

THE CONFLICT OF AUTHORITY AND FREEDOM IN ANCIENT CHINESE ETHICS

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THE purpose of this paper is to give an account of the development of Chinese thought on the important problem of authority and freedom in ethics, a problem which is fundamental for any ethical system. It makes a very great difference to ethical theory whether the individual's actions shall be determined by standards of conduct which are imposed upon him from without, or whether he shall be free to work out those standards of conduct for himself. On this problem ancient and medieval Chinese thought ended in accepting the principle of authority by adopting the Confucian philosophy. While today we rebel against external authority in moral matters, yet we must remember that the ancient and medieval world universally adopted a different attitude. In the legalism of the Pharisees, the law codes of the Brahmans, the authoritarianism of the Christian Catholic church, and the philosopher-ruler of Plato's ideal republic, who was to be the absolute authority for the mass of the people, reflective thought everywhere decided in favor of authority. Consequently we are not surprised that it was also victorious in China; rather we should be surprised to find that so much opposition was given to its sway.

The situation in China was similar to that in ancient Greece—a gradual growth in wealth and commerce; a group of city-states situated in a homogeneous territory—this time inland instead of on a sea-coast; growing intercourse between them, the growth of a literature and of literary centers. There were a number of differences; the most important of these was the remarkable historical sense of the people. In the eyes of the people of the time of Confucius, China was already an ancient country with authentic records going back for at least half a millenium, and traditions going back more than a

millenium more. Hence we find in ancient China a historic sense that links her thought more with that of our own time than with the timeless universals of Greece. At the same time we find a strengthening of the authority of the past through its very antiquity. A second difference lay in the possession by China of an Emperor who was theoretically the center of the political organism. While his power was shadowy in the golden age of philosophy, so that there was no central authority to check speculation, yet the possession of the imperial tradition meant much for the development of the ideal of a political system (and hence of an ethical doctrine) in which there was an Emperor, a Sage-King to wield the authority of the state—a much more convenient figure to head up an authoritarian doctrine than Plato's philosopher-rulers in an aristocratic "Republic." Thirdly, there was no slave class in China. The Chinese were a homogeneous people not much given to fighting; while there are traditions of a coming from the West (unconfirmed by any reliable evidence) it was by a process of peaceful penetration rather than by conquest that they gained their place in the sun. They were peaceful agriculturalists rather than warlike herdsmen. Hence we find in China a larger amount of genuine democracy and of community of interest between the governors and governed than elsewhere.

The ancient Chinese social system was organized around the family and clan. This family was the typical patriarchal family. the father or grandfather possessed the *patria potestas*, and his children, grandchildren, and other relatives, together with their wives and children, lived in one household. Their gods were chiefly the spirits of the honored ancestors, who still cared for their descendants, and whose worship and care bound the family into a greater unity. In such a relatively static agricultural environment, it was natural that the experience of age should receive honor and authority. Hence the greatest happiness that could come to anyone was to live to a good old age until the headship of the family descended upon him, and the whole clan should honor and serve him. Even today, "Long Life" is one of the three greatest happinesses. Thus there came to be clear distinctions between older and younger, so that different words were used for the terms, "older brother" and "younger brother", "older sister" and "younger sister," "uncle who is older than my father" and "uncle who is younger than my father," "older brother's wife" and "younger brother's wife", to a great de-

gree of refinement. When reflective thought came to be applied to this situation, two especial virtues were applied to these relations, "filial piety", and "Reverence for the elder". In addition there was the virtue of *Li*, later to become one of the two most important moral concepts, translated "propriety", "ceremony", or "the rules of proper conduct", which included all the various observances, customary, religious, and courtly, as well as the observances of politeness, and logically included the two previously mentioned virtues. This concept of *Li* became the apotheosis of traditional morality, and carried with it all the values of the traditional scheme of things.

Confucius may well be called the Socrates of China. Living about three-quarters of a century before that thinker, like him, he busied himself in endeavoring to build up a code of morals to buttress the declining morality of his time. For him, as for Socrates, ethics constituted the sum and substance of philosophy, and he refused to go into other speculations. He was a faithful government official, and so politics was the goal of philosophy.

As a basis for his ethics, Confucius brought forward a principle which was new at that time in Chinese ethical thought, that of *Jen* or "benevolence".¹ The meaning of this term has been disputed, but Confucius himself defined it as "Love your fellowmen."² In another passage he declared that "the man of *Jen* is one who desiring to maintain himself sustains others, and desiring to develop himself develops others. To be able from one's self to draw a parallel for the treatment of others—that may be called the rule of *Jen*."³ In other words, *Jen* is the carrying out of the golden rule. It is the highest of virtues,⁴ and is the definition of the Superior Man.⁵ But *Jen* is not love in the sense that we use the term. Confucius made very much of the natural and social relationships of prince and minister, father and son, older and younger brother, husband and wife, and in each case there is a superior and inferior,

¹The chief pieces of literature which we can assuredly date before the time of Confucius are the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*. In the *Odes*, *Jen* is used only twice, whereas *Li* is used six times; in the *Book of History*, *Jen* is used five times while *Li* is used nine times. Evidently *Jen* did not become an important ethical concept until the time of Confucius; in the *Analects* it is used fifty-four times as against forty-one times that *Li* is used.

²*Analects* XII, xxii.

³*Analects* VI, xxviii.

⁴*Analects* IV, vi, 1.

⁵*An.* IV, v, 2, 3.

so the attitude of the superior should be different from that of the inferior; it is not the love of equals, but the benevolence of the prince or paterfamilias; kindness rather than love.⁶

But he was not consistent in his use of the term. As the highest of virtues, *Jen* came to include the whole of virtue, to be equivalent to virtue itself, and so to include other elements than love; it is defined as respect, magnanimity, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness,⁷ and even applied to all, not merely to the superior.

In Confucius' use of this concept, he was getting away from the ethics of authority. *Jen* was a general principle, just as was the Golden Rule; it was not a code of conduct already decided upon for whose use only casuistry was required; it was a principle which each individual would have to apply for himself. We should remember in this connection that in Confucius' Silver Rule, "Do not do to others as you would not have others do unto you", the negative form of statement is due to the peculiar genius of the Chinese language, which prefers a negative to a positive statement, and that when Confucius came to elucidate its meaning by the principle of "reciprocity", he showed that he meant the Golden Rule in its positive form—which is but an expression of the principle of *Jen*, and in Confucius' meaning thereof, had the limitations of *Jen*. Such an attitude of kindness, or even a restricted love, is never a system of enactments to be obeyed, but rather it is a principle, for which new applications are continually occurring; it is a principle of freedom, not of authority, for it breaks thru every bond set for it. In so far, *Jen* is the opposite of *Li*, and it is not surprising that in an age which had been used to an authoritarian code, Confucius was asked again and again to define *Jen*—to state what it meant in concrete situations, so that people could know it just as they knew the code prescribed by *Li*. *Jen* was a principle whose consistent application would have carried Confucius into a break with the old order in favor of the right of the individual to decide matters for himself.

But Confucius did not see whither this new principle was leading him, and he was extremely unwilling to break with the past. He

⁶This is the sense in which it is *invariably* used in the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*. In the *Odes* it is used in adulation of the ruler, in the phrase "admirable and kind". In the *Book of History* it is used once of King T'ang, once of the ruler, twice of his ministers, and once of Duke Chou (Medhurst's translation of V, vi, 6 is preferable to that of Legge), each time indicating their attitude to their inferiors.

⁷*An*, XVII, vi.

did not see clearly what was implied in *Jen*, and in defining it, he defined *Jen* by *Li*: "*Jen* is the denial of self and the response to *Li*." . . . Its main features are "if not *Li* do not look, if not *Li* do not listen, if not *Li* do not speak, if not *Li* do not move."⁸ Thus Confucius confused his principle of liberty with the traditional principle of authority. Indeed we find him speaking of *Li* almost as often as *Jen*, and when we remember that *Jen* was the new thing, which would be likely to be spoken of more often than the *Li* which was already understood, and when we remember Confucius' own fondness for the proprieties and ceremonies, we realize that he emphasized *Li* just as much as *Jen*, if not more.⁹ Hence we are not surprised that in the most influential school of his immediate disciples, that of Tsentze, "filial piety" and "reverence for the elder" were exalted as the greatest virtues, and the Confucian influence returned to an emphasis upon the traditional morality.

The Confucians were preeminently the conservors of the heritage of the past. They edited the literary treasures of the past, preserved and embellished the traditions of the great Sages who were the models of a virtuous life. They were the liberal conservative party, not the radical party. Reform of abuses was their aim, but reform back to the ideals of the past, not towards a better state in the future. For the radical movement we must look to the non-Confucian philosophers of the time.

In the mists surrounding the beginning of Chinese philosophy, Laotze stands out as a solitary, gigantic figure. He and Confucius determined the course of subsequent Chinese thought. Laotze realized that beauty and ugliness, goodness and evil, difficulty and ease, long and short, sound and echo, were mutually involved in each other; that without evil there would be nothing we call good; without ugliness there would be nothing we call beauty. Hence the way to get rid of evil is plain; there is only one method, to get rid of *both* of these opposites, good as well as evil, and return to the simple primitive chaotic state when men knew neither good nor evil, when the people of one valley looked over the hills to a neighboring hamlet and heard their cocks crow, but all their lives never went there; when there was no knowledge and hence no desire. This sort of ethics with its abandonment of the world of action was too im-

⁸*An.* XII, i; see also XII, ii; I, ii; III, iii.

⁹For a fuller discussion of this and other points, cf. "Hsüntze, the Moulder of Ancient Confucianism" by H. H. Dubs, ch. VII and VIII.

practical to appeal widely to the preeminently practical Chinese; but it represented a new thing in ethics—an ethical principle depending on but *one* principle, logically deduced, a characteristic which was to have great results in the subsequent development of Chinese ethics.

Micius or Mo Ti was a younger contemporary and fellow-countryman of Confucius. A hard-working government official, like Confucius, his sympathies were not confined to the ruling class and to their rule of the people, as were those of Confucius, but instead his sympathies were with the people and their own problems, and so he reached a democratic rather than an aristocratic ethics. It is possible that he was originally a disciple of Confucius, but with a young man's zeal, he was impatient of Confucius' insistence upon and preoccupation with ceremonies; instead he was drawn to this new principle of *Jen*, and he took it, universalized, and democratized it into his famous principle of "Universal Love". Then he was compelled to do what Confucius had refused to do, to break with the past, and so he advocated the setting up of a new order free from the weight of tradition. He now had to meet the tremendous opposition of the conservatism of society, and he found himself depending upon the persuasiveness of his ideal and the cogency of his arguments to impress his contemporaries. So he did what Laotze had done, he deduced his principles of ethics from one principle, which he found in "what is beneficial". His was a utilitarianism with Universal Love as its chief principle. Likewise he developed a set of canons of proof. So it is no wonder that this unified system, with everything proceeding from one self-evident principle, should have proved extremely persuasive, and that Micianism came to be a very dangerous rival of Confucianism, and to contest formidably with it for the supremacy.

But Micius was unfortunate in not having any successors as great as he. The most brilliant of his followers developed his teaching in the direction of metaphysical and epistemological speculations, rather than in ethics, and these Neo-Micians degenerated into propounders of logical puzzles, like those of Zeno and the Greek sophists, instead of becoming the ethical and religious rejuvenators of the Chinese world. While Micianism challenged Confucianism for some centuries, it eventually died a natural death, aided by the constant stabs given it by the Confucians.

The pessimism and relativism of Laotze found expression in the

individualist Yangtze. To him no universals could have any real existence, only the individual was important; consequently there could be no ethical standard except that of the individual's own satisfaction. He attacked all the worthies of old and praised those who sought their individual enjoyment rather than the good of society. As Mencius said of him, he would not sacrifice a hair to save the world. He represented the extreme reaction to the burying of the individual in the family and social organization by those Confucians who emphasized filial piety and family solidarity. Yangtze had little permanent influence; the solidarity of the Chinese family prevented his teachings from becoming influential.

If Confucius was the Socrates of China, then Mencius was its Plato, with whom he was a contemporary for the last quarter century of Plato's life. Like him, he developed and oriented his Master's teachings, although he had not the metaphysical and logical interests that characterized Plato. For the Confucians, as for Confucius, ethics and politics constituted the whole of philosophy, and anything else was unnecessary or possibly harmful. Mencius felt the persuasiveness of a philosophy that was developed from one principle, such as that of Mencius. In common with all the other philosophers of his day, he felt that anything natural was good, and so he tried to find a basis in human nature, which was naturally good, for the Confucian ethics. Since human nature is good, the full expression of the natural feelings of man would give the whole of ethics.

"The feeling of commiseration is essential to man; the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man; the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man; and the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man. The feeling of commiseration is the principle of *Jen*. The feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of *Yi* (justice, *δικαιοσύνη*, giving each his due). The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of *Li*. The feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of wisdom. Men have these four principles just as they have their four limbs. . . . Let them have their complete development, and they will suffice to provide for all within the country."¹⁰

The principle of deducing ethics from the full expression of essential human feelings, if logically carried out, would have taken Mencius completely out of the orthodox Confucian stream of

¹⁰*Mencius* II, I, vi. 4-7.

thought, just as Micius was carried out by his principle and broke with the past. For this principle of developing every man's innate endowment would have done away with all external authority. If every man can reach the truth simply by developing what is within him, then what is the need for Sages and the standards they worked out; what is the need even for the teachings of Confucius, who by this time had already been made one of the Sages; indeed, what is the need of any authority at all? Each man need rely only upon himself. Had Mencius been a little bolder and less inclined to follow the path already marked out, he might have seen these implications of his teaching, and have broken through the crust of Confucianism, just as did Micius. But the crust was too strong for him. He drew back, and emphasized *Li* just as did the other Confucians; though in his teaching this principle does not assume the importance it assumed in that of others. In one saying he subordinated everything else to *Li*,¹¹ he gave his mother an especially splendid funeral; he induced the prince of Lu to make an innovation by mourning three years for the death of his father; and he even taught that the care of parents is not as important as their obsequies, thus stressing the various elements of *Li*. He could not have deduced these observances from the feeling of modesty and complaisance; like the other Confucians, he simply took over the traditional observances.

Chuangtze, the Heraclitus of China, was the only one of these philosophers who broke from the universal application of philosophy to practical affairs and did not propound a political theory. For him change was fundamental, and everything was relative. A keen critic, he saw the flaws in the other philosophies, and criticised them unmercifully. Against the Micians he showed that not the right, but the plausible, is the most persuasive; against the Confucians he urged that all change is by natural law, so why seek to reform anything? He picked flaws in the ancient Sages, flouted their imperfections, and criticised the impeccable Confucius himself. His especial detestation was the Confucian ceremonies and *Li*. Against their elaborate burial ceremonies he urged that "real mourning grieves in silence", and that "our emotions are dependent upon the original purity within, and it matters not what ceremonies are employed". "Ceremonial is the invention of man." But his positive teaching was fatalism and ethical relativism; the best that anyone

¹¹*Mencius* IV, 1, xxvii.

could do was to be content with his lot and undisturbed at life or death.

Confucianism was in a dangerous situation. It realized the values that were enshrined in the heritage of the past, and its own importance as to the conservor of that heritage, but with such violent and trenchant attacks from without, and with its own leaders equivocating as to fundamental principles, it seemed as if Confucianism must be overcome. In this situation, it produced a third great leader, who came to the rescue.

Just as Aristotle organized the Platonic philosophy into the first philosophic system, so Hsüntze, the younger contemporary of Mencius, developed Confucianism into a consistent and logical philosophy. A true follower of Confucius, a keen critic, and an extremely logical thinker, he gave to Confucianism its final shape as the conservative and authoritarian philosophy of China. Like the other Confucians, he had no special interest in metaphysics, yet he found himself drawn into it more than they. Recognized as the leader of Confucianism in his lifetime, he made it his business to refute and attack other unorthodox philosophies, and to fix the Confucian canon and teaching.

Hsüntze saw clearly how Mencius' principle that ethics is the development of innate human feelings would lead away from Confucius' own principles; and he came to clearness as to just what was the position of Confucianism. He saw that it stood for authority, in contrast to the individualism represented by the unorthodox teachings. Nevertheless he was able to give *Jen* a real place in an authoritarian system. While in political theory he followed Mencius in almost all points, yet in the basis of his ethics, he saw that Mencius had been untrue to the spirit of Confucianism. Consequently he criticised and opposed Mencius' doctrine of human nature.

Mencius had deduced his theory from the assumption that human nature was good; Hsüntze declared that human nature is evil, and found no difficulty, in that troubled time, in adducing empirical evidence to that effect. The theory that human nature is evil may not be flattering to men's vanity, but it furnishes an impregnable foundation for any doctrine of authority. The Catholic theologians found this to be the case, when, by denouncing human nature as depraved and sinful, they were able to show that the sinner cannot even know the truth without the mediation of an authoritative body

of truth in the hands of an authoritative institution. Hsüntze did not go so far as they did. He did not hold that man's nature is utterly depraved; he believed in no fall of mankind. He merely held that human nature, left to itself, inevitably tends to evil; hence the Confucian *Tao* or Way is absolutely necessary to develop human nature, and to train it to goodness. This is his famous doctrine that human nature is evil.

On this basis, an authoritatively given code of ethics is clearly seen to be necessary, and it was undoubtedly the need of establishing an unshakable foundation for the Confucian authoritarian ethic that led Hsüntze into postulating the evil tendency of original human nature, since we find no such theory anywhere else in the thought of the time. Consequently we find Hsüntze making *Li* his chief virtue, developing it and rationalizing it as never before. Part of his writings were incorporated into the *Book of Rites*, together with the larger collection, the *Ritual of the Senior Tai*, and Sze-ma Ch'ien's *Historical Record* quoted him extensively.

There was still the problem as to where his authoritarian code came from. Hsüntze believed in no God or spiritual Heaven; he could have no revelation. But the answer to this problem was plain to him: it was the Sages, the Sage-Kings, the culture heroes who had developed the Chinese civilization, who had promulgated this code. And how had they come by it? Through the cultivation of their own original natures. They were no different from the rest of humanity in original nature; but they were able to overcome their limitations by training and make themselves perfectly good. Similarly everyone else has the possibility of training himself to a state of Sagehood by following their example. Here Hsüntze found a place for Confucius' principle of *Jen*—it is the characteristic of the Sage; when the Sage has developed himself, he can do the right without effort; he can discern the right without being blinded by false teachings or evil desires. He follows his desires and gives rein to his passions, yet does right. Thus freedom and authority are reconciled in the person of the Sage.

Such was the form that Confucianism finally took, and the fact that authoritarianism triumphed in Confucianism is clearly shown by subsequent events. The Mician teaching died out. The philosophies of Laotze and Chuangtze degenerated into the magical and superstitious Taoism which merely perpetuated the original Chinese animism, which the religious agnosticism of Confucius and the skept-

ticism of Hsüntze had divorced from Confucianism. Confucianism became the orthodox philosophy of China, and in so doing, it developed a canon and an orthodox formulation. In this process it necessarily became authoritarian. But in the consequent decay of philosophical originality, Hsüntze's unflattering doctrine of human nature brought him into disfavor. In the Han revival of learning, Tung Chung-shu, the greatest of Confucians, lauded Hsüntze; and in the T'ang period, Han Yü, the greatest of Chinese literateurs, ranked Hsüntze as second only to Mencius. It was not until the Sung period that Hsüntze was definitely condemned as unsound by Chu Hsi, the Confucian Thomas Aquinas. To Chu Hsi, nature was Nature, not merely human nature, but the Nature of the universe, and to say that nature is evil meant that the Universe is evil. Hence Hsüntze must be wrong and unsound. But the conception of Confucianism as authority, which Hsüntze had so clearly preached, had become fixed in the Confucian tradition, and Chu Hsi himself accepted it—it became the center of his dogmatism, and subsequent generations have been compelled to conform to his interpretation of Confucianism. Chu Hsi kept Hsüntze's doctrine that man's nature is evil in a different form: he said instead that "the human heart is rarely pure. It is often in error: when it is cultivated, it is pure; when it is allowed to go its own way, it falls into error". Hence it must be closed against error and false teachings. Although Chu Hsi stressed Mencius, yet in the theoretical foundation of his ethics, he is a follower of Hsüntze. It was Wang Yang-ming, with his emphasis upon the heart, who was the true follower of the Mencian teachings that virtue is the development of the individual's capacities. But Wang Yang-ming was practically condemned as a heretic.

So authority conquered in ancient China as it did everywhere else in the ancient world, although not without meeting strenuous opposition. Now that Western influences have broken up the Confucian medievalism, the Chinese are turning back to their glorious period of ancient philosophy and revaluing its thought. As the battle of freedom and authority is refought, may we not expect a different result than before?