they can begin to evaluate their own lives. Confucius repeatedly refers students to consider moral exemplars who have demonstrated the proper attendance to others and to avoid the interest and conduct of the petty. These former reflect *ren*, translated by Ames and Rosemont as “authoritative conduct,” or “the authoritative person.” Thus, the morally exemplary man in the Confucian tradition is the authoritative source of an answer to this central question.

The very character for *ren* in the Chinese lexicon reflects the constitutively social nature of the person. The character is made up of two terms, one meaning “person” and the

other meaning “two.” Read at face value, to become virtuous one requires others. That is, to develop into the most refined nature one can become, an individual is dependent on others and must serve ends which entail others. The stark contrast between the highest ideals in the Aristotelian conception, valorizing the self-sufficiency and self-serving ends of contemplation, should be clear. However, ever more differences become apparent as one reads the *Analects* and finds that virtue, the excellence of the person, is not confined to a strong emphasis on reason and psychological dispositions. Excellence is required of the whole person. Even with respect to the predominately psychological traits, the emphasis is spread across one’s capacity to reason, one’s aesthetic sensibility, religious and moral outlook, and acquired learning. These traits, however, are always pressed into some other relational service. That is, how they are used and expressed is also a matter of excellence, particularly in how one composes one’s body (10.4). Thus, the physical composure of the person is enlisted in the entire excellence of the person. One’s posture, stance, and body language are all as much a part of becoming an excellent person as is our psychology.

Earlier we had said that the creativity we exercise in our social roles is the means by which we increase self-cultivation. Now we can see that this notion of creativity should be very broadly construed as the full breadth of our faculties and resources. That is, being creative in our relationships suggests more than being imaginative. Being creative is investing ourselves fully in our relationships, and since the conception of a person is broader than the Western tendency to reduce “person” to “psyche” we should note that all our faculties are brought to bear in engaging excellently in our relationships. Our reason, wit, learning, and imagination flow through out body, our behavior, and our actions (12.1). Being invested in our relationships demands that attention is paid to how all these aspects of our personhood contribute to our conduct towards others.

This robust inclusion of our physical and intellectual constitution into the Confucian notion of an exemplary man reflects another common theme in the *Analects*, namely the importance of attending to the small details of everyday life. Daily life is the most significant context in which we are called upon to demonstrate and reflect the excellence of our nature. Daily life also affords us with constant and ubiquitous opportunities for developing and defining our nature’s excellence. This trend rejects both the high-stakes moral philosophy common today as well as the Aristotelian devaluation of everyday activities that are quite evidently in the service of mundane ends. Confucian ethics reflects this general emphasis in Chinese thought to consider the possibilities for self-development in everyday activities. In Zen stories it is not uncommon to find that the exemplary person is a common cook, and his deep insight into the most profound metaphysical and moral aspects of the world are expressed in how he cuts meat (cf. Zhuangzi’s account of Cook Ding and Lord Wen Hui). This simply never happens in the Aristotelian tradition, nor in most of the history of the Western tradition of moral theory. Cooks are not fit subjects for the role of exemplary person, at least they are not so until they perform some heroic act. Heroes are exemplary persons in the Western tradition. Yet in the Chinese tradition, though there clearly are heroes and heroic figures, there is less importance placed upon their heroic actions or choices themselves than we find in the West. Everyday life is difficult enough and in some ways more difficult to sustain

excellence within, for it requires constant attention and care (6.29). Recounting the stories of heroes and heroic acts leaves open the possibility that we begin to think a last moment conviction or sacrifice is genuinely important, as though an almost coincidental (or in the worst case an accidental) elevation of their merit is sufficient to regard them as having exemplary status. Living up to the drama of the heroic becomes the only motivation for living well. However, these dramatic moments rarely occur (thankfully), and this can leave us unfocused on our moral condition the remainder of the time. The emphasis on the everyday challenges in the *Analects* buttresses the need to invest oneself into one's relationships conscientiously (4.6). That is, one must be present to the small moments before you, aware of the relevant needs of the interaction and people one is currently engaged in, and act accordingly.

This brings us to our final note. A keen awareness of the concrete reality around one also reflects a commitment to the nature of humanity. One is born into this world with a range of possibilities to grow into the relationships that define oneself. These relations may bear common qualities (we all have mothers and fathers, communities and nations, and many of us have siblings, friends, and co-workers), but they are never exactly the same for everyone (17.2). That is, our relationships are not generic; they are specific and come with traits unique to them. This means that our opportunities for growing in our relationships is likewise unique, there is no formula or principle that defines an absolute proclamation for how to live (14.1). There are ideals that help guide us through practical deliberation, and there are the social ritual forms that govern over our relationships. However, these are templates and suggestions that offer important reference points, they do not do the work of being a moral person for us. For that we must be receptive to the concrete details of the case before us. This is a skill exercised in real contexts within robust relations, and it is a skill that we continually develop and (one hopes) improve upon. Thus, in the *Analects* it is not unusual to find accounts of Confucius treating some of his followers in decidedly harsh ways that may not appear kind (14.43). Yet careful attention to the case reveals that Confucius was responding to the unique qualities of the situation (not merely those of his student but of the context). As an exemplary person, Confucius offered us an answer to the central moral question, "How shall we attend to others properly?" that was specific to his position within his relations. We could say, in a more formulaic expression, that one should attend to others as they really are, as real people engaged in relations with you, also a real person. Such an approach to morality does not offer fixed and universal proclamations regarding proper conduct. Rather this approach provides us with a heightened regard for attending to the actual people who are part of our lives. So when we say that the morally exemplary man in the Confucian tradition is the authoritative source of an answer to the central moral question, we have to note the emphasis on the singular "an answer" to the question. The example of Confucius himself given in the *Analects* is an account of his own solution to his own life. Growing in one's relations is a human becoming, a task taken on by a non-generic being not defined by the possession of a universal quality, but defined by the specific features of his or her relations to others. Confucius offers a look at how an exemplary person lived, attending to his life. Yet we must live our own lives, and if we have learned from Confucius, then we have learned that "our" life is not "his" life. So to live as he lived, we

must find and live our own answers within the forms provided by the unfolding of our own society.

<sup>i</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1, Ch. 7. (Ackrill, 1987)

<sup>ii</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1, Ch. 7. (Ackrill, 1987)

<sup>iii</sup> Ames and Rosemont, Jr., "Introduction" *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, p. 49.

<sup>iv</sup> Fingarette, Herbert, "The Music of Humanity in the Conversations of Confucius" *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 10 (1983), p. 217.