

**More Than a Self:  
On Being – and Becoming – *Jūnzǐ***

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# DECLARATION

I, Qasir Shah confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.



## ABSTRACT

This thesis reimagines the classical Confucian figure of the *jūnzǐ* (君子) as a vital resource for ethical education and moral cultivation in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world marked by fragmentation, inequality, and institutional decay. Against the backdrop of contemporary crises—political, ecological, and educational—it argues that prevailing models of personhood rooted in autonomy, competition, and performative success are inadequate for fostering moral seriousness. In response, the thesis turns to the Confucian tradition, offering a sustained exploration of the *jūnzǐ* as an ethical exemplar who embodies relational virtue, aesthetic sensibility, and the lifelong practice of becoming human well.

Through a close reading of classical texts and key concepts—*rén* (consummate conduct), *lǐ* (ritual propriety), *yì* (appropriateness), *chéng* (sincerity), and *xīn* (heart-mind)—the thesis articulates a vision of moral formation grounded in ritual participation, emotional discernment, and responsive presence. Rather than proposing a nostalgic return to the past or a wholesale adoption of ancient forms, it calls for a creative and critical engagement with Confucian thought as a living tradition. Educators, it suggests, must resist the twin dangers of ritual formalism and cultural exoticism by framing moral cultivation not as cultural performance, but as an invitation to ethical presence.

The thesis combines philosophical analysis, case studies, and cross-cultural reflection to explore how the *jūnzǐ* might inform new practices of leadership, education, and civic life. In doing so, it offers a relational and role-embedded alternative to dominant images of the moral agent as autonomous or strategically rational. Thus, the *jūnzǐ* is recovered not as a relic of elite virtue, but as a guide for cultivating moral clarity, humility, and care in turbulent times. This work contributes to the global philosophy of education by offering a Confucian-inspired framework for ethical *becoming* in pluralistic and demanding contexts.



## IMPACT STATEMENT

This thesis addresses a central crisis of our time: the moral impoverishment of contemporary education and leadership. In a world marked by fragmentation, performative success, and rising inequality, it offers a philosophical reimagining of ethical education through the Confucian figure of the *jūnzǐ*—a moral exemplar shaped by relational attunement, ritual practice, and lifelong moral cultivation. This thesis critiques dominant Western paradigms that valorise autonomy, efficiency, and technical competence, and instead advances a vision of personhood and pedagogy rooted in care, humility, and the aesthetic refinement of daily life. Its primary impact lies in offering a renewed moral vocabulary and pedagogical framework for educators, philosophers, and civic leaders. Through sustained engagement with Confucian texts and contemporary philosophical discourse, the thesis proposes that moral excellence is not a personal possession or procedural achievement, but a dynamic, relational process of becoming. Key Confucian concepts—*rén* (consummate conduct), *lǐ* (ritual propriety), *yì* (appropriateness), and *chéng* (sincerity)—are reinterpreted as resources for forming ethical selves capable of navigating pluralistic and morally unstable environments.

Within academia, this research contributes to the global philosophy of education by placing Confucian ethics in dialogue with Western moral theory, educational policy, and civic practice. It offers an alternative to procedural liberalism and instrumentalised schooling by centring the ethical formation of the self through role-embedded practice and reflective participation. The thesis speaks to debates in moral education, teacher formation, and intercultural ethics, highlighting the importance of exemplarity over abstraction and moral responsiveness over strategic autonomy.

Beyond academia, the work has relevance for public discourse, civic education, and leadership development. It invites educators to resist both cultural relativism and rigid orthodoxy, proposing instead a pedagogy of ethical presence—where teaching is understood as a moral and relational vocation. By reframing the educator as a potential *jūnzǐ*, it opens possibilities for reimagining school leadership and institutional culture in terms of ethical seriousness, emotional discernment, and moral constancy.

The thesis also contributes to decolonial and cross-cultural conversations by challenging the marginalisation of non-Western philosophies in ethical and educational discourse. It demonstrates that Confucian traditions, when approached critically and contextually, can inform urgent global questions without defaulting to cultural essentialism or nostalgia. In doing so, it offers a framework

for ethical learning that is neither universalist nor parochial, but dialogical, situated, and transformative.

By reimagining the *jūnzǐ* as a guide for becoming more fully human in complex and divided times, this research seeks to influence how we think about education, leadership, and moral responsibility. It affirms that the purpose of education is not simply to produce skilled individuals, but to cultivate persons capable of acting with humility, vision, and care in a fractured world. In doing so, it contributes to a growing movement within philosophy of education that seeks not only to theorise, but to rehumanise.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has been eleven years since I began this PhD, and I'm still not quite sure where the time has gone. Much has changed in the world during that period—the rise of the radical right into mainstream politics, deepening ideological, ethnic, religious, and gender polarisation, ongoing wars, staggering wealth inequality, the upheaval of COVID-19, and the accelerating presence of AI. Through all of this, three constants have supported me—directly and indirectly—in completing this thesis: my mother, Bibi Ghulam Raza; my partner, Anna Brown; and my supervisor, Paul Standish. I had hoped to take the time to acknowledge each of them with the thought and care they deserve. But as this moment has arrived, I find myself rushed and aware that my words will inevitably fall short. Still, I hope this thesis stands as a quiet testament to their influence—for without them, it simply would not exist.

My mother remains my enduring inspiration—an embodiment of what it means to be truly good. She is kind, loving, generous, forbearing, forgiving, empathetic, and wise, even in the face of trials and tribulations that might have left a lesser person embittered. When I compare her to those considered educated by virtue of degrees, I am reminded that credentials alone do not confer goodness or wisdom. What matters is the heart—for without the capacity to feel, how can one love or empathise with others? She breathes life into my words and thoughts; her presence animates this thesis. It is what it is because of her.

The second person is Anna, whose patience and support over this long journey have meant more than I can express. She has been both an encouraging and constructively critical sounding board for my ideas, and this thesis owes much to the conversations we've shared over the years. Her generosity has extended well beyond intellectual engagement—she has proofread not only this thesis but much of what I've written, sparing me countless embarrassments over errant commas and the occasional questionable turn of phrase. She has also endured more than her fair share of academic conferences, which often doubled as our only 'holidays' together. Ever good-natured, she accompanied me to buffer my tendency to be either overly reserved or overly enthusiastic in social settings, and to save me from feeling like a lemon.

The third person is Paul, to whom I will always be deeply grateful for accepting me as his student. I shudder to think how my initial proposal might be received today—likely dismissed as too rough around the edges for serious consideration. Yet Paul saw something in me, or perhaps in the proposal itself, that captured his interest—or maybe he simply has a soft spot for lost causes.

Despite his distinguished standing, one would be hard-pressed to find a more humble or generous person. Like a true master, he has guided his disciple with patience and insight, even though my research lies outside his own area of expertise. The fact that Paul is not a specialist in Confucianism has, in many ways, been a gift: it has compelled me to engage with alternative perspectives that have challenged and deepened my understanding of Confucianism's relevance in the modern world. His immense breadth of knowledge and wisdom enables him to see issues in a global frame, and to pose searching, incisive questions that prompt reflection—never imposed, always inviting. It is the hallmark of a true teacher. Whatever strengths this work may hold are a testament to his guidance; its flaws are mine alone.

In the end, this thesis is as much theirs as it is mine. It carries traces of every conversation, every act of kindness, every moment of encouragement that helped me find my way through. I can only hope it reflects, however imperfectly, the love, trust, and belief they've shown in me. For that, and for them, I am endlessly grateful.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                            |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Preface.....</b>                                                                        | <b>17</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 1: Crisis, Character, and the Search for Moral Formation .....</b>              | <b>19</b> |
| 1.1    A Contemporary Ethical Deficit .....                                                | 19        |
| 1.2    Modern Moral Formation: Education, Ethics, and Limits.....                          | 26        |
| <b>CHAPTER 2: Confucius: His Time and Motivation .....</b>                                 | <b>31</b> |
| 2.1    Historical and Cosmological Foundations of Confucian Thought.....                   | 31        |
| 2.2    Confucius as Ethical Reformer and Humanistic Educator.....                          | 32        |
| 2.3    Personhood and Ethical Relationality: a Confucian Contrast to Western Models .....  | 37        |
| 2.3.1    Human Beings as Human ‘ <i>Becomings</i> ’ .....                                  | 40        |
| 2.4    Confucian Views on Human Nature ( <i>Xing</i> 性): Mencius and Xunzi.....            | 43        |
| 2.5    Some Prominent Theories of the Person in the Western Canon .....                    | 46        |
| 2.6    Contemporary Theories of Confucian Personhood .....                                 | 48        |
| 2.6.1    Herbert Fingarette: The Secular as Sacred .....                                   | 48        |
| 2.6.2    Henry Rosemont and Confucian Role Ethics.....                                     | 50        |
| 2.6.4    Roger Ames and Confucian Role Ethics.....                                         | 51        |
| 2.6.5    David B. Wong: The Biological Relational Organism .....                           | 53        |
| 2.6.6    Tu Weiming: Person as Centre of Relationships .....                               | 54        |
| 2.7    Summary and Conclusion.....                                                         | 56        |
| <b>CHAPTER 3: <i>Jūnzǐ</i> 君子: The Paradigmatic Confucian Person .....</b>                 | <b>59</b> |
| 3.1    The <i>Jūnzǐ</i> as Moral Exemplar .....                                            | 59        |
| 3.2    The Moral Vision of the <i>Jūnzǐ</i> 君子 in the <i>Analects</i> 論語.....              | 62        |
| 3.3    Becoming Centred: The <i>Jūnzǐ</i> 君子 and the Practice of <i>Zhōngyōng</i> 中庸 ..... | 65        |
| 3.4    Sincerity and Self-Realisation: <i>Chéng</i> 誠 in the <i>Zhōngyōng</i> .....        | 70        |

|         |                                                                   |    |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 3.5     | The Five Constant Virtues and the <i>Jūnzǐ</i> .....              | 72 |
| 3.5.1   | <i>Rén</i> 仁: The Heart of Confucian Ethics.....                  | 72 |
| 3.5.2   | <i>Lǐ</i> 禮: Ritual Propriety and the Embodied Moral Grammar..... | 78 |
| 3.5.3   | <i>Yì</i> 義: Appropriateness and Discerning Moral Sense.....      | 84 |
| 3.5.3.1 | <i>Zhōng</i> 忠 and <i>Shù</i> 恕 .....                             | 87 |
| 3.5.4   | <i>Zhì</i> 智: Moral Insight and Practical Wisdom.....             | 90 |
| 3.5.5   | <i>Xìn</i> 信: Trustworthiness and Moral Consistency .....         | 94 |
| 3.6     | Conclusion .....                                                  | 97 |

## **CHAPTER 4: Reframing Filial Obligation Through Confucian *Xiào*..... 99**

|       |                                                                               |     |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4.1   | Introduction – The Family as Moral Ground .....                               | 99  |
| 4.2   | The Confucian Foundation – <i>Xiào</i> 孝, as Ethical Starting Point.....      | 101 |
| 4.3   | Reimagining Confucian Familial Ethics in Contemporary Family Forms .....      | 104 |
| 4.4   | Western Models of Filial Obligation–A Comparative Analysis .....              | 107 |
| 4.5   | Reinterpreting Western Thought Through a Confucian Lens .....                 | 112 |
| 4.6   | Critical Reflections on <i>Xiào</i> 孝 and the <i>Xiaojing</i> .....           | 115 |
| 4.6.1 | The Pedagogical and Esoteric Nature of Confucian Teaching .....               | 115 |
| 4.6.2 | Filiality and Justice: A Site of Ethical Negotiation, Not Contradiction ..... | 117 |
| 4.6.3 | Ritual Formalism and the Challenge of Inner Sincerity.....                    | 118 |
| 4.6.4 | Beyond Obedience: <i>Xiào</i> 孝, Authority, and the Relational Self .....     | 119 |
| 4.6.5 | Cultural Particularism and the Question of Universality.....                  | 125 |
| 4.7   | Conclusion – From Repayment to Reverence.....                                 | 126 |

## **CHAPTER 5: Education of an Ethical Exemplar – The *Jūnzǐ* 君子..... 131**

|       |                                                                                         |     |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 5.1   | The Ethical Ideal of the <i>Jūnzǐ</i> .....                                             | 131 |
| 5.1.1 | The Reimagining of Nobility: From Bloodline to Virtue .....                             | 131 |
| 5.1.2 | Relational Personhood: The Role-Embedded Self .....                                     | 133 |
| 5.1.3 | Becoming Human: <i>Rén</i> , <i>Yì</i> , and the Embodied Continuity of Character ..... | 135 |

|                                                                     |                                                                                |            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 5.2                                                                 | Embodied Ethics and Relational Authority .....                                 | 136        |
| 5.2.1                                                               | Living <i>Lǐ</i> 禮: Ritual as Ontological Patterning .....                     | 136        |
| 5.2.2                                                               | Cultivating <i>Zhì</i> 智: Wisdom as Moral Intuition .....                      | 139        |
| 5.2.3                                                               | Grounding <i>Xìn</i> 信: Integrity and the Moral Weight of Sincerity .....      | 142        |
| 5.3                                                                 | The <i>Jūnzǐ</i> as Educator and Moral Guide .....                             | 143        |
| 5.3.1                                                               | The Pedagogical Power of Presence.....                                         | 144        |
| 5.3.2                                                               | Teaching as Self-Formation and Ethical Influence.....                          | 145        |
| 5.3.3                                                               | Shame, Humility, and the Reflective Teacher .....                              | 147        |
| 5.3.4                                                               | The <i>Jūnzǐ</i> in a Spiritually Bankrupt Educational Culture .....           | 149        |
| 5.3.5                                                               | Ontological Pedagogy and the Formation of the Moral Self.....                  | 151        |
| 5.4                                                                 | The Curriculum of the Heart: Confucian Pedagogy .....                          | 154        |
| 5.4.1                                                               | Education as Moral Formation, Not Instruction .....                            | 154        |
| 5.4.2                                                               | Pedagogical Foundations and the Realisation of Moral Learning .....            | 156        |
| 5.4.3                                                               | Poetry, Music, Rites, and Documents: The Canon of Humanity .....               | 159        |
| 5.4.4                                                               | Role Imitation, Ritual, and the Cultivation of <i>Xīn</i> 心 (Heart–Mind).....  | 162        |
| 5.4.5                                                               | The Curriculum as Aesthetic and Ethical Embodiment .....                       | 164        |
| 5.5                                                                 | Fragility, Failure, and Ethical Perseverance .....                             | 167        |
| 5.5.1                                                               | The Recurrence of Moral Failure ( <i>Akrasia</i> ) .....                       | 167        |
| 5.5.2                                                               | Shame ( <i>Chǐ</i> 恥) as Ethical Attunement .....                              | 169        |
| 5.5.3                                                               | Constancy, Moral Struggle, and the Lifelong Becoming of the <i>Jūnzǐ</i> ..... | 170        |
| 5.6                                                                 | Crisis and Continuity: Moral Presence in an Unstable World.....                | 172        |
| 5.7                                                                 | Conclusion: Recovering Ethical Presence .....                                  | 175        |
| <b>CHAPTER 6: Confucianism: Moral Conflict Across Spheres .....</b> |                                                                                | <b>177</b> |
| 6.1                                                                 | Case Study 1: Filial Reverence.....                                            | 177        |
| 6.1.1                                                               | Introduction.....                                                              | 177        |
| 6.1.2                                                               | The Case of Priya: Filial Reverence and the Relational Self.....               | 179        |
| 6.1.2.1                                                             | Background and Moral Stakes.....                                               | 179        |

|         |                                                                                      |     |
|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 6.1.2.2 | Gratitude and the Limits of Liberal Obligation.....                                  | 180 |
| 6.1.2.3 | The Confucian Response: <i>Xiào, Rén</i> , and Relational Identity .....             | 182 |
| 6.1.2.4 | <i>Yì</i> and the Particularities of Context .....                                   | 184 |
| 6.1.2.5 | Objection and Modification: A More Compelling Case? .....                            | 184 |
| 6.1.2.6 | Concluding Reflections on Personhood and Autonomy .....                              | 185 |
| 6.2     | Case Study 2: Inclusion that Excludes: A Confucian View of the Parkfield Protests .. | 187 |
| 6.2.1   | Liberal Framing and Its Breakdown at Parkfield .....                                 | 188 |
| 6.2.1.1 | The Liberal Frame of Inclusion .....                                                 | 188 |
| 6.2.1.2 | Structural Failures of Procedural Liberalism.....                                    | 189 |
| 6.2.2   | Hämäläinen's Model of Moral Renegotiation .....                                      | 190 |
| 6.2.2.1 | Ethical Richness and Methodological Strengths.....                                   | 190 |
| 6.2.2.2 | Where Hämäläinen's Model Falls Short in the Parkfield Case .....                     | 192 |
| 6.2.3   | Confucian Ethical Response .....                                                     | 193 |
| 6.2.3.1 | Key Confucian Concepts ( <i>Chéng, Xìn, Lǐ, Rén, Xīn</i> ).....                      | 193 |
| 6.2.3.2 | Beyond Proceduralism: Why Moral Capacities Must Be Cultivated.....                   | 195 |
| 6.2.3.3 | Harmony-with-Difference ( <i>Hé 和</i> vs. <i>Tóng 同</i> ) .....                      | 196 |
| 6.2.3.4 | Ritualised Engagement and the Role of Exemplars .....                                | 198 |
| 6.2.4   | Conclusion: Coexistence Beyond Consensus .....                                       | 199 |
| 6.3     | Case Study 3: Relational Justice and Sovereignty in Kanaky .....                     | 201 |
| 6.3.1   | Historical and Ethical Background.....                                               | 201 |
| 6.3.2   | Philosophical Perspectives on Personhood and Self-Determination .....                | 203 |
| 6.3.2.1 | The Liberal Personhood Perspective .....                                             | 203 |
| 6.3.2.2 | Confucian Relational Personhood and Kanak Independence .....                         | 207 |
| 6.3.3   | Confucian Political Ethics in Context.....                                           | 207 |
| 6.3.4   | Relational Justice and the Architecture of a Shared Future .....                     | 211 |
| 6.3.5   | Conclusion: Cultivating Harmony Beyond the Liberal Horizon .....                     | 212 |
| 6.4     | Conclusion: From Ritual to Justice, From Relation to Repair .....                    | 215 |

|                                                                                           |            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>CHAPTER 7: Confucianism Today: Tradition, Change, Relevance.....</b>                   | <b>217</b> |
| 7.1 Restatement of the Central Thesis .....                                               | 217        |
| 7.2 Synthesis of Main Findings .....                                                      | 220        |
| 7.3 Contributions of the Thesis .....                                                     | 222        |
| 7.4 Critical Reflections and Limitations .....                                            | 225        |
| 7.4.1 Tensions within Confucian Ethics: Filial Reverence, Patriarchy, and Hierarchy ..... | 226        |
| 7.4.2 Challenges of Confucian Role Ethics in Pluralistic Societies .....                  | 228        |
| 7.4.3 Rethinking Moral Development: From Autonomy to Relational Cultivation .....         | 231        |
| 7.4.4 Feminist Reinterpretations of Confucian Relational Ethics .....                     | 237        |
| 7.4.5 Limitations of the Thesis and Future Critical Work.....                             | 240        |
| 7.5 Vision for the Future .....                                                           | 243        |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>                                                                 | <b>251</b> |
| <b>Appendix: Pinyin and Wade-Giles Romanization Systems .....</b>                         | <b>265</b> |



## Preface

This thesis emerges from a deep concern with the ethical failings of modern institutions and the urgent need to recover forms of moral cultivation suited to our relational nature. While the primary focus is Confucianism—specifically the ethical figure of the *jūnzǐ* (君子)—the project draws on a broad range of philosophical and educational sources to examine what kind of person our educational systems are producing, and what kind they ought to be forming.

As a non-Sinologist and non-speaker of Chinese, I approach Confucian texts through English translations. My engagement with these traditions is necessarily shaped by my own life experiences, interpretive preferences, and the resonance I find in particular readings. I make selective use of the various English translations of the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and other key texts, primarily those rendered by James Legge, D.C. Lau, Wing-tsit Chan, Henry Rosemont, and Roger Ames. These choices are informed both by scholarly value and by what speaks meaningfully to the themes of this thesis. In the spirit of Tu Weiming's distinction between analytical inquiry and personal appreciation, I remain committed to open-ended dialogue. As Tu notes, analytical inquiry is 'open to argument and therefore allows for further investigation,' while personal appreciation, when unexamined, may ossify into 'an unyielding fixity' (1989, p. 11). I acknowledge that what I present is shaped by a partial understanding of Confucianism, coloured by my own position and interpretive lens. Nonetheless, I engage the tradition in good faith and in the hope that it may illuminate questions of moral formation in the present.

Key Confucian terms such as *rén* (仁), *lǐ* (禮), *yì* (義), and *chéng* (誠) do not always lend themselves to accurate English equivalents. Where needed, I provide explanatory glosses and thereafter retain the original Chinese terms to preserve their philosophical nuance. Romanisation is rendered in *pinyin* throughout, except for proper names and titles where Wade–Giles remains standard (e.g., Tu Wei-ming). Tables of the respective representations are included in the Appendix for reference. Nevertheless, to approach Confucianism adequately requires more than conceptual translation; it demands attentiveness to the lived moral and social life from which the tradition emerged. As Rosemont reminds us: 'Rather must we look to the ordinary, and the moral, and the religious life in our own culture to appreciate fully the Chinese on their own terms – and our own as well, cast in a new (or very old) light' (Rosemont, 2015, p. 8).

This thesis is not an attempt to universalise Confucianism, nor to propose a final account of ethics. Rather, it adopts a form of moral pluralism in the spirit of David Wong's *Natural Moralities: A*

*Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (2009a). Wong argues that while there may be no single true morality, there are still limits on what can count as a morally legitimate system. His view accepts a deep moral ambivalence as a feature of our ethical condition—an ambivalence that should make us cautious in our judgments and more open to engaging across cultural traditions. This pluralistic stance makes room for fruitful comparisons without requiring full convergence, and it shapes the ethos of this thesis: not to claim Confucian ethics as superior or universally binding, but to explore its unique moral insights as a dialogue partner in rethinking ethical education and human flourishing.

As Rosemont (2015, p. 19) provocatively notes, if Christine Korsgaard remains a Kantian despite reading Bentham and Mill, and Peter Singer an avowed utilitarian despite knowing Kant and Korsgaard's work, then ethical difference is not always a matter of rational persuasion. It reflects deeper metaphysical and moral commitments. A pluralistic approach allows such differences to coexist without collapsing them into relativism or demanding uniformity.

Finally, a word about terminology: while I recognise that the category 'Western philosophy' may be overly broad, I follow Rosemont's reminder that few hesitate to group together vast and varied traditions under the banner of 'non-Western.' For clarity, I retain the term 'Western' as a heuristic, offering more specific distinctions where appropriate. With these methodological commitments in place, the chapters that follow build a case for Confucian moral formation as a relational, ritual-based, and educative response to contemporary ethical fragmentation. This project proceeds through philosophical analysis, comparative ethics, and close textual engagement, and argues that the figure of the *jūnzǐ* offers not only a counter-image to modern elite subjectivity, but a constructive ideal for education, leadership, and civic life in a fractured age.

# CHAPTER 1: Crisis, Character, and the Search for Moral Formation

## 1.1 A Contemporary Ethical Deficit

Now the man of perfect virtue [*jūnzǐ*], wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others (*Analects*, Legge, 6.28.2).<sup>1</sup>

This chapter surveys the contemporary moral crisis, examines the shortcomings of modern attempts at ethical formation, and argues for the urgent need to recover relational and ritual-based models of virtue cultivation. It sets the groundwork for turning to Confucian traditions of moral development, particularly the figure of the *jūnzǐ*, as a resource for reimagining education and leadership in a fractured world.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the Confucian moral exemplar, the *jūnzǐ* (君子)—their character, values, and education from childhood to maturity—and to argue for the need to educate such persons if we are to create an ethical society: one grounded in love and respect for others, where each person is supported in their pursuit of flourishing and becoming fully human. Such a society cannot emerge without individuals who possess a moral compass—people committed not only to ethical and aesthetic self-cultivation but also to the moral development of others as integral to their own becoming. Unless moral character is centred within our educational institutions—valorised, nurtured, and structurally supported—we risk continuing to elevate those who are self-serving and who instrumentalise others for personal gain. This concern is echoed by Michael Sandel (2020), who argues that contemporary meritocracy has not produced morally sensitive elites but has instead fostered a ‘credentialist prejudice’—an educated arrogance that legitimises inequality and obscures the structural roots of injustice.

Similarly, scholars such as Piketty (2014) and Chancel *et al.* (2022) have provided detailed economic analyses showing how global inequality has widened dramatically in recent decades, with those at the top benefiting from educational and policy structures that entrench advantage. Today, the richest 10% of the global population own 76% of all wealth (ibid., 2022, p. 10), while the wealth of the world’s five richest billionaires has more than doubled since 2020—even as 60% of humanity has grown poorer (Oxfam, 2024). Far from fostering widespread prosperity, policies such as tax cuts for the wealthy have been shown to exacerbate income inequality in both the short and

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to the *Analects* in the thesis are based on D. C. Lau’s translation (1979) unless otherwise indicated - as in the present case, where the James Legge (2005) translation is used as it furnishes a more appropriate translation.

medium term (Hope & Limberg, 2022).<sup>2</sup> These disparities are not merely economic—they constitute the political and moral backdrop against which the ethical failures of our time are unfolding. They corrode democratic life by concentrating power in the hands of individuals whose decisions and influence are rarely subject to ethical scrutiny or civic accountability.<sup>3</sup> These contemporary diagnoses echo concerns found in earlier moral traditions, such as Confucianism, which likewise emphasise the dangers of social stratification, moral neglect among elites, and the importance of cultivating virtue as a public good.

My interest in the subject of ethical exemplars stems from the unsettling fact that, despite living in an age of astonishing technological and scientific advancement, we remain morally impoverished. Human civilisation has made extraordinary progress—in medicine, communication, artificial intelligence, and space exploration—yet we continue to inflict deep and deliberate suffering upon one another. This failure cannot be attributed merely to ignorance or lack of resources. Rather, it reveals a deeper crisis: a profound deficiency in moral cultivation. According to the United Nations, conflict and violence are increasing worldwide. The organisation has warned that peace is now more threatened than at any point since the Second World War.<sup>4</sup>

The Council on Foreign Relations' Global Conflict Tracker reports thirty-two armed conflicts currently ongoing across the globe.<sup>5</sup> The level of brutality in many of these is harrowing. Civilians are deliberately targeted; children are mutilated; hospitals and schools are bombed. This is not only a political crisis—it is a failure of moral imagination. There are widespread reports of war crimes. In Myanmar, the military campaign against the Rohingya people has been widely described as ethnic cleansing and genocide. More recently, in the case of Gaza, there are, according to UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese (2023), 'reasonable grounds' to believe that genocide is being committed in the occupied Palestinian territories by the Israeli state.<sup>6</sup> The tools of modern warfare now include the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure, the mass killing of children,

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<sup>2</sup> See also Alvaredo *et al.*, 2013; Atkinson and Piketty, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Elon Musk contributed approximately **\$277 million** to support Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/elon-musk-277-million-trump-republican-candidates-donations/>). See also Jane Mayer (2016) who details how billionaire-backed 'dark money'—notably from the Koch brothers and allies—has been used to build a network of organisations aimed at influencing academia, think tanks, courts, legislatures, and the presidency. One example is the Atlas Network, a U.S.-based libertarian organisation supporting free-market groups worldwide. Its affiliates have tripled since the 2000s to over 500 by late 2023, with two-thirds in Europe, Australia, or the Americas, and Asia seeing the fastest growth (Fischer and Plehwe, cited in Vucetic, 2024, p. 4). See also Monbiot (2024): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/06/rishi-sunak-javier-milei-donald-trump-atlas-network>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker>

<sup>6</sup> See the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, by Francesca Albanese dated 26 February–5 April 2024.

and the deliberate deprivation of basic necessities such as food, water, and electricity. Particularly disturbing is the rhetoric that accompanies and justifies these actions—language that dehumanises entire populations.<sup>7</sup> In Gaza, for example, Palestinians have been publicly described by government officials as ‘human animals,’ and policies have been articulated with the explicit intent of denying them life-sustaining resources.<sup>8</sup> As Arendt (1963/2006) warned, the moral language that precedes and rationalises violence is often what enables it. The horror, then, lies not only in the acts themselves, but in the erosion of the ethical categories that once rendered such acts unthinkable.

Amid such brutality, however, we also witness examples of remarkable moral courage—persons who act justly and humanely even under conditions of extreme duress, sometimes at great personal risk. What explains this moral divergence? Are such persons simply a different kind of human being? Can we identify them from a young age, and if so, what would be the ethical and political implications of doing so? Would it justify separating them for moral training, or would such measures inevitably devolve into forms of surveillance, control, or selection—an ethical nightmare reminiscent of Philip K. Dick’s *The Minority Report* and its film adaptation by Steven Spielberg? While speculative, these questions touch on real dilemmas about freedom, moral possibility, and the role of institutions.

Thinkers such as Iris Murdoch (1970) remind us that goodness is not accidental—it is the fruit of vision, attention, and sustained inner effort. Mencius likewise contends that all human beings possess the sprouts of virtue, but only through education and moral reflection can we realise our full humanity. The pressing concern, then, is not whether virtue is possible, but why it is so rarely cultivated. How is it that those who display cruelty, selfishness, or moral indifference come to dominate public life, while those who act with humility, care, and wisdom are often ignored, marginalised, or punished for their conscience? If we could foresee moral greatness—or moral failure—in advance, how would society respond? Should moral exemplars be cultivated with

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<sup>7</sup> By dehumanisation, I do not mean a literal denial of the victim’s humanity—as if they are genuinely perceived as animals. On the contrary, dehumanisers often implicitly acknowledge their victims’ humanity by naming them ‘enemies,’ ‘accomplices,’ or ‘animals’—as seen, for example, in references to Palestinians—while subjecting them to humiliation, rape, or torture before killing. One does not seek to demean a cockroach; one simply kills it. But humiliation presupposes a moral subject. The Rwandan genocide is a case in point, where Tutsis were simultaneously animalised and morally targeted. On this paradox—where dehumanisation relies on a tacit recognition of the victim’s moral status—see D.L. Smith(2016) ‘Paradoxes of dehumanization.’

<sup>8</sup> See Law for Palestine’s *Database of Israeli Incitement to Genocide* (2024), which documents over 500 publicly available statements—many containing dehumanising language—made by Israeli officials and public figures.

special attention, or would doing so violate the liberal principles of autonomy, equality, and moral agency?

The current moral vacuum is not accidental; it has been actively shaped by the resurgence of authoritarian ideologies and the unchecked power of economic elites. Far-right movements, once confined to the political margins, are now mainstreamed by elected leaders who openly undermine democratic institutions and ethical norms. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has curtailed press freedom, suppressed dissent, and propagated an ethno-nationalist narrative; in Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu's administration has pursued policies that discriminate against Palestinians and threaten judicial independence; and in the United States, Donald Trump's two tenures have seen repeated attacks on electoral legitimacy, the emboldening of white nationalist groups, and the erosion of institutional trust. As Robert Paxton (2005) argues, in *The Anatomy of Fascism*, fascism is less a historical anomaly than a recurrent political behaviour, defined by obsession with national decline, victimhood, and the mythical restoration of unity and purity. Timothy Snyder (2017) similarly reminds us in *On Tyranny* that authoritarianism does not always arrive with a coup, but often creeps in through the slow normalisation of indecency. What makes this trend especially troubling is the failure of key institutions—churches, universities, and media platforms—to act as moral counterweights. In the U.S., many evangelical leaders legitimised Donald Trump's breaches of democratic norms under the banner of 'Christian values.' In Germany and the Netherlands, media and academic institutions have struggled to push back against the mainstreaming of far-right rhetoric of parties like AfD and Geert Wilders' PVV, often normalising xenophobic discourse in the name of balance or free speech. In Sweden, the far-right *Sweden Democrats* now exert real influence through a governing agreement, with limited institutional resistance offered in the interest of political stability. Meanwhile, Rupert Murdoch's global media empire—from Fox News to *The Sun*—has amplified populist agendas and eroded trust in democratic institutions. Across liberal and illiberal democracies alike, institutions that should safeguard democratic norms have too often enabled their erosion through silence, accommodation, or complicity.

The far right has also proven remarkably adept at manipulating collective anxieties, especially in a world marked by war, economic precarity, and deepening inequality. Neoliberal market policies have hollowed out welfare structures while enriching the elite and, instead of addressing this systemic harm, populist demagogues redirect public anger toward vulnerable groups, portraying migrants, minorities, and 'outsiders' as threats to civilisation, race, and national identity. As Hannah Arendt observed, authoritarian elites are often skilled at weaponising existing resentments—redirecting social grievances and insecurities toward scapegoated groups. Hate, in such contexts,

does not need to be invented; it only needs to be channelled. In the early stages of totalitarianism, as Arendt (1951/2017) showed, resentment against the socially and intellectually 'better off' was a powerful mobilising force. But the true horror, she warned, began when even this last trace of human emotion was extinguished—replaced by cold, bureaucratic systems of destruction that no longer needed hatred to operate. In this climate, 'natural' antipathy is manufactured, spatial proximity to the other is reimagined as danger, and entire communities are dehumanised in the name of cultural purity (Bauman, 1989). This process was laid bare in the August 2024 racist riots across the UK, incited by false reports that a Muslim migrant had murdered three children in Southport. The claim was baseless, but the violence it unleashed was very real—confirming Bauman's warning that fear and hatred, once summoned, do not remain on the periphery but come to define the political centre.

While far-right leaders mobilise fear and resentment through overt political rhetoric, a more insidious form of influence operates under the guise of progress. This power is wielded by the owners of tech empires, media conglomerates, and global corporations—figures who shape how we communicate, consume, learn, and govern, yet are more often cast as visionaries than held accountable as moral actors. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Rupert Murdoch exemplify this phenomenon. Despite their vast cultural and structural reach—structuring digital life, public discourse, and political consciousness—their decisions often escape sustained ethical scrutiny. Framed in the language of innovation and efficiency, their actions frequently bypass deeper questions of justice, civic responsibility, and human flourishing. More broadly, the systems that elevate such leadership tend to reward market success over moral imagination, severing influence from relational accountability.

What is striking is the degree to which society continues to reward individuals who are technically brilliant yet morally impoverished. They are praised as innovators, followed as thought leaders, and emulated by the ambitious. Martha Nussbaum (2010) has criticised modern education for producing graduates equipped with marketable skills but lacking any serious understanding of how to live responsibly or relate ethically to others. A parallel insight comes from Iris Murdoch (1970), who warned that in privileging scientific objectivity and bureaucratic neutrality, modern institutions risk producing individuals who are clever but ethically adrift—capable of mastering procedures without cultivating the moral vision needed to see and respond to the reality of others. 'The chief enemy of excellence in morality,' she writes, 'is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one' (ibid., p. 57). For Murdoch, moral excellence is not rooted in technical competence but in disciplined

attention to the world as it truly is—a quality of vision that is increasingly rare. That such individuals are admired—and that they pass through our most prestigious institutions unchallenged—should trouble us deeply.

We are faced, then, with a paradox: we inhabit a world that is technologically advanced, data-rich, and institutionally complex, yet we continue to elevate individuals to positions of extraordinary influence who lack the moral clarity, ethical seriousness, or sense of responsibility such roles demand. Success is increasingly measured by visibility, wealth, and influence—regardless of how that success is achieved or to what ends it is directed. We reward ambition, rhetorical flair, and strategic competence, but pay little attention to whether the person in question is guided by any coherent vision of the good. The result is a kind of cultural and moral dissonance: we claim to value justice, compassion, and integrity, yet the individuals who rise to the top of our political, economic, and cultural institutions often embody precisely the opposite traits. As Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has argued, we live in a ‘liquid modern’ world, in which traditional moral anchors have eroded and ethical identities have become fragmented. In such a world, the criteria for leadership are increasingly performative rather than substantive. Michael Sandel (2020) in *Tyranny of Merit*, has similarly shown how meritocratic structures produce elites who are blind to their own privilege and insulated from the experiences of those they govern or employ. The deeper concern here is not merely that these individuals lack moral substance, but that we are losing any shared cultural understanding of what a morally serious person looks like. Without a credible image of the good person, our moral imagination is impoverished—and with it, our political and educational priorities.

We are living through turbulent times. But as history has shown, moments of crisis often contain within them the potential for reimagining the ethical possibilities of the human. It is during such periods of rupture that new visions for life, rooted in justice, dignity, and care, can emerge. Yet these visions are often fleeting. Once moral ideals begin to shape institutions, they risk being diluted, instrumentalised, or hollowed out by habit, ideology, or self-interest. What begins as a moral breakthrough can become, over time, a moral formality—its vitality drained by the very systems it seeks to transform. This raises an enduring question: why are ethical advances so difficult to sustain? Why are our better selves so often undermined by the very structures that claim to support them? These questions strike at the heart of this thesis. If institutions such as universities, governments, and corporations are not morally neutral but actively shape human character and social norms, then the absence of ethical clarity and moral imagination within them is not incidental—it is formative. To address this, we must move beyond surface-level reforms and return to the deeper question of what kind of person we are trying to cultivate. Here, the Confucian tradition

offers not only a vocabulary of virtue, but a sustained vision of ethical life grounded in relationships, ritual, and the lifelong practice of becoming ‘fully’ human.

Education lies at the heart of this problem. Universities in particular have become complicit in producing individuals who are intellectually capable, professionally successful, and socially mobile—yet ethically ungrounded. These institutions are not passive bystanders in the moral decline of public life: they are active participants, rewarding personal achievement over moral responsibility. As Raewyn Connell (2013) notes, many universities now function as ‘global credentialing machines,’ reproducing privilege while neglecting civic and ethical development. In such environments, students learn to maximise output, manage impressions, and climb hierarchies—but rarely to ask difficult moral questions or reflect on the ethical implications of their ambitions. As Martha Nussbaum (2010) warns, we risk creating a generation of technical experts who can calculate and predict, but lack empathy, humility, and ethical judgment. Ethics, when included at all, is often reduced to an optional module or abstract exercise—rather than a lived, relational practice. The deeper problem is that we no longer seem to know what kind of person education is meant to form. We have abandoned the idea of the morally serious person, the ethical exemplar, as its central aim. Without a deeper philosophical or metaphysical grounding—an account of what it means to live well and be fully human—education drifts. It produces technically skilled individuals who may struggle to form coherent moral selves in an increasingly fragmented world.

While this thesis focuses on Confucian traditions of ethical cultivation, it acknowledges that modern approaches—such as character education, Kohlberg’s moral development theory, and contemporary virtue ethics—have also sought to address the challenges of moral formation, albeit often through more individualistic, procedural, or cognitive models. These efforts, though valuable, highlight the persistent difficulty of sustaining a robust moral vision within fragmented and performative educational systems. This concern echoes Michael Fielding’s (2007) critique of the ‘high-performance school,’ which he describes as ‘morally and intellectually impoverished’—a system driven by metrics, league tables, and market logics at the expense of ethical depth and relational presence. Like the Confucian tradition explored here, Fielding’s ideal is not to produce compliant performers, but to cultivate morally responsive persons capable of mutual flourishing. What follows is not a detailed treatment of modern moral education theories, but a brief survey of several influential frameworks—character education, Kohlberg’s moral development theory, and contemporary virtue ethics—that help illuminate both the urgency and the limitations of recent attempts to recover ethical seriousness in education. These models are returned to in Chapter 7,

where they are brought into conversation with Confucian insights as part of a broader reflection on moral formation in pluralistic societies.

## **1.2 Modern Moral Formation: Education, Ethics, and Limits**

Efforts to address the moral failings of modern education are not new. In recent decades, various frameworks have sought to reintroduce ethical cultivation into educational practice, with notable contributions from the character education movement, Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development, and contemporary adaptations of virtue ethics. Each of these approaches acknowledges, at least implicitly, the inadequacy of a purely procedural or technocratic conception of education. Each recognises the need for moral vision as a central aim of human development. Yet, despite their insights, they often fall short of offering a fully relational, holistic, and context-sensitive vision of ethical life—one capable of sustaining moral seriousness amid the fragmentations of modernity.

Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development, for instance, represents an important attempt to chart the cognitive progression of moral reasoning from obedience to universal ethical principles. His work illuminated the ways in which moral thinking matures through structured stages, suggesting that education could foster higher levels of moral reasoning by providing appropriate cognitive challenges. Yet Kohlberg's model remained primarily focused on justice, autonomy, and rational deliberation, privileging abstract principles over the relational and ritual dimensions of ethical life. Moral excellence, in his account, is framed chiefly as the internalisation of universalisable rules, rather than as the cultivated capacity to respond fittingly and reverently within particular relationships and situations.

Character education programmes, especially as developed in Anglo-American contexts, by such people as Thomas Lickona (1996, 2009), William J Bennett (1992; 1996), and the *Jubilee Centre* (Arthur et al., 2014; Pike et al., 2021; The Jubilee Centre, 2017) attempt to remedy some of these limitations by focusing explicitly on the cultivation of virtues such as honesty, compassion, and perseverance. Yet often, these initiatives risk reducing virtue to a list of discrete traits to be transmitted, assessed, and measured—an approach that can flatten the dynamic, intersubjective, and lifelong nature of genuine moral cultivation. Without a deeper metaphysical and relational grounding, character education may become performative or instrumental, rather than transformative.

Contemporary virtue ethicists, drawing inspiration from Aristotle and others, offer a more promising emphasis on character formation over rule-following. The flourishing human life, on these accounts, is one shaped by the habituation of good dispositions, responsive to the particularities of context. Yet even here, there remains a persistent tendency to conceive virtues primarily as internal traits of autonomous agents—qualities developed within individuals, rather than co-constituted through ritualised, relational practice. In this sense, even many strands within the modern recovery of virtue ethics often retains assumptions about the isolated moral agent that Confucian thought would fundamentally challenge.

Moreover, thinkers such as Wittgenstein have questioned the very framework of moral reasoning that undergirds much of Western ethical theory. While not offering a systematic moral philosophy, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*—particularly his remarks on language and meaning—suggests that understanding, including moral understanding, arises not from abstract rules or internal states alone, but from participation in what he calls 'forms of life': the shared, embodied practices that give language and action their sense (1953/1997, p. §§19, 23). As Paul Standish (2022) highlights, Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of a 'painted curtain' to challenge the idea that moral life is something hidden inside us. This 'painted curtain' represents a false picture that distracts us from the real drama of our shared lives—the ways we speak, act, and relate to one another. For Wittgenstein, as Standish explains, moral meaning is not found by looking behind these practices into some inner mental state, but by attending to how our words and actions are woven into our everyday lives and relationships. From this perspective, moral perception and responsiveness are shaped within lived patterns of social life rather than developed through detached reflection. Paul Standish (2016) extends this critique by arguing that modern education's obsession with accountability and performativity has produced a condition of 'disenchantment,' where moral and relational dimensions are stripped away. This, he suggests, stems from 'a late flowering of verificationism in current conceptions of teaching, learning, and above all assessment' (p. 99). In response, he calls for a 're-enchantment'—a renewed attention to the lived, relational, and imaginative practices that shape moral life (*ibid.*). Standish using McDowell's statement that 'initiation into a language is initiation into a going conception of the space of reasons,' discusses McDowell's reliance on the idea of the 'space of reasons' (*ibid.*, p. 105) and critiques its overly conceptual emphasis. Instead, Standish argues that moral and relational understanding in education grows through what he describes as 'self-conscious practices of representation and participation in community' (*ibid.*, p. 102). Standish draws on McDowell's idea of language as 'a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what' (*ibid.*, p. 105) to affirm that these practices carry moral and relational significance beyond mere performance. In this view,

the moral dimension of education emerges not from abstract concepts or mechanical procedures but from these lived, communal practices that shape our sense of meaning and belonging. This emphasis on relational formation resonates with both Wittgenstein (as interpreted by Standish) and Confucianism, affirming that moral formation arises through participation in shared practices and relational contexts. This insight from Wittgenstein thus not only critiques the inadequacies of modern frameworks but also gestures towards the kind of relational moral life that Confucian thought has long emphasised.

Taken together, these modern efforts reveal both the urgency of the moral education project and the limits of frameworks that neglect the relational, ritual, and embodied dimensions of ethical life. They prepare the ground, but they do not go far enough. It is precisely in addressing these omissions that the Confucian tradition—especially through the figure of the *jūnzǐ*—offers a richer, more sustainable vision of ethical cultivation. A vision rooted not in detached autonomy, but in reverent relationality; not in procedural mastery, but in the lifelong art of becoming fully human.

It is against the aforementioned backdrop of partial insights and lingering deficiencies that we now turn to Confucian traditions of moral cultivation. The Confucian tradition, as explored in Chapter 3, offers a compelling moral alternative to contemporary tendencies toward ethical detachment and instrumental achievement—centred on the slow, relational cultivation of virtue through the figure of the *jūnzǐ*, an ethical exemplar shaped not by autonomy or perfection, but by sincerity, responsiveness, and lifelong moral effort. While Confucian ethics has sometimes been portrayed as hierarchical, this thesis reads it as a dialogical and responsive tradition. It resists moral authoritarianism, emphasising formation through relational co-participation rather than imposition. The figure of the *jūnzǐ*, I suggest, can serve as a counter-image to the self-interested, performative, and morally disengaged subjects currently valorised in our political, economic, and educational systems. In this sense, recovering the *jūnzǐ* offers a way to reimagine education, ethics, and leadership within a morally fragmented world.

To develop this argument, the thesis proceeds through seven chapters, combining philosophical analysis, comparative ethics, and close engagement with classical and contemporary Confucian sources. **Chapter 1** has outlined the nature of the moral crisis and the ethical failures of modern institutions, while proposing Confucian moral cultivation as a vital alternative. **Chapter 2** situates Confucius within the political and cultural upheavals of the Eastern Zhou period, exploring how his ethical vision emerged in response to social disintegration. **Chapter 3** examines the *jūnzǐ* as the paradigmatic Confucian moral exemplar, and the relational, ritual, and aesthetic practices that

shape their formation. **Chapter 4** turns to the virtue of *xiào* (filial reverence), arguing for a reinterpretation that moves beyond rigid traditionalism or reductive liberalism. **Chapter 5** investigates the role of education in Confucian ethics, especially the cultivation of shame, perseverance, and responsiveness through ritual and practice. **Chapter 6** applies Confucian relational ethics to contemporary moral conflicts—including questions of pluralism, family, and postcolonial identity—demonstrating the adaptability of Confucian thought to diverse ethical contexts. Finally, **Chapter 7** synthesises the thesis’s key insights, considers the challenges of Confucian ethics in pluralistic societies, and offers a vision of ethical education rooted in moral exemplarity and relational personhood. Together, these chapters construct a cumulative argument: that Confucian traditions, far from being obsolete or parochial, offer a philosophically rich and pedagogically powerful response to the moral fragmentation of the modern world.



## CHAPTER 2: Confucius: His Time and Motivation

### 2.1 Historical and Cosmological Foundations of Confucian Thought

We begin with a historical contextualisation of Confucius—his times and motivations—because without such grounding, it is difficult to appreciate what inspired his philosophical project or to grasp its continuing relevance in today’s world. Yet this framing must go beyond the socio-political; it must also account for the metaphysical and cosmological backdrop in which Confucian thought emerged. As Vincent Shen (2014b) has argued, ancient China underwent a profound shift during this period—from a worldview grounded in divine command (*Shàngdì* 上帝) to one shaped by a moral cosmology (*Tiān* 天) that emphasised human agency and relational ethics. While Shen does not characterise this transformation as a sharp rupture, he suggests that Confucius contributed to what might be called a creative humanism: a form of ethical life rooted not in supernatural decree, but in the cultivation of personal and communal virtue. Taken in this light, Confucius was no mere transmitter of received traditions; instead he reformulated them into a philosophy of universalisable praxis: a way of living ethically through human relationships, cultivated habits, and practical wisdom.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) lived during the Axial Age, often referred to as the ancient world’s Enlightenment era. He was born in the small state of Lu, in what is now Shandong province. This extraordinary epoch also saw the emergence of other transformative thinkers—Zarathustra, Lao-Tzu, the Buddha, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—each of whom contributed profoundly to humanity’s moral and metaphysical self-understanding. While such a timeline is important for situating Confucius within a broader intellectual moment, our concern here is less comparative than contextual.

Thinkers of the Axial Age: Timeline

|                              |                             |                               |                                 |                         |                               |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Zarathustra<br>c.628–551 BCE | Lao-Tzu<br>fl.c.600–400 BCE | Buddha<br>c.563–483 BCE       | <b>Confucius</b><br>551–479 BCE | Socrates<br>470–399 BCE | Aristippus<br>c.435–356 BCE   |
| Plato<br>c.429–347 BCE       | Aristotle<br>384–322 BCE    | <b>Mencius</b><br>372–289 BCE | Epicurus<br>341–270 BCE         | Zeno<br>c.334–262 BCE   | <b>Xunzi</b><br>c.310–220 BCE |

According to tradition, Confucius was born into the *shī* (士) class—a knightly social order of low-level noble lineage. His father, Shuliang He 叔梁紇, was a military commander who died when Confucius was around three years old. He was raised in modest circumstances by his mother, Yan Zhengzai 顏徵在. His status placed him within a transitional social stratum—no longer part of the

hereditary aristocracy, but not yet integrated into a formal bureaucracy. As Li Feng (2014) notes, the *shī* class arose amid the breakdown of the Zhou aristocracy and the emergence of new power centres based on military and administrative service. Confucius thus stood at the crossroads of a collapsing feudal order and an emerging meritocratic ethos. Remarkably, he began teaching in his twenties or thirties and is widely regarded as the first person in Chinese history to dedicate his entire life to education. More significantly, he was the first to offer instruction to all, regardless of social class, with the aim of cultivating moral character rather than simply training for bureaucratic function (Chan, 1969, p. 17).

As Wing-tsit Chan notes, Confucius ‘can truly be said to have moulded Chinese civilisation in general’ (1969, p. 14). His imprint on Chinese life has been profound and enduring. William Theodore de Bary affirms this impact with clarity:

If we were to characterise in one word the Chinese way of life for the last two thousand years, the word could be ‘Confucian’. No other individual in Chinese history has so deeply influenced the life and thought of his people, as a transmitter, teacher and creative interpreter of the ancient culture and literature and as a moulder of the Chinese mind and character’ (De Bary et al., 1960, p. 15).

## **2.2 Confucius as Ethical Reformer and Humanistic Educator**

Confucius is often mischaracterised as a rigid traditionalist prescribing strict behavioural codes to be blindly followed. However, as we will see, this caricature is wholly inaccurate. For Confucius, no amount of legislation or imposed moral doctrine could make people virtuous; what was needed were moral exemplars and a rigorous programme of critical, reflective study. Although he drew from the past, he was no mere conservative. Indeed, he was a reformer who initiated sweeping social and philosophical changes. He broke the feudal notion that nobility of character was linked to aristocratic birth, insisting instead that every person possessed the capacity for sagehood. As we will explore more fully in Chapter 3, Confucius redefined the term *jūnzǐ*—formerly an aristocratic title—to refer instead to a person of ethical cultivation and refinement. In redefining the *jūnzǐ*, Confucius was not merely altering a term—he was subverting the ideological foundation of Zhou feudalism. As Nivison (1996) points out, this move marked a moral shift from inherited status to cultivated character. In a time when inherited rank was losing legitimacy, Confucius proposed a new ethical nobility grounded in practice, not blood.

Confucius' political vision entailed a meritocratic social order in which hierarchy was based not on lineage or wealth, but on virtue and public service.<sup>9</sup> As David Hall and Roger Ames write, 'social and political distinctions were, for Confucius, the outcome of personal cultivation and contributions toward sociopolitical harmony' (1987, p. 164). This radical revaluation of moral worth forms the core of his thought and has profound implications for how we think about leadership, personhood, and the purpose of education. Peimin Ni (2014b) echoes this view by underscoring Confucius' belief that a person becomes fully human not by birth or legal status, but through the gradual and intentional process of self-cultivation (*xiūshēn* 修身). This cultivation is not simply intellectual, but emotional, ritual, and practical. Jiyuan Yu (2007) expands on this by highlighting the unity of moral and aesthetic sensibilities in Confucian self-cultivation, suggesting that the *jūnzǐ* embodies a graceful integration of ethical seriousness and expressive humanity.

While the term 'Confucianism' has become conventional in English, it is, strictly speaking, a misnomer. It is not a term employed in China or other East Asian cultures. There, the tradition is more accurately known as *rújiā* 儒家 (School of the Ru) or *rúxué* 儒學 (Ru learning).<sup>10</sup> This linguistic distinction matters, for it reminds us that the tradition predates Confucius by several centuries. The *rú* were originally ritual specialists, associated with the foundational cultural figures of the early Zhōu dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE), such as Kings Wen and Wu and, most especially, the Duke of Zhou.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, the *rú* came to be regarded as custodians of classical knowledge and ritual culture. As Xinzhong Yao (2008, p. 20) observes, they began as specialists in ceremonial dance, music, and religious rites, and eventually became recognised as literati—those devoted to the conservation

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<sup>9</sup> Confucian meritocracy should not be conflated with the system critiqued by Michael Young in *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958), where success is reduced to intelligence and academic performance, entrenching inequality and framing failure as personal deficiency. That dystopia mirrors today's credential-driven culture, where exam scores and productivity eclipse empathy, integrity, and civic responsibility. In contrast, Confucian meritocracy centres on moral cultivation: leadership is earned through virtue, self-discipline, and public-mindedness, not technical skill alone. Education is not merely instrumental, but a lifelong ethical practice aimed at social harmony. As debates over merit, equity, and education intensify, this distinction matters. Confucianism offers a humanistic model grounded in ethical responsibility and inner development—misreading it as technocratic erases its normative and relational core.

<sup>10</sup> The terms *rújiā*, or *rúxué* can roughly be translated as the doctrine or tradition of 'scholars'. According to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) scholar Liu Xin (?–23 CE), the *rú* as a profession began during the early years of the Zhōu Dynasty. The *rú*, argues Liu Xin, were devoted to the 'six classics' (the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of Music*, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) (Yao, 2008, p. 17).

<sup>11</sup> Confucius deeply esteemed the founders of the Zhōu dynasty—Kings Wen, Wu, and especially the Duke of Zhou. Renowned for consolidating Zhou institutions and exemplifying virtuous rule, the Duke served as regent after King Wen's death, governing on behalf of the young King Cheng. At the peak of his authority, he made the unprecedented decision to step down upon Cheng's maturity. This voluntary transfer of power affirmed the Mandate of Heaven, which held that legitimacy derived from virtue, not birthright alone. The Duke's renunciation became a defining model of moral leadership in early Chinese political thought.

and transmission of cultural tradition. In this sense, Confucius did not invent a school of thought *ex nihilo*. Rather, he consolidated and reinterpreted the wisdom of earlier generations in order to pass it forward. His enduring vision was not to innovate for innovation's sake, but to refine, clarify, and revitalise what was best in the received traditions. This is reflected in Confucius' own modest self-characterisation: 'I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity' (*Analects* 7.1). This statement, however, should not be read, as it is by some, as evidence of slavish traditionalism. Rather, it reveals his humility and philosophical discipline. Though profoundly respectful of antiquity, Confucius was not constrained by it. His achievement lay in rearticulating the moral insights of the past to address the challenges of his own time. His thought exemplifies a form of creative fidelity—drawing on tradition not as static dogma, but as a dynamic moral resource.

It is precisely this balance between conservation and transformation that accounts for Confucius' enduring legacy. His influence became canonised during the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE – 9 CE), when Confucian philosophy was formally institutionalised as state orthodoxy. From that point forward, Confucian values became embedded in the cultural and political fabric of East Asia for nearly two millennia. And despite the forces of Westernisation and modernisation, Confucius remains an active presence in the ethical sensibilities of contemporary societies. As John Tucker (2019, p. 273) points out, many of Confucius' central concepts—such as *rén* (consummate conduct), *xiào* (filial reverence), and *yì* (appropriateness)—continue to inform the moral imagination of East Asian societies, even if their Confucian roots are sometimes forgotten. Even among reformers and modernisers, Confucianism remains 'a powerful substratum of ethical thinking, practice, and prognosis at the individual, social, and political levels.' Confucius may be seen, then, not as the founder of a religion or the originator of a dogma, but as a sage-teacher who drew upon the symbolic and moral capital of the *rújiā* to address the ethical disintegration of his time. In doing so, he developed a relational and cultivation-centred ethics grounded in ritual, virtue, and the transformation of self and society.

To appreciate Confucius' motivation and moral vision, we must understand the political, social, and cosmological realities of his day.<sup>12</sup> Confucius was a product of the Eastern Zhōu era<sup>13</sup> which is divided into the 'Spring and Autumn Period'<sup>14</sup> and the 'Warring States Period' (403 – 221 BCE).<sup>15</sup> These were times of profound disorder and fragmentation, marked by constant warfare, shifting allegiances, and the erosion of ritual and moral norms. The disintegration of established authority was not merely institutional—it was existential. As Vincent Shen (2014a) observes, this was a transitional moment in Chinese civilisation, marked by a movement from a divinely sanctioned political order to one that demanded human ethical agency. In this atmosphere of uncertainty and dislocation, the question of *how* to live well—*how* to become fully human—took on new urgency.

The Spring and Autumn period takes its name from the *Chūnqiū* (春秋), the chronicle of the state of Lu—Confucius' native state—which documented the seasonal affairs of its ruling house and was traditionally attributed to Confucius himself. During this time, the once-central authority of the Zhōu kings had all but collapsed. Following a devastating attack on their western capital, Zōngzhōu 宗周<sup>16</sup>, by the Quǎnróng 犬戎 nomadic tribes, the court relocated east to Chéngzhōu 成周 (also known as Luòyì 雒邑).<sup>17</sup> This eastward shift signified more than a mere geographical relocation—it symbolised the decline of the moral and ritual order once embodied by the Zhōu court. Real power now resided with the regional lords (*zhūhóu* 諸侯), who governed semi-autonomous states with little regard for central authority. In Confucius' own state of Lu, true control had passed into the hands of three hereditary families—the Ji, Meng, and Shu clans—who overshadowed the ducal house. Similar patterns played out across the fragmented political landscape. As Yao notes, '[t]here were about 124 states shortly before Confucius' birth and around 70 during his life.' The political map was in flux, and legitimacy was increasingly determined by force, not virtue.

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<sup>12</sup> Although Roland Barthes in his 1967 work 'The Death of the Author' (1977), argues that the writing and the writer are unrelated because what the writer writes, Barthes suggests, rather than being original, is a 'tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (p.146). 'Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (p.147). (Jacques Derrida in his 1971 essay 'Signature événement contexte', goes further and states that the author has never been in a position to fix meaning.) Although I agree with Barthes that it is difficult to ascertain the original intent of the author, should we truly separate the text from its creator? I would argue that it is never entirely possible for an author to detach themselves from their work. A text is inevitably a product of the author's imagination and experience, shaped by the cultural and personal context in which they are situated. From this context, one can often glean insights into the motivations behind the writing. As social beings, we are invariably influenced by those around us, and these influences inevitably leave their trace on any creative work.

<sup>13</sup> Dōngzhōu 東周, 770–221 BCE.

<sup>14</sup> Chūnqiū Shídài 春秋時代, 770–481 BCE.

<sup>15</sup> Zhànguó Shídài, 战国时代, 403 – 221 BCE.

<sup>16</sup> Near modern Xi'an 西安, Shaanxi.

<sup>17</sup> Modern Luòyáng 洛陽, Henan.

This was not merely an age of violence and disorder, but one of deep structural and moral upheaval. The disintegration of the Western Zhōu ritual system, accompanied by the rise of militarised states like Qi, Jin, and Chu, gave way to a competitive ethos based on cunning, expediency, and brute power. The authority of the rites (*lǐ* 禮), once binding aristocrats into a shared moral culture, was now routinely ignored or manipulated. The ideal of rule by moral excellence (*dé* 德) was replaced by *realpolitik*. In the *Zuǒ Zhuàn* 左傳<sup>18</sup>, war, betrayal, and strategic marriages become the currency of survival. As Li Feng (2014, pp. 166–170) argues, this transformation signalled not only a political decentralisation, but also a collapse in the moral and cosmological order that once underpinned the Zhou dynasty (pp. 166–170). In such a world, the moral disorientation of both elites and commoners was pervasive.

Instability was the norm. Warfare was endemic, and political life was rife with intrigue and betrayal. Legal protections were tenuous at best. As H.G. Creel observes, nobles would at times threaten—or even execute—their ministers for speaking honestly (1949, pp. 20–21). For common people, life was marked by hardship: heavy taxation, arbitrary violence, and frequent displacement. Speaking truth to power could be fatal. Human life was cheap, and many aristocrats appeared to value little beyond ‘hunting, war, and extravagant living’ (Creel, 1949, p. 2).<sup>19</sup> Remarkably, this era of disorder also gave rise to one of the most vibrant periods of intellectual development in Chinese history—the so-called ‘Hundred Schools of Thought.’ Rather than resigning themselves to despair, thinkers met the crisis with philosophical creativity, proposing new models of ethics, society, and human nature. From this cultural upheaval emerged the major traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, and Legalism. It was within this atmosphere of breakdown and transformation that Confucius carved out a path grounded not primarily in abstract metaphysics, but in the cultivation of ethical life.

Confucius’ mission was to restore ethical order and social harmony—not through coercive law, but through the cultivation of virtue, the performance of ritual, and the exemplarity of moral character. He believed that governance must be rooted in personal integrity and moral charisma (*dé*), not merely administrative skill or hereditary right. His goal was not an egalitarian society in the modern sense, but a morally stratified one, where the hierarchy of roles was justified by virtue rather than

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<sup>18</sup> A major historical document and an influential literary model.

<sup>19</sup> For example, the penalty for rebellion was death by torture; for more on the socio-political situation of this period see Creel (1949) chapter III.

by birth. He envisioned a society in which mutual respect across generations and social roles was the binding force of civic life. As Hall and Ames (1987) argue, Confucian hierarchy was not intended as a structure of domination but as a matrix of reciprocal ethical responsibility. In this fractured world, Confucius became a tireless teacher and reformer. For over a decade, he travelled across various states, offering counsel to rulers on how to re-establish just governance. Yet he was consistently overlooked for political office. His failure to attain lasting power was not due to a lack of insight, but to an unwavering commitment to principle. He would not pander to rulers, nor would he adapt his teachings for political gain.

It is this lifelong dedication to ethical formation that marks Confucius as the first truly humanistic educator in Chinese history. His aim was not to prepare individuals for bureaucratic efficiency, but to cultivate persons capable of embodying virtue in every aspect of life. As Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont (1999) have emphasised, for Confucius, to be human is not a static condition but a moral achievement. Learning to be human requires an integration of thought, emotion, ritual propriety, and ethical responsiveness. This vision was not confined to abstract philosophy but was realised in practice through his disciples, who were trained not for tactical acumen or political manoeuvring but for moral clarity. Despite Confucius' lack of political success, these students were in high demand across the feudal states, valued for their trustworthiness, decorum, and sense of justice in a world marked by violence and betrayal. As he affirms in *Analects* 1.2, the true purpose of learning was not advancement but self-betterment: *The jūnzǐ* is not a vessel—not a tool for narrow function, but a person of depth, character, and aesthetic sensibility. In prioritising moral character over vocational training, Confucius became the first Chinese thinker to teach privately with the express aim of nurturing ethical excellence (Chan, 1969, p. 17). For him, learning to be human was not a given but an ongoing, arduous project—requiring critical reflection, disciplined practice, and the continual refinement of self. This moral anthropology rests on a relational conception of personhood—one that contrasts with many dominant strands within Western philosophical traditions, which often emphasise the autonomous, self-contained individual.

### **2.3 Personhood and Ethical Relationality: a Confucian Contrast to Western Models**

To understand Confucian ethics fully, we must first consider his vision of personhood: how he understood the nature of human beings, their moral potential, and the way this potential is realised through relationships and roles. This vision differs significantly from many influential strands within Western theories of personhood, particularly those rooted in metaphysical or psychological

continuity. For example, Derek Parfit (2012) argues that what matters in survival is not personal identity *per se*, but psychological continuity—memory, consciousness, and character traits. In his view, the self is reducible to a series of mental states, and identity can even be indeterminate or split across multiple individuals, as in his famous *Teletransporter* and brain-fission thought experiments. On such a view, a perfect replica — whether biological or artificial — that preserved the same psychological states could, in the respects that matter, count as a survival of the original person. Personhood here is primarily conceived as internal and individual, often treated as disconnected from social roles. Confucianism, by contrast, sees personhood as fundamentally relational and ethical: one becomes a person not by preserving inner continuity alone, but by fulfilling roles in family and society, and cultivating virtue through ritual and responsibility. While the Confucian account does not reduce identity to psychological continuity, it recognises that such continuity is essential for sustaining genuine relationships over time, since trust, affection, and mutual obligation depend on the remembered history of shared life. Mere outward imitation of role performance—whether by an actor or a machine—would not suffice, for the cultivation of *rén* (consummate conduct) and *chéng* (sincerity) presupposes the ongoing presence of the heart–mind (*xīn* 心) engaged in moral self-cultivation. A *jūnzǐ* could not engage in such deception without undermining sincerity and trustworthiness, and a perfect mimic could not truly be the same person, even if appearances were convincing. Where Parfit detaches personhood from bodily or social continuity, the Confucian tradition embeds it within a lifelong process of moral and communal becoming. Thus, personhood is not a metaphysical given, but an ongoing ethical achievement grounded in context, practice, and relationship. As we shall see in the following sections, Confucian personhood is best understood as a dynamic process of ethical cultivation—one grounded in relationships, shaped by roles, and realised through continual self-transformation.

Before we explore the Confucian vision of personhood in depth, it is important to contrast it with dominant models in the Western philosophical tradition. As Rosemont (2015) argues, our conception of the self fundamentally shapes the ethical systems we build, the social norms we accept, and the educational aims we pursue. Do we understand the person as an autonomous, self-contained agent—or as a relational being, embedded within a network of familial and communal responsibilities? This is not a merely abstract debate: the answer determines the kinds of values we prioritise, the institutions we construct, and the ways in which we raise and educate our children. In many strands of Western thought, particularly those stemming from Athenian and Enlightenment traditions, the human person is often construed as a rational, rights-bearing individual—capable of self-legislation and moral reasoning independent of others. Rosemont (2015, p. 23) summarises this view succinctly: ‘If we define human beings as free, autonomous

individuals who can be described and analyzed strictly as agents, we will tend to prioritise personal and social responsibility.’ This outlook continues to shape modern capitalist societies, where autonomy, competition, and self-interest are treated as natural and desirable. Cultural adages such as ‘God helps those who help themselves,’ ‘May the best man win,’ or ‘Every man’s home is his castle’ reflect this ethos, reinforcing a model of personhood rooted in independence, ownership, and liberty.

Yet Rosemont also highlights a competing ethical thread within the Western tradition—what he calls the ‘Spartan’ value system—that places emphasis on collective identity, duty, and sacrifice. While the dominant paradigm often celebrates autonomy, reason, and choice, the moral fabric of Western life also includes values such as compassion, social obligation, and interdependence. The Bible teaches ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself,’ and John Donne famously reminded us that ‘No man is an island.’ These values coexist—often uneasily—with the individualistic ethos, surfacing in moments of national crisis, community mobilisation, or religious reflection. As Rosemont (2000, pp. 17–18) notes, the same society that praises ‘self-help’ may also call for community care, depending on the context. To illustrate this ethical ambivalence, Rosemont draws on Aesop’s fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper. The Ant, industrious and foresighted, refuses to share food with the Grasshopper, who spent the summer singing rather than preparing for winter. The fable is often interpreted as a moral endorsement of prudence and self-reliance. However, it also invites reflection on the limits of these virtues: does the Ant’s refusal signal justice or cruelty? Should individual foresight trump solidarity? These are not uniquely Western dilemmas, but they point to a broader philosophical question about how cultures rank and relate values such as autonomy, responsibility, harmony, and compassion.

According to Rosemont (2015, 2018) by examining the conceptual foundations of personhood across traditions, we can avoid two common errors: uncritical relativism on the one hand, and cultural imperialism on the other. If we fail to take these differences seriously, he warns, we may end up ‘endorsing the morality of the group with the most machine guns’ (Rosemont, 2018, p. 203). This warning is especially prescient in light of current political developments. In the United States, Donald Trump continues to promote a form of moral discourse driven less by ethical reasoning than by power, spectacle, and loyalty to tribe. Policies are often justified not through appeals to justice or shared humanity, but through assertions of strength, dominance, and national self-interest. Under his leadership, moral questions are frequently reduced to the logic of ‘winning’ over others,

echoing Rosemont's fear that when ethical complexity is ignored, might becomes right.<sup>20</sup> This stark observation underscores the urgency of the comparative project: to understand Confucianism not merely as an exotic alternative, but as a philosophical resource for rethinking the ethical assumptions embedded in our own models of self, society, and education.

### 2.3.1 Human Beings as Human '*Becomings*'

While Western philosophical traditions are far from monolithic, certain influential strands—particularly those shaped by the classical metaphysics of Platonism and the emergence of the modern liberal subject—have often conceived the self as relatively static, autonomous, and internally coherent. This model, echoed in ideas of moral agency, legal personhood, and rational deliberation, imagines a rights-bearing individual existing in principle prior to and independent of social relationships. As Roger T. Ames observes, this view stems from a substance-based ontology, inherited from Aristotle, Plato, and Parmenides, which assumes reality consists of separate, self-contained entities defined by an inner essence and a fixed set of attributes (Ames, 2021, pp. 33–37). Within this framework, persons are tacitly understood as complete in themselves, with relationships seen as external and optional—attachments that come after the fact, not elements that shape who one is. Even where moral development is acknowledged, it is often framed as the unfolding of a pre-existing self, rather than the ongoing emergence of identity through dynamic and interdependent relationships (p. 21).

Of course, speaking of 'Western traditions' in this way risks crude overgeneralisation. It sweeps across too broad a range and risks reducing rich philosophies to caricature. Yet there is a defensible rationale for highlighting certain patterns. With regard to the inheritance of Greek philosophy, a most prominent feature is what is known as Platonism. (I say 'known as' because it is questionable how far this way of thinking can be attributed to Plato, even if it can at times be found in what Socrates says.) This has filtered down through Western traditions in various respects, with a legacy of influence in philosophy but also in wider fields, for example, in medieval Christianity and even in modern advertising. Platonism is characterised by the belief that the world we live in is a world of shadows, a pale reflection of the true or ideal forms of things. We have an example of such a true form in the concept of a triangle. In the ordinary world we encounter triangular shapes, but these are never perfect in the way that our idea of a triangle is: that is, the drawn triangle is made by a

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<sup>20</sup> Trump's demand for the sale of Greenland from Denmark, and Israel's increasing confiscation of Palestinian lands and Syrian territory after the aftermath of the fall of Assad are just two recent examples of this.

line of pixels or by the fragmenting lead of the pencil on the page; though none of this interferes with our ability to conceive the true form, which by its nature is perfect and more secure. On these grounds, our knowledge of the true Form provides an experience of truth of a kind superior to any awareness of the empirical world through observation (i.e. through modern science). And this knowledge is superior also because the object of contemplation is timeless and unchanging. Hence, Platonism brings with it a criterion of *unchangingness* and *timelessness*, and also a sense of the universality of its significance. These seemingly abstract notions then filter down through wider forms of understanding and practice, generating ways of thinking about the world, a kind of metaphysics, that is alien to traditional forms of Eastern thought.

I have also referred to the construction of the human subject within liberalism, where similar dynamics are at play. Modern liberalism is typically associated with thinkers like Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, and Mill, but it's important to recognise the foundational role of Descartes in shaping the idea of the sovereign human subject. It's often said that most people in the modern Western world are Cartesian—not because they've read Descartes, but because his ideas, like those of Plato, have left enduring traces in broader cultural consciousness. Descartes' method of systematic doubt isolates individual consciousness as the one thing that cannot be doubted. This move generates a new kind of self-awareness and a sharp division between inner and outer worlds, where the 'external' becomes contingent upon the 'internal' human subject. The rise of science and technology in the modern period reinforced this split, framing the external world as an object of detached scrutiny rather than the medium of lived experience. Cartesianism continues to shape modern thought through an almost instinctive mind-body dualism, while Hume's formalisation of the fact-value distinction remains embedded in Western consciousness. The modern ideal of rational autonomy is, in part, a legacy of these philosophical developments.

The contrasts I'm drawing are not rigid binaries, but sketches of underlying metaphysical tendencies that continue to shape modern consciousness. Against this backdrop, early Confucian thought presents a markedly different anthropology—one that resists locating the self in an isolated, autonomous subject. These contrasts are meant to illuminate the background metaphysical differences that have helped shape today's world. For all the diversity within both Eastern and Western traditions, these broad tendencies remain worth keeping in view. With that in mind—and bearing in mind my earlier caution about generalisations—let me now return to Confucianism.

Kwong-loi Shun offers a complementary critique, showing that early Confucian thought does not conceive of the self as a private, autonomous entity. Instead, it centres on the heart/mind (*xīn* 心)

as the locus of both cognitive and affective activity—capable of reflection, direction, and ethical transformation. Crucially, this heart/mind is not metaphysically separate from the body, but intimately connected to it through *qi*, the vital force that animates and integrates all aspects of the person (Shun, 2009, pp. 185–186). Ethical cultivation, then, is not the refinement of an isolated will, but the transformation of the whole person—body, emotion, and social orientation alike.

Confucianism thus offers a radically different anthropological vision: human beings are not static entities, but dynamic *becomings*. Though biologically human from birth, we must learn how to become human in an ethical and aesthetic sense. For Confucius, personhood is not given but achieved—through learning, self-cultivation, and participation in the rituals and relationships that constitute communal life. As Ames puts it, ‘Confucian ethics begins from fundamentally different assumptions about how personal identities emerge in our human narratives and how moral competence is expressed as a habituated virtuosity in the roles and relationships that come to constitute us’ (Ames, 2021, p. 21). Personhood, in this view, is a narrative unfolding—realised through responsiveness to the evolving web of roles and relationships that shape communal existence.

Tu Wei-ming captures this ethos succinctly: to be truly human requires ‘learning to become aesthetically refined, morally excellent, and religiously profound’ (Tu, 1985, p. 52). This is not an ancillary concern—it is the primary and ultimate task of life. For the Confucian, being good is not merely one virtue among others. It is the comprehensive integration of all virtues, inseparable from wisdom, sensitivity, strength, and creativity. Thus, becoming a good person is not reducible to performing ethical duties; it involves the refinement of the whole self—ethically, aesthetically, and relationally.

Confucius makes this clear in the *Analects* (17.2): ‘Men are close to one another by nature. They diverge as a result of repeated practice.’ This reflects a foundational belief in moral equality—not based on rights, but on a shared capacity for virtue. All are born with the same ethical potential; what distinguishes the noble from the petty is not birth or innate talent, but habituation: the choices we make, the models we emulate, the practices we sustain. Realising this potential requires a desire for self-cultivation and a lifelong commitment to study and practice. Confucius’ own life exemplifies this journey. In a rare autobiographical moment, he traces the stages of his ethical and spiritual maturation:

At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the line [of right] (*Analects* 2.4).

Here moral becoming is incremental and lifelong. The *jūnzǐ* never sets aside *rén*—‘consummate conduct’—not even for the time it takes to eat a meal (*Analects* 4.2). As Tseng Tzu remarks, ‘A Gentleman must be strong and resolute, for his burden is heavy and the road is long... Only with death does the road come to an end’ (*Analects* 8.7). Ethical life, then, is an ongoing labour of self-cultivation—transforming the entire person and radiating into the social and cosmic order (Shun, 2009, pp. 190–193). The Confucian self is not a bounded individual but a dynamic centre of relational transformation, unfolding through a lifetime of becoming.

## 2.4 Confucian Views on Human Nature (*Xìng* 性): Mencius and Xunzi

The Confucian tradition, though unified in its commitment to moral self-cultivation, diverges in its understanding of human nature (*xìng* 性).<sup>21</sup> At the heart of this divergence lies a fundamental question: Are human beings naturally good, or do they require moral shaping to overcome an inherently self-centred nature?

For Mencius, all human beings are born with *sìduān* 四端—variously translated as the ‘four hearts,’ ‘sprouts,’ or ‘seeds’: compassion (惻隱), a sense of respect (辭讓), a feeling of shame (羞), and the capacity to distinguish right from wrong (是非). These are the nascent forms of the cardinal virtues: *rén* 仁 (consummate conduct), *yì* 義 (appropriateness), *lǐ* 禮 (ritual propriety), and *zhì* 智 (living wisely) (*Mencius*, 2A:6).<sup>22</sup> Mencius likens these moral predispositions to our limbs—innate parts of ourselves that require only activation: one need only lift the limb to use it. In this, Mencius extends Confucius’ claim in the *Analects* (7:30) that everyone can attain *rén*, provided they truly desire it. To illustrate the universality of our innate moral sense, Mencius offers a compelling thought experiment:

Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the

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<sup>21</sup> *Xìng* (性) — As defined by Ames, *xìng* refers to ‘natural human propensities,’ understood not as a fixed, inborn essence but as a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent unfolding of a person’s initial dispositions through cultivation and lived experience. The character *xìng* combines *xīn* (心, ‘heartminding’) and *shēng* (生, ‘birth, life, growth’), underscoring that human identity is an emergent process of becoming within social, cultural, and cosmic relationships (Ames, 2021, pp. 383–404).

<sup>22</sup> These Confucian virtues, along with *xìn* 信 (making good one’s word), will be discussed at length in chapter 3.

parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, not yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human (*Mencius*, IIA.6).

This spontaneous feeling of empathy exemplifies our inborn moral responsiveness. It is the clearest sign that the moral sprouts are not learned behaviours but expressions of our inherent nature. Each ‘sprout’ can, with cultivation, develop into a full virtue—benevolence, dutifulness, observance of ritual propriety, and practical wisdom respectively (*Mencius*, 2A:6). As Tu Wei-ming notes, ‘[s]trictly speaking, one is not taught to be able to feel, will, sense, and know; these are innate faculties of the heart and defining characteristics of human nature’ (1988, pp. 220–221). Nonetheless, Mencius is clear that mere possession of these moral seeds is not sufficient. Like sprouts in the soil, they must be nurtured through ethical reflection and practice; neglected, they may ‘rot and wither’ (*Mencius*, VIA:8).

Xunzi on the other hand states that although human nature is bad (*xìng è piān* 性惡篇) and being endowed by Heaven is natural and not learnt (Xunzi and Hutton, 2016, chap. 23, p.248), morality is still possible because of three reasons. First, despite our mind not being able to control our desires, it has a certain degree of control over what we actually *do* – the seeking of the objects of our desires. The mind is able to *reflect* and modify our actions. Our bad nature can be transformed through deliberate effort: by learning (*xué*) the rationale behind morality and the laws, and putting them into practice, we can gradually gain control over our impulses and shape our character (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016, p. chap. 23, 248). Our nature can be reconstructed through the artificial institution of morality, invented by the sage kings. Through this ‘human artifice’ (*wěi* 偽)<sup>23</sup> our bad nature can be shaped much in the manner that a carpenter straightens crooked wood according to the desired shape by steaming it (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016, p. chap. 23, 248).

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<sup>23</sup> I will use D C Lau’s (1953) widely used translation ‘human artifice’, although, Lau warns us that when using this translation one should bear in mind that in Chinese *wěi* covers the human activities of *doing* something and *making* something, e.g. moral behaviour and the making of articles by a craftsman.

Second, we are beings capable of habituation by engaging in rituals (*lǐ*)<sup>24</sup> and *yì*,<sup>25</sup> following teachers and proper models (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016, pp. 248–249), and by the accumulation of ‘goodness’ (*shàn*) we are capable of modifying our nature. Once a habit is formed, it becomes second nature. This increases the control the mind has over our actions. By accumulating good acts, and *reflecting* on these, one will come to realise and understand the benefits of doing good such as peace, and social and political order. And eventually, come to realise their intrinsic virtue, and come to love them so (Chp. 23 Xunzi & Hutton, 2016).

Third, morality once invented, is intelligible to the person in the street since for Xunzi no-one enjoys disorder and strife: people are predisposed to a life of order brought about by rituals and norms instituted by the sage kings. Here it is important to highlight that for Xunzi even those that behave ‘immorally’, do so, *not* necessarily out of any intrinsic pleasure of performing a bad act, but because they do *not* have an innate conception of morality, immorality arises simply because people pursue their self-interest unchecked without consideration of others’ desires.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding their differences, both Mencius and Xunzi believed in the perfectibility of persons, that people were no different to sages in that, like them they possessed the same capacity to cultivate their selfhood to its peak. For Mencius, this was to be done by nurturing our moral sprouts through study and performing of good actions, while for Xunzi, one could curb one’s natural selfish instincts, by *internalising* morality, by study, habituation, and accumulation of good acts. However, for both becoming good is a strenuous lifelong task, not easily achieved because the ability to be good does not necessarily mean one will do so. We will discuss this in more detail when we explore moral failure (*akrasia*) in Chapter 5: why if we have the capacity to be good that many do not develop this? From the aforementioned discussion it should be clear that moral cultivation is squarely grounded in the daily lived experience of ordinary existence. Before turning to the Confucian account of our relational nature—a foundational element of personhood that helps illuminate the

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<sup>24</sup> For Xunzi, ritual/rites (*lǐ*) has two meanings: ‘first, it refers a set of standards for behavior that were created by the sage kings in order to bring order to people. These standards range from ...etiquette all the way up to grand ceremonies for special occasions. ... Second, the text uses the term *lǐ* to refer to a person’s tendency to adhere to ritual, that is, as a virtue, and in those cases it is rendered as “ritual propriety” (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016, p. 345).

<sup>25</sup> For Xunzi, *yì* has two meanings: first, ‘it refers to a certain set of ethical *standards* that were created by the ancient sage kings to bring order to people (e.g., 23.27-31). These standards delineate proper social roles and privileges and responsibilities attached to them (e.g., 27.691-97). On the other hand, *yì* also refers to a *virtue*, namely the tendency to adhere to these standards and the order they contain (e.g., 15.355-57). In other texts, one commonly sees the latter sense of *yì* translated as “righteousness,” and the former sense is sometimes translated as “duties” (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016, p. 346)

<sup>26</sup> Thus unlike Augustine, Xunzi does not hold that people are, in some circumstances, capable of performing evil actions for evil’s sake. In Book II of Augustine’s Confessions, where he recalls stealing pears in his childhood not to eat but because of the pleasure that it brought him: I stole something I had in plenty... not for need, but for the thrill of thieving and doing what was wrong... It was foul, and I loved it—for wickedness itself. (Quoted in Perrett, 2002, p.305).

role of virtue in self-cultivation—it is helpful to first consider some prominent Western philosophical models of the person. Placing these in conversation with Confucianism can help clarify the distinctive emphases of the Confucian perspective. A fuller treatment of Confucian virtues will follow thereafter.

## 2.5 Some Prominent Theories of the Person in the Western Canon

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance (Kant, *What is Enlightenment?*)

To highlight the distinctiveness of the Confucian conception of personhood, it is useful to briefly sketch how Western philosophy has typically approached the self. The aim here is not exhaustive comparison, but to identify core assumptions—especially those challenged by thinkers like Rosemont and Ames. Whereas many influential Western philosophical traditions conceive of the person as a primarily autonomous and self-contained agent, Confucian models understand moral identity as emerging through lived relationships and attunement to the dynamic, generative order of the cosmos. The extreme pole of this vision is ethical egoism, articulated most clearly by Ayn Rand, who held that self-interest was the highest moral imperative, and that altruism was, in fact, unethical (Freeman, 1977, pp. 7–8).

More mainstream rule-based traditions, such as Kantian ethics, also centre autonomy. In *What is Enlightenment?*, Kant defines enlightenment as the emergence from 'self-incurred immaturity,' urging readers to use their own reason 'without direction from another's guidance.' This autonomy becomes central in his moral philosophy: it is the point at which a rational agent is able to think and reason morally without dependence on others' guidance, and to legislate the moral law for themselves and act in accordance with it. Because this law is universal and binding on all rational beings, autonomy, while grounded in the reasoning of the individual, is inherently connected to a shared moral order rather than to the particularities of social or historical context. In Mary Bockover's reading, the Kantian moral agent 'is not dependent on others even if it functions to protect their autonomy' (2010, p. 318). Moral law arises from individual reason, detached from particular social or historical conditions. In contrast Utilitarianism, developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, appears to reverse this by prioritising consequences over abstract principles. Still, their system depends on universal reasoning—maximising happiness for the greatest number, regardless of time, place, or cultural context. Mill (1871) defines actions as right 'in proportion as they tend to promote happiness' and wrong as they produce its opposite. While seemingly

empirical, this still relies on a conception of the person as a rational calculator, detached from the specifics of relational identity.<sup>27</sup>

Both Kantian and utilitarian moral theories conceive of morality in universalist terms: one-size-fits-all principles grounded in reason rather than lived relationships. As Rosemont and Ames observe, these traditions ‘ignore individual particularities of time, place, and culture’ in the name of moral objectivity (2016, p. 65) (2016, p. 65). By contrast, virtue ethics—particularly in the Aristotelian tradition—shifts the focus from moral rules to the cultivation of character. For Aristotle, virtue is acquired through habituation: ‘we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts’ (*NE* II.1, 1103a33, trans. W.D. Ross). Morality involves forming a person who habitually chooses the mean between extremes, guided by reason. ‘Virtue... is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean... this being determined by a rational principle... by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it’ (II.6, 1106b36). Ethical life aims at *eudaimonia*—often translated as ‘flourishing’ or ‘well-being,’ but more precisely the condition of living a fully realised, virtuous life. It is not reducible to pleasure or subjective happiness, but is instead ‘an activity of the soul... in accordance with virtue in a complete life’ (I.7, 1098a15), pursued for its own sake. *Eudaimonia* is also ‘self-sufficient,’ meaning ‘when isolated [it] makes life desirable and lacking in nothing’ (I.7, 1097b14–20). This ideal of *autarkeia*—self-sufficiency—reflects a deeper commitment to individual autonomy. The contemplative life (*bios theoretikos*), which Aristotle regards as highest, exemplifies this orientation. The wise person ‘can contemplate truth..., even when he is by himself,’ and such contemplation ‘is loved for its own sake’ and requires little from others (X.7, 1177a21–23).

While virtue ethics departs from rule-based systems through its focus on character, it often retains a philosophical emphasis on individual autonomy. Moral excellence remains largely rooted in the agent’s internal dispositions rather than primarily in relational embeddedness. This emphasis on autonomy continues to distinguish Aristotelian ethics from traditions such as Confucianism, which centre moral development in social roles and interpersonal cultivation. This emphasis on non-dependence reflects a deeper cultural ideal of individual completion over relational embeddedness. Contemporary forms of virtue ethics, though more flexible than deontological or utilitarian frameworks, often continue this pattern by treating virtues as individual dispositions—traits that

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<sup>27</sup> The utilitarian logic of sacrificing one for the many is powerfully challenged in Le Guin’s *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, where a city’s joy rests on a child’s misery, and in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Ivan rejects a world built on a single child’s suffering. Such examples reveal the moral cost of abstract, aggregate reasoning — a cost Confucian ethics resists by grounding value in concrete, relational life.

guide action across varying circumstances. As David Wong observes, virtue ethics ‘provides guidance to the individual primarily through description of ideal personhood and character traits to be realised,’ rather than through abstract or impersonal principles (quoted in Sim, 2015, p. 64). This individualist orientation has led many Confucian scholars to resist subsuming Confucianism under the virtue ethics rubric. Confucian ethics, with its emphasis on relational roles, ritual propriety, and interdependent self-cultivation, appears to offer a fundamentally different moral paradigm. Nonetheless, some philosophers have proposed a more expansive conception of virtue ethics—one capacious enough to accommodate the Confucian model. As May Sim (2015, p. 63) suggests, if we define virtue ethics more broadly as an approach that emphasises ‘the dispositions, character, motivation and virtues of the agent,’ then Confucianism can be meaningfully situated within this tradition.

However, I favour Roger Ames contention that framing Confucianism as a form of virtue ethics obscures what makes it philosophically novel. For Ames, Confucian ethics is not just about individual virtue, but about *role performance in particular relationships*. It is, in his view, better described as *role ethics*—a *sui generis* moral system that resists Western categories and deserves to be interpreted on its own terms. Despite these disagreements, most Confucians agree that the traditional Western view of the person—as free, rational, and self-contained—stands in contrast to the Confucian view of the person as *inherently* relational. In Confucianism, one does not become a person by reasoning in isolation, but by learning how to act appropriately within a web of specific relationships, guided by the cardinal virtues *rén* (consummate conduct), *lǐ* (ritual propriety), and *yì* (appropriateness). For instance, how we behave toward grandparents will differ from how we interact with siblings or friends—not out of inconsistency, but because roles *shape* obligations. This foundational insight anchors the Confucian commitment to self-cultivation within a *social grammar of ethical life*—a grammar we will explore more deeply through both classical and contemporary interpretations.

## 2.6 Contemporary Theories of Confucian Personhood

### 2.6.1 Herbert Fingarette: The Secular as Sacred

It is often assumed that Confucius was a secularist—concerned solely with the art of ethical living in this world, without appeal to divine sanction or metaphysical realities. Herbert Fingarette, however, offers a more nuanced reading. In his influential work *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (1972/1998), Fingarette argues that although Confucius does not appeal to an omnipotent God in the style of monotheistic traditions, he nonetheless preserves a profound sense of the *sacred*—a

sacredness embedded not in transcendental beings, but in the *ritualised patterns of human interaction*.

Fingarette identifies this sense of sacredness with what he terms 'magic': not supernaturalism *per se*, but 'the power of a specific person to accomplish his will directly and effortlessly through ritual, gesture and incantation' (Fingarette, 1998, p. 3). For Confucius, this 'magic' resides in rituals properly performed—not only grand ceremonies like marriage or mourning, but also the subtle, everyday rituals of human life: greetings, posture, tone of voice. These are not superficial gestures but vehicles of *ethical and aesthetic elevation*. A simple handshake, for example, becomes a meaningful act when performed with the right spirit. The dynamics of approach—eye contact, the tilt of the palm, firmness of the clasp—can communicate power, submission, respect, or camaraderie. When ritual is internalised and performed with sincerity, it transforms the ordinary into the *profoundly human*. In Fingarette's words:

It is in this beautiful and dignified, shared and open participation with others who are ultimately like oneself that man realises himself. Thus perfect community of men—the Confucian analogue to Christian brotherhood—becomes an inextricable part, the chief aspect, of Divine worship (Fingarette, 1998, p. 16).

For Fingarette, then, Confucian personhood emerges *not* from introspective soul-searching but from participation in ritualised communal life. The sacred is not hidden in metaphysical depths but is manifest in *how* we engage with others—*how* we bow, speak, mourn, or listen.

Fingarette also challenges the prominent strain of Western mind-body dualism, rooted in Platonic metaphysics, which has dominated Euro-American philosophy. For Confucius, such a division does not arise. The self is neither a soul trapped in a body nor a Cartesian 'thinking thing' (*res cogitans*). There is arguably no interiority removed from the social world. As he strikingly puts it: 'For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there are no human beings' (Fingarette, 1983, p. 10). This insight is reflected in the very etymology of the Confucian virtue *rén* 仁 (consummate conduct). The character is composed of the 'person' radical (亻) and the number 'two' (二), visually expressing the idea that full humanity exists only in relation to others. Thus, to be a person is to exist *in* relationship. Personhood is *not* a pre-social given but a product of ethical participation in communal ceremonies. Our actions do not merely express our moral selves—they *form* them. However, Fingarette's account has not gone unchallenged. As Stephen Wilson argues, Fingarette, 'allows almost no place for the "inner life" of the individual outside traditional social forms and so disregards the individual component of human flourishing' (Wilson, 1995, p. 265). For

Fingarette it simply was not present in the *Analects*, not even as a rejected possibility (Fingarette, 1998, p. 45). For instance, Confucius often speaks of *self-examination*, a practice that presupposes a reflective inner domain. He links *rén* with inner reverence and *yì* with inner discernment. In the *Analects* (4:17, 5:27, 12:4), he exhorts his disciples to examine their intentions and cultivate inward sincerity. Jiyuan Yu (2008, pp. 606–607) highlights this well. Without inner sincerity, *lǐ* becomes an empty shell—hollow performance devoid of moral weight. Confucius’ notion of *rén* requires an internal attitude of reverence and love, and his references to self-examination, moral shame, and harmony show a robust—though implicit—psychological depth. Similarly, as Gordon Mower (Mower, 2012, p. 31) notes, Confucius speaks of dreams, guilt, longing, and personal grief—states of consciousness that require an inner, subjective self. Fingarette’s claim that the *Analects* lacks any ‘inner psychic life’ therefore appears overstated. If there were no such interiority, then passages like Confucius’ lament—‘*How seriously I have declined! It has been so long since I last dreamt of meeting the Duke of Zhou*’ (*Analects* 7.5)—would be meaningless. Thus, while Fingarette’s emphasis on ritual as transformative is compelling, his denial of inner moral psychology is difficult to sustain. The Confucian person may not be atomistic or metaphysically dualistic, but that does not mean she is without inwardness, conscience, or solitude.

## 2.6.2 Henry Rosemont and Confucian Role Ethics

Henry Rosemont extends Fingarette’s critique of the Western ideal of the atomistic self and offers a more explicitly political and ethical articulation of Confucian personhood—one grounded in roles, relationships, and reciprocity. In his writings, particularly *Against Individualism* (2015), Rosemont argues that some dominant strands of Western thought, built on the Enlightenment ideal of the free, rational, self-legislating individual, tend to abstract the self from its concrete moral responsibilities and sever it from the network of roles through which identity is formed and cultivated. In contrast, Rosemont contends that in the Confucian tradition, *who one is*, is defined not by some metaphysical essence or interior core, but by the *roles one occupies and performs well*. To illustrate this, he famously contrasts two metaphors: the peach and the onion.

People may be seen as peaches: an external skin that is public, the fruit itself which is our body as well as our personality and history. And there is the peach pit, our self, that which endures... But think instead of an onion. I peel off successive layers: first son, then husband, father, grandfather; I continue peeling away the layers... And what is left when there are no moral layers? Nothing at all’ (Rosemont, 2015, p. 14).

This metaphor encapsulates Rosemont’s central claim: the self is constituted by its roles. There is no enduring ‘pit’ beneath the surface—no immutable core self, only the sum of our ethically enacted

relationships. As our roles shift over time—student becomes teacher, daughter becomes mother—so too does our personhood. Identity, in this view, is relational, dynamic, and developmental. Moreover, for Rosemont, these roles are not mere social descriptors but carry with them moral obligations. To be a son, friend, or citizen is not simply to bear a label—it is to act in ways that are appropriate (*yi* 義), ritually proper (*li* 禮), and consummate (*ren* 仁) in the context of those roles. The cultivation of *jūnzǐ*-like character requires living these roles well. However, this strong relational thesis has drawn criticism. Daniel Bell rightly warns that not all relationships are equally constitutive of identity. Some—such as one’s relation to a parent—are deeply formative, while others—like membership in a neighbourhood sports team—may be contingent or peripheral (Bell, 2017, p. 567). If all roles equally define who we are, we risk losing sight of *degrees* of moral depth and relational centrality. Rosemont does not fully address this gradation. Nor does he give sustained attention to the inner psychological life. His emphasis is squarely on the moral ecology of social embeddedness. But this should not be taken to mean he denies all interiority. Rather, his point is that inner moral reflection is itself shaped by relational life, rather than emerging in isolation from it.

Nevertheless, his vision is intentionally stark. In rejecting the dominant Western image of the self as independent and self-sufficient, Rosemont proposes a Confucian model in which moral identity is never separable from one’s relationships. As he puts it: ‘Our roles constitute our identity in the sense that they specify who we are... As our roles change with the passing of years... I become quite literally a different person’ (Rosemont, 2015, pp. 94–95). In this framework, Confucian personhood is not something one *has* prior to society—it is something one *does*, *cultivates*, and *becomes* through ethical participation in the moral fabric of shared life.

#### 2.6.4 Roger Ames and Confucian Role Ethics

Roger Ames, a long-time collaborator of Henry Rosemont, takes the relational conception of personhood further by developing a more explicit ontological and ethical framework. Like Rosemont, Ames contends that the Confucian self is *inherently* social and embedded in relationships. However, he offers a metaphysical corrective to what he sees as overly hollow conceptions of relationality, particularly Fingarette’s notion of the self as ‘an empty room’ (Ames, 1991, p. 105). For Ames, the Confucian person is neither an atomised individual nor an indistinct social construct. Instead, the self is a ‘focus-field’: a unique centre of relational energy within a dynamic field of social interactions: ‘the individual is not considered a part of society to which he or

she belongs, but a productive *focus* of the experiences and interactions constituting that society' (1999, p. 191).

The 'focus-field' model allows for both relational constitution and individual uniqueness. The Confucian self is focal in that it both *constitutes* and is *constituted* by the field in which it resides (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 43). The self cannot exist apart from its relationships, yet each person also occupies *a particular and unsubstitutable place* in that network—a singular pattern of participation and contribution. Ames further argues that Confucianism offers not a virtue ethics, but a role ethics—a moral system grounded in the performance of roles rather than the cultivation of abstract virtues. Moral excellence is defined by how one lives particular roles: parent, child, friend, teacher. These roles are not static but *emergent* and *interpretive*; we become moral by learning how to enact our roles well, in contextually appropriate ways. As Ames puts it:

Role ethics begins from the assumption that... persons cannot be understood apart from the other persons with whom they interact or the world that gives them context... What is moral is conduct that conduces to growth and flourishing in the roles and relations we live together with others (2016b, p. 11).

This yields a model of moral life that is relational, context-sensitive, and performative. The question is not 'What is the right thing to do?' in the abstract, but 'What is appropriate (*yi* 義) in this role, in this situation, with these people?'

Unlike many abstract universalist systems in Western moral philosophy, Confucian role ethics takes concrete relational life as its moral starting point. The obligations of a son are different from those of a friend, and the excellence of each role is inseparable from the particularities of its enactment. Ames therefore sees Confucian morality as fundamentally *artistic* and *improvisational*: a continual act of ethical performance, attuned to the shifting contours of human life. This also undergirds his critique of dominant Western moral theories. Where Kantian ethics emphasises autonomy, Confucianism emphasises *attunement*; where utilitarianism demands maximisation, Confucianism demands *appropriateness*; where some Western frameworks abstract the self from society, Confucianism roots the self in society as its medium of cultivation. This contrast is not absolute, but highlights Confucianism's distinctive emphasis on moral particularism and role-defined responsibilities. And yet, as John Ramsey (2016, p. 237) notes, while Ames offers a powerful relational account, he does not fully resolve a key issue: how to distinguish between constitutive and contingent roles. Ames suggests that some roles—such as familial ones—carry more moral weight than others. But he does not offer a clear criterion for why or how. Ramsey suggests that

Mencius' emphasis on the *renlun* 人倫—the five core relationships (parent–child, ruler–subject, husband–wife, elder–younger siblings, and friend–friend)—may serve as a foundation. Still, more elaboration is needed.

Nonetheless, Ames' model allows for ethical autonomy within relationality. While the self is constituted by relationships, it also shapes its world through action. He writes: 'I have never been a "me" without the "me" being this son, this brother, this teacher, this Canadian, and so on' (2018, pp. 190–191). Uniqueness, in this view, does not lie in metaphysical isolation, but in the distinctive way one performs and cultivates one's roles. The Confucian person is not reducible to her relations, but she cannot exist without them. Personhood is not a possession; it is a continuous practice.

### 2.6.5 David B. Wong: The Biological Relational Organism

David Wong's intervention in contemporary Confucian ethics is a subtle but significant one. While broadly sympathetic to the relational self advocated by Rosemont and Ames, Wong raises a critical question:

If I am simply the sum of my relationships, then who or what is the entity standing in each of these particular relationships? (2004, p. 420).

This is not a return to metaphysical individualism, but a challenge to what he sees as *relational reductionism*. Wong's answer is to propose two interrelated senses of Confucian relationality: the social and the developmental. First, he suggests we may view the person as a biological organism that becomes a moral agent through participation in human relationships. The Confucian character *rén* 仁—which joins the radical for 'person' (人) with the number 'two' (二)—symbolises this relational ontology: personhood emerges *through interaction with others*. We are not born with full humanity; we must become human by engaging with other persons in ethically formative ways. Second, Wong underscores the developmental dimension of relationality. Humans are born helpless and dependent. From infancy, we are formed—cognitively, emotionally, and morally—through the nurture and guidance of others. Our ethical sensibilities are shaped not in abstraction, but *in response* to those who love, discipline, and guide us. This aligns with the Confucian emphasis on ritual, family, and education as the crucible of moral formation. And yet, Wong is careful to note that these developmental processes do not exhaust the self. While personhood is forged in relationship, it also acquires *a degree of stability and ethical individuation*. His key claim is that the *jūnzǐ* (the cultivated moral exemplar) develops traits that *transcend* specific roles and situations:

The traits of the *jūnzǐ* include dispositions to act and to feel in ways that are ethically appropriate to the context, guided by right judgment... With given practice, they may take hold, and when they do, they can attain a significant degree of independence from context (Wong, 2004, p. 424).

This suggests that while relationships are *formative*, they do not remain *determinative*. The mature moral agent is not merely responsive to situational expectations but is capable of judging the moral value of a given custom, role, or norm. Such a person can choose *yì* 義 (appropriateness) over mere convention—acting ethically even when it means diverging from social expectation. However, this portrayal risks idealising the *jūnzǐ* as morally exceptional—leaving less room for the ordinary person, who may struggle with this level of contextual discernment. This moral attentiveness is not necessarily rare. It is something that can be nurtured in all persons through learning, reflection, and accumulated experience. I would argue that the conscious deliberations that allow the *jūnzǐ* to do the right thing in novel situations are the same types of processes many people engage in daily. The difference lies in *practice and commitment*. As with Xunzi's idea of habituation and accumulation of *shàn* (goodness), or Mencius' nurturing of moral sprouts, the *jūnzǐ* simply excels at a process *available to all*—a process that begins with *volition*: the choice to study, to reflect, to grow. Confucius affirms this when he says: 'If one is not eager to learn, I do not teach him' (*Analects* 7.8), and 'He who learns but does not reflect is lost' (*Analects* 2.15).

Wong's formulation ultimately affirms that while Confucian personhood is relational in its genesis, it also involves internal moral reflection, deliberative autonomy, and growth beyond one's roles. His account helps navigate between overly individualistic and overly relational models, affirming a conception of self that is both socially embedded and psychologically continuous. His twofold conception—*developmental* and *social*—thus allows for a relationally embedded self that is nevertheless psychologically continuous and ethically self-aware.

### 2.6.6 Tu Weiming: Person as Centre of Relationships

Tu Weiming offers one of the most nuanced articulations of Confucian personhood. He cautions against any simplistic or monolithic reading of the Confucian self, reminding us that: 'There is no monolithic Confucian self to speak of' (1985, p. 13). Confucian thought, like any major philosophical tradition, has undergone reinterpretation and refinement over time. The self envisioned by Mencius is not identical to that envisioned by Xunzi, and Tu himself is engaged in constructive retrieval—offering a Confucian personhood that speaks meaningfully to contemporary concerns about agency, interiority, and human flourishing.

Tu's key insight is that the Confucian self is best understood not as an amalgam of roles, but as the centre of relationships. This subtle shift in emphasis allows him to preserve the relational grounding of personhood while also affirming the integrity and agency of the individual. We are not reducible to the sum of our roles, nor are we merely useful nodes in a social network. Rather, the self is that which maintains, deepens, and transforms the relationships it inhabits. 'We maintain our relationships because the way we are towards others is a reflection of who we are as a person: it is for the 'sake of self' that we cultivate ourselves...' (Weiming, 2010, p. 188). Importantly, this "sake of self" is not to be conflated with strong forms of Western individualism that emphasise autonomy as self-sufficiency. Tu defines the self not as a sovereign ego, but as a communal centre—a point of connection, responsibility, and transformation: 'The Confucian self worth cultivating is never a private possession of a single individual but a shareable experience that underlies common humanity' (1985, p. 57). In this way, self-cultivation is never purely inward. It is always in-relation: with parents, with community, with the cosmos. Yet it is not for others in the instrumental sense; it is through others, and ultimately for one's own deep moral growth. 'Learning for the sake of the self,' Tu notes, is not about selfishness or self-help, but about cultivating one's humanity to its fullest, so that one may be a more meaningful part of the world. Tu's self-as-centre model bears some resemblance to the focus-field metaphor of Hall and Ames, but with a greater emphasis on self-refinement and inner life. Whereas Hall and Ames highlight the constitutive power of relationships, Tu draws attention to the active role the self plays in shaping those relationships. For example, I may not choose to be a daughter or son, but I do choose how to be that child: with reverence, with compassion, with neglect, or with resentment. The way I act in relation is a mirror of my ethical self.

Tu also insists on the interiority of moral life. Using the example of Tseng Tzu, disciple of Confucius, traditionally believed to have authored the *Daxue* (*Great Learning*), he emphasises the importance of probing one's inner self through regular self-examination. This echoes Confucius' own counsel in the *Analects* (4.17, 5.27), as well as the reflective dimension of *rén*. Unlike Fingarette, Tu affirms that self-cultivation includes solitude, introspection, and spiritual depth—though always as part of a broader commitment to relational harmony. Moreover, Tu's insistence on the non-utilitarian nature of cultivation marks a key difference from some of the stronger versions of role ethics. Cultivation is not about becoming useful to the state, the family, or the clan. It is about perfecting one's humanity—which may, as a result, benefit others, but is not defined by that benefit. He writes:

My "learning for the sake of the self" is a personal task, but it is tantamount to the realization of the communal well-being rather than a quest for private self-interest (2010, p. 188).

This vision allows for both embeddedness and autonomy, both intimacy and reflection. Tu's self is not boundless, but neither is it hollow. It is a moral centre, capable of both joy and mourning, contemplation and commitment. Yet where Tu's conceptualisation of personhood may fall short is in giving due significance to the purely intellectual and aesthetic dimensions of the self—dimensions more explicitly foregrounded in some classical Western traditions, such as the Aristotelian ideal of contemplative *eudaimonia*. This includes the quiet fulfilment found in solitary pleasures: reading, listening to music, gardening, engaging in self-dialogue, or drifting into daydreams. These inner experiences are not alien to Confucianism. Confucius himself, enraptured by the music of *shao*<sup>28</sup> in Ch'i, did not notice the taste of his food for three months, declaring, 'I never dreamt that the joys of music could reach such heights' (*Analects* 7.14). His prolonged periods of mourning (*Analects* 17.21) and the solitude of his wanderings reflect a deep and complex inner life. The 'self' is never cut off from others, but neither is it reducible to them. While relationships and social rituals are essential to self-cultivation, so too is the contemplative self—the one that feels doubt, joy, guilt, or wonder in ways that are not always shareable.<sup>29</sup> Tu's vision, then, helps us reclaim a holistic view of Confucian personhood—one that integrates ritual, reflection, sociality, and solitude into a unified path of self-cultivation.

## 2.7 Summary and Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that Confucian personhood is grounded in a relational ontology—one in which identity is not fixed or autonomous, but continually formed through ethical participation in a web of roles and relationships. This differs significantly from many Western models, which often emphasise autonomy and reason, though not universally. In Confucianism, the self is not something we possess from birth, but something we become through lifelong cultivation—through ritual, reflection, and appropriate role performance.

The contemporary thinkers we've examined converge on this point, even as they diverge in emphasis. Fingarette highlights the transformative power of ritual but downplays inner life. Rosemont stresses social embeddedness yet risks reducing the self to its roles. Ames deepens this model through his "focus-field" framework, capturing the self's dynamic role within relational

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<sup>28</sup> The music of Emperor Shun (2294 and 2184 BC), the legendary leader of ancient China who came to the throne through the abdication of Emperor Yao. Shao music was the best of ancient Chinese court music and the most played musical style, and occurs in literary records through the ages.

<sup>29</sup> See also Peimin Ni (2016, pp. 67, 113) who argues that in the *Analects*, the aesthetic is as important an element, as the moral: the aesthetically pleasing becomes the morally commanding. By "aesthetic" is meant that the good life is an artistic life, characterised by praxis and intuitive judgment.

fields. Wong adds a developmental dimension, showing how Confucian selfhood evolves in and through relationship, while still allowing for psychological continuity and critical moral reflection. Tu Weiming, perhaps most integratively, offers a vision of the self as the moral centre of relationships—one that is cultivated through others but ultimately for the sake of fulfilling shared humanity. What unites these perspectives is a commitment to selfhood as an ongoing ethical achievement, not a metaphysical given. Personhood, in this view, is not realised in isolation but in concrete relationships—how we act toward parents, friends, elders, and peers; how we embody *rén* (consummate conduct), *yì* (appropriateness), and *lǐ* (ritual propriety). And yet, this relational model does not exclude interiority. Reflection, solitude, longing, even grief—central themes in some Western introspective traditions—are also present in the Confucian texts. The Confucian person is not hollow, but neither is she closed off: she is a work in progress, shaped from within and without.

This vision animates Confucius' ethical response to the political fragmentation of the Spring and Autumn period. In a time of moral disintegration, his answer was not coercive regulation but the cultivation of exemplary persons—*jūnzǐ*—those who lead not by force, but by the moral resonance of their character. To become such a person was to extend one's own growth outward: to seek not only self-realisation, but to support the flourishing of others as well—just as Confucius taught that one who wishes to be established must help establish others, and one who seeks personal growth must enable it in others (*Analects* 6.28). As Tu Weiming (2024) reminds us, the path of becoming fully human is neither a lonely assertion of ego nor the erasure of individuality. It is a shared journey, rooted in ritual, sustained by reflection, and oriented toward communal flourishing. And it is this journey—the ethical, aesthetic, and relational becoming of the person—that we turn to next through the cardinal virtues of the Confucian tradition.



## CHAPTER 3: *Jūnzǐ* 君子: The Paradigmatic Confucian Person

### 3.1 The *Jūnzǐ* as Moral Exemplar

This chapter explores the *jūnzǐ* (君子)—the exemplary moral agent in Confucian ethics—as the model individual through whom a harmonious society is realised. In Confucian thought, the cultivation of such individuals is essential for social and moral order. As Confucius states:

The man of perfect virtue [*jūnzǐ*], wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others (*Analects* 6.28, trans. Legge).

The *jūnzǐ* embodies the cardinal Confucian virtues of *lǐ* (ritual propriety), *yì* (appropriateness), and *rén* (consummate conduct), as well as *zhì* (living wisely) and *xìn* (making good on one's word). These virtues, as will be discussed below, are not isolated traits but relational dispositions developed through continual self-cultivation. As Antonio Cua notes, the *jūnzǐ* is 'the paradigmatic individual [who] sets the tone and quality of the life of ordinary moral agents' (Cua, 2007, p. 125). Such individuals are not only symbols of Confucian virtue; they are often presented as essential to the ethical functioning of society, serving as a moral reference point in both private conduct and public life.

The *jūnzǐ*'s influence is not limited to the private cultivation of virtue; it radiates outward, shaping the moral sensibility of others. This is clearly captured in *Analects* 19.21, where Tzu-kung observes, 'The gentleman's errors are like an eclipse of the sun and moon: when he errs, the whole world sees him doing so; when he reforms, the whole world looks up to him.' The *jūnzǐ* is visible, not because they seek visibility, but because their life is rooted in ethical transparency. Their personhood is inseparable from morality, as indicated in *Analects* 15.18, where Confucius states that the noble person 'rests in humanity and refrains by observing the rites.' Such individuals achieve influence not through rhetoric or coercion, but through personal refinement and constancy of character. Confucius' own account of moral development (*Analects* 2.4) affirms this trajectory of ethical self-cultivation as a life-long project. Through dedication to learning (*xué*), the *jūnzǐ* acquires not only moral insight but also a kind of authority that commands respect (*gōng* 恭) and reverence (*jìng* 敬). Their presence encourages ethical formation in others, even when the principles underlying that influence are not fully grasped. As Confucius notes, 'The gentleman can lead people along the way but cannot make them understand it' (*Analects* 8.9). Ames and Rosemont (1999, p.

243). underscore this point: ‘Everyone can have a place on the way, even when they don’t participate in constructing it.’

Confucian texts consistently affirm that the capacity to become a *jūnzǐ* lies within the reach of all. Moral excellence is not predicated on innate superiority but on sustained effort. In *Analects* 17.2, Confucius asserts, ‘By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart.’ Mencius reinforces this notion by emphasising the moral potential inherent in the heart-mind (*xīn*), and Xunzi, while rejecting innateness, similarly affirms the transformative power of cultivation. Importantly, Xunzi challenges the view that *jūnzǐ* are innately different from others, writing:

With respect to inborn nature and endowment, intelligence and ability, the *jūnzǐ* and small-minded persons are one and the same. In desiring honor and averting shame, they are the same. But if we consider the way they pursue these matters, we find them to be diametrically opposite (quoted in, Cua, 2014, p. 296).<sup>30</sup>

The *jūnzǐ*, in this sense, is not born but made—a moral archetype forged in the crucible of communal life and the discipline of continual self-cultivation. They stand above the *xiǎorén* 小人 (petty person), whose selfishness is matched by a refusal to grow through relational engagement, leaving them ethically stunted, socially fragmented, and corrosive to communal cohesion. It falls short of the *shèngrén* 聖人 (sage), whose perfect harmony with the cosmos lies beyond ordinary comprehension, and is also distinct from the *rénzhě* 仁者 (consummate person), whose embodiment of *rén* 仁 (consummate conduct) reflects a fully cultivated virtue grounded in deep relational attunement (Ames, 2021, pp. 76–78). In this middle ground, the *jūnzǐ* emerges as both relationally resonant and aesthetically refined (ibid., 2021, pp. 75–75).

Characterised by grace, discernment, and cultivated responsiveness, *the jūnzǐ* occupies a vital moral category in Confucian thought: aspirational yet attainable, exemplary yet grounded in everyday practice. As Roger Ames observes, *the jūnzǐ* is not a static endpoint but a dynamic moral waypoint—an embodied guide between the aspiring *shì* 士 (scholar-official), still at the outset of their ethical journey, and the elusive *shèngrén* (ibid., 2021, p. 79). In this light, the *shì* 士 functions as a *jūnzǐ-in-training*—a committed learner whose moral formation unfolds through ritual participation and civic responsibility. As Henry Rosemont (1986, p. 204) explains, The *shì* have

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<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Lionel Giles’ search for a European equivalent for the *jūnzǐ* of the term Greek *ho kalos kagathos* (higher mental and moral qualities) with all the outward bearing of a gentleman (Giles 1907, cited in Cua, 2014: 295), certainly would not be a fair reflection of the characteristics of a *jūnzǐ*.

willed to follow the *dào* as embodied in the *lǐ* (ritual propriety), they know some of the *lǐ* and are engaged in the ongoing process of learning more, concomitant with the actions appropriate to their station.’ Thus, the *shì* are not passive recipients of instruction but active participants in shaping communal life—practitioners of ethical becoming through relational practice. While the *shì* are ‘those who do,’ still receiving instruction in public conduct and moral service, the *jūnzǐ* are ‘those who are’—described rather than instructed, serving as embodied models of consummate conduct (Ames, 2021, p. 79). As Rosemont further notes, all *shèngrén* are *jūnzǐ*, and all *jūnzǐ* are *shì*, though the reverse is not necessarily true. This hierarchy is not a fixed status order but a continuum of progressive integration, each stage reflecting a deeper embodiment of *lǐ*, *rén*, and communal resonance (Rosemont, 1986, pp. 204–205).<sup>31</sup> Yet it is the *jūnzǐ* who renders the *dào* visible—translating ritual, music, and civic duty into an elegant choreography of moral life. Their excellence is cultivated through relationship, sustained through political responsibility, and refined through the aesthetic grace of everyday conduct (Ames, 2021, pp. 76–77).

The semantic evolution of the term *jūnzǐ* is also instructive. Traditionally, *jūnzǐ* referred to the offspring of nobility, without gender distinction (Li 2009, in Tan, 2014, p. 104). Confucius appropriates and redefines the term, detaching it from hereditary privilege and reattaching it to moral excellence (*dé* 德). As David Hall and Roger Ames (1987, p. 164) argue, Confucius reconceives *jūnzǐ* to denote ‘nobility of refinement rather than blood,’ thereby transforming it into a moral, rather than social, designation. The term has been variously translated as ‘gentleman,’ ‘noble man,’ ‘virtuous man,’ ‘exemplary person,’ and even ‘profound person.’ While each rendering captures something of its ethical tenor, none fully conveys its cultural and philosophical depth. For this reason, the present inquiry will retain the romanised pinyin form *jūnzǐ*, so as to preserve its conceptual specificity and avoid reductive equivalence.

Etymologically, Hall and Ames (1987, p. 183)<sup>32</sup> note that the glyph *jūn* (君), with *zǐ* (子) as honorific, conveys multiple associations: noble rank, a respectful form of address, a cultivated model whose character inspires ethical emulation, and a source of sociopolitical order grounded in interpersonal responsiveness. Crucially, the *jūnzǐ* is not a static archetype imposed upon others, but a dynamic moral presence whose authority arises from engagement with the social world. The *jūnzǐ* becomes

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<sup>31</sup> Though only briefly mentioned, terms such as *dàrén* 大人 (great person) and *chéng rén* 成人 (developed person) occasionally indicate further degree of refinement beyond the *jūnzǐ* (Ames, 2021, p. 76).

<sup>32</sup> For a more comprehensive etymological understanding and discussion of the *jūnzǐ* see Hall and Ames (1987, pp. 182–192).

a locus of ethical transformation, not by withdrawing from the world, but by embodying the virtues required to shape it.

The *jūnzǐ*, as moral agent, is also a civic figure, entrusted with roles of responsibility and public service. Leadership, for Confucius, is inseparable from ethical competence. Ministers and officials, if they are to be worthy of their position, must advance both the material and moral welfare of the people. In this regard, the *jūnzǐ* is not merely an abstract model of virtue, but a participant in governance, ideally positioned to bring about social harmony. The *jūnzǐ* remains composed even in poverty and sustains dignity in circumstances that might humiliate the petty person (*Analects* 6.9, 15.32). They are also prepared, when necessary, to sacrifice their lives in defence of moral principle (*Analects* 15.9). As de Bary poignantly observes, ‘Above and beyond this, the noble man is a model for everyone who might play a leadership role in society<sup>33</sup>—a life of higher responsibilities’ (de Bary, 1991, quoted in Cua, 2014, p. 296).

In summary, the *jūnzǐ* serves as the axis of Confucian moral vision—a person shaped by continuous self-cultivation, defined by relational integrity, and capable of moral leadership. They do not represent an unattainable ideal but a model of transformation that is widely accessible through sustained effort. By participating in the ongoing, relational process of *dào* as way-making,<sup>34</sup> the *jūnzǐ* models a path available to others, even those who have not yet awakened to it. In this way, Confucius places the hope of social harmony not in institutional structures alone, but in the ethical refinement of individuals. The *jūnzǐ* is both moral end and moral means: the embodiment of virtue and the condition for its propagation.

### 3.2 The Moral Vision of the *Jūnzǐ* 君子 in the *Analects* 論語

The *jūnzǐ* appears over seventy times in the *Analects*, underscoring their central role as Confucius’ embodiment of moral reflection and ethical aspiration. Whenever Confucius discusses morality, it

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<sup>33</sup> Contemporary leadership is often defined by functional skills—like management, innovation, and problem-solving—rather than moral virtue. In contrast, the *jūnzǐ* embodies leadership through *phronesis* (practical wisdom): the integration of ethical judgment, character, and habit directed toward cultivating societal harmony.

<sup>34</sup> *Dào* (道) is best understood not as a fixed, transcendent order, but as an evolving, relational process—a moral and cultural pathway forged through lived experience and sustained tradition. As Hall and Ames (1987, pp. 226–236) argue, Confucius conceives *dào* as an active, creative process of ‘road-making’—a historically continuous yet personally shaped way of life rooted in cultural inheritance and extended through ethical cultivation. The character itself combines 首 (*shǒu*, ‘head’ or ‘to lead’) and 辵 (*chuò*, ‘walk’ or ‘movement’), highlighting its verbal and dynamic nature. Originally used in contexts like guiding a river, *dào* denotes both the act of creating a path and the path itself. It is, therefore, both received and re-created—a humanly authored process of becoming and meaning-making in the world.

is in relation to the moral virtues that a *jūnzǐ* should possess. However, the *Analects* never provides a clear definition of the *jūnzǐ*, nevertheless, according to the Japanese historian Shigeki Kaizuka (2002 p. 96-97) two fundamental nuanced conceptions can be ascertained. The first usage is that of someone having acquired an education, thus distinguishing them from the uneducated and unrefined persons – they possess a wide-ranging education in among other subjects, poetry (*Analects*, 16.13) and music (*Analects* 13.3). They are therefore, refined and carry themselves well, and as such can serve in government or any position of responsibility, because unlike a vessel, which is designed for a specific purpose, the *jūnzǐ* are skilled *not* only in one particular thing but adept in a variety (*Analects* 2.12). Being widely versed in cultural norms and customs, the *jūnzǐ* are therefore, noble in disposition (*Analects* 6.27). Such education, it needs to be noted, cannot be divorced from ethics given its focus on character formation.

The *jūnzǐ*'s moral superiority, therefore, arises from her ethical comportment [*zhì* 質] which textures her *becoming* by way of 'nature and nurture'.<sup>35</sup> Thus it is that Confucius says of the *jūnzǐ*:

The gentleman [*jūnzǐ*] has morality [*yì* 義] as his basic stuff [*zhì* 質] and by observing the rites [*lǐ*] puts it into practice, by being modest gives it expression, and by being trustworthy [*xìn* 信] in word brings it to completion. Such is a gentleman indeed! (*Analects* 15.18).

She 'understands what is moral' (*Analects* 4.16) and is 'on the side of what is moral' (*Analects* 4.10). She is moved by humaneness (*rén*) which she tirelessly nurtures (*Analects* 4.5). Given her attraction toward goodness, the *jūnzǐ* is naturally 'profound': *strong* and *resolute* in striving to cultivate herself. She comprehends the seriousness of her task, and knows that the effort needed to realise it is a lifelong endeavour (*Analects*, 8.7). This is why she is careful of her words, ashamed lest they outstrip her actions (*Analects* 14.27) and as such she ensures her actions precede her words (*Analects* 2.13).<sup>36</sup>

The second, and more prevalent conception can be summed in the saying:

The gentleman seeks neither a full belly nor a comfortable home. He is quick in action but cautious in speech. He goes to men possessed of the Way to have himself put right. Such a man can be described as eager to learn (*Analects* 1.14).

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<sup>35</sup> See endnote 193 Ames and Rosemont (1999, p. 250).

<sup>36</sup> Because as the *Zhongyong* elaborates, should one think and plan before one speaks, one will prevent oneself from 'stumbling' and getting into 'difficulties' and prevent 'distress' and 'coming to a dead end' (Ames & Hall, 2001).

This conception sees the *jūnzǐ* as an ‘incomplete personality, possessed of some goal, and in search of education’ (Kaizuka 2002, p.98). The *jūnzǐ*, unlike the sage (*shèngrén*), is far from perfect, and is aware of her fallibilities (*Analects* 15.19). This awareness is the basis for her *eagerness to learn*, seeking out those possessed of *dào*—the cultivated, proper way of living and acting—in the hope of being corrected and refined through their guidance (*Analects* 1.14). Together, these two conceptions are not mutually exclusive but highlight different aspects of the *jūnzǐ*’s development: one emphasising education and refinement, the other moral aspiration and humility.

The *jūnzǐ* are always in a process of *becoming* better persons, but what differentiates them from the ordinary person is their *desire* and *commitment* to cultivate themselves and others, both morally and materially (*Analects* 6.28). This thesis argues that the Confucian tradition provides such a model—one rooted in a comprehensive vision of moral cultivation and sustained by the figure of the *jūnzǐ* (君子). Often translated as the ‘superior person,’ ‘noble person,’ or ‘gentleman,’ the *jūnzǐ* is best understood not as a title of status, but as an aspirational moral exemplar: a person committed to ethical growth, relational attunement, and self-cultivation. Unlike certain influential Western notions of the self that emphasise individuality and rights-based autonomy, Confucian personhood is fundamentally relational—shaped through family, community, and ritual. This does not erase individuality but reframes it as something developed through one’s roles and responsibilities. Rather than grounding moral theory in abstract universal principles, Confucianism roots it in situated practices—of attunement, responsiveness, and embodied virtue. The *jūnzǐ* becomes who they are through thoughtful conduct in everyday life—through habits and gestures that harmonise inner intention with outer action.

Far from being an idealised or unreachable archetype, the *jūnzǐ* is someone who has undertaken the difficult work of becoming trustworthy, humane, and wise—integrating virtue into their very way of being. Confucius does not present this person as morally perfect, but as someone sincere in their striving, consistent in their conduct, and capable of inspiring others. Their life is not oriented toward dominance, competition, or personal gain, but toward the flourishing of the community through the cultivation of character that not only sustains social harmony but resonates with the generative structure of the cosmos itself (Tu, 2024). In the *Analects*, the *jūnzǐ* appears not as a lawgiver or political strategist in the mould of a Solon or Pericles, but as a teacher, a moral presence, a harmoniser of relationships. The *jūnzǐ* represents not a universalistic moral abstraction, but an embedded ethical agent—one whose sense of responsibility emerges from lived relationships and evolving practical wisdom. This Confucian model of moral development stands in

contrast to some prominent Western philosophical archetypes, such as the Nietzschean ideal of the self-creating *Übermensch* and the bureaucratic rationalist who reduces ethics to policy compliance.

The *jūnzǐ*, however, does not emerge by accident. She is shaped through a lifelong process of ethical cultivation that begins in early childhood and continues into maturity. Education, in this context, does not refer narrowly to formal instruction, but encompasses a broad field of formative influences: family relationships, role expectations, ritual practices in one's roles and relationships (*lǐ*), social encounters, and emotional habits. For Confucius, the moral life is not separable from the life of relationships. One becomes a certain kind of person by performing one's roles well—by being a good child, sibling, friend, parent, teacher, or ruler. Virtue is enacted, not declared. It is cultivated through the attentive repetition of appropriate conduct, emotional responsiveness, and reflection on failure—a process that constitutes not only ethical development but an embodied attunement to the generative rhythms and relational patterns that structure the moral world.

The lifelong practice of self-cultivation enables the *jūnzǐ* to become a quietly transformative presence in the world—one whose moral influence extends not through authority or force, but through the resonance of embodied virtue. As Confucius says, were the *jūnzǐ* 'to settle amongst the Nine Barbarian Tribes of the east,' even their uncouthness would disappear (*Analects* 9.14). The *jūnzǐ* is thus exemplary not by command or authority, but by moral presence—worthy of emulation through conduct rather than prescription. It is also important to note that while Confucius is often referred to as a sage, this is not a title he claimed for himself—nor that of *jūnzǐ*. As he puts it: 'How dare I claim to be a sage or a benevolent man? Perhaps it might be said of me that I learn without flagging and teach without growing weary (*Analects* 7.34).<sup>37</sup> So from the *Analects*, one can conclude that although Confucius retains for the *jūnzǐ* the connotation of nobility of refinement, and princely superiority, this is predicated on ethical merit. Such an understanding of the *jūnzǐ*, means it is possible for any person, through self-cultivation, and relevant aptitudes, to become one.

### 3.3 Becoming Centred: The *Jūnzǐ* 君子 and the Practice of *Zhōngyōng* 中庸

Supreme indeed is the Mean [*zhōngyōng*] as a moral virtue. It has been rare among the common people for quite a long time (*Analects* 6.29).

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<sup>37</sup> *Mencius*, II.A.2 contains what seems to be a fuller version of this passage.

The *Analects* makes only a brief reference to *zhōngyōng*, offering little elaboration on its substance. It is in the *Zhongyong* that this pivotal concept is more fully developed, particularly in terms of its application in the life of the *jūnzǐ*. The *Zhongyong* conceives of the *jūnzǐ* as one who embodies *zhōngyōng* (2:1). But what does this mean? The term *zhōngyōng* has been interpreted in various ways. James Legge translates it as ‘The Doctrine of the Mean’, E. R. Hughes as ‘The Mean-in-Action’, Gu Hongming as ‘Central Harmony’, Ezra Pound as ‘The Unwobbling Pivot’, and Tu Wei-ming as ‘Centrality and Commonality’ (1989). The Han commentator Zheng Xuan understood *yong* as ‘practice’—that is, the practical application of centrality. Zhu Xi later suggested that *yong* signifies ‘that which is ordinary and common’. In line with this, Ames and Hall translate *zhōngyōng* as ‘Focusing the Familiar’ (affairs of the day) (2001, pp. 115–116), while Xie Wenyu (2011) offers ‘On Proper Action’.

Ames and Hall’s emphasis on the ‘familiar’ draws etymologically from the same root as ‘family’, a link that resonates strongly with the Confucian worldview in which family lies at the heart of ‘socio-religious experience’ (2001, p. 43). This connection underscores the significance of ritual (*lǐ*) in managing human relationships with care and precision—a foundational aspect of self-cultivation, given the inherently relational nature of Confucian personhood. Consequently, one may say that for the *jūnzǐ* to be *zhōngyōng* is to perform appropriate action within the context of the ordinary and relational dynamics of daily life. Despite this, *zhōngyōng* being of supreme value (*Zhongyong* 3), it is difficult to maintain. Ames and Hall observe that although every person inherits the moral groundwork, moral seeds, from *Tiān* (Heaven)<sup>38</sup>, few can sustain a state of *zhōngyōng* for long (2001, p. 43). This is because its actualisation depends on achieving *hé* (harmony 和), a state cultivated through what Tu Wei-ming calls the ‘ever-deepening subjectivity’ of the *jūnzǐ*. This inner depth brings about both unity with *Tiān* and more effective moral action in the broader social world. To illustrate this, Tu (1989, p. 6) turns to the opening lines of the *Zhongyong*:

What Heaven [*tiān*] imparts [命 *mìng*] to man is called nature [性 *xìng*]. To follow human nature is called the Way [道 *dào*]. Cultivating the Way is called teaching [教 *jiào*]... Therefore the profound person [*jūnzǐ*] is cautious over what he does not see and apprehensive over what he does not hear... Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused it is called

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<sup>38</sup> *Tiān* is often translated as Heaven, but this can be misleading. In English, *Heaven* suggests a transcendent, omnipotent deity in the Judeo-Christian sense, distinct from the world and humanity. In Confucianism, however, *tiān*, *dì* 地 (earth), and human beings form an interdependent unity. As Hall and Ames put it, ‘the sum of existence is a unity between t’ien [*tiān*], earth, and each human being... each existing correlative to the other two’ (1987, p. 303). *Tiān* is also shorthand for *tiāndì* (‘heaven and earth’), emphasising its embeddedness in the natural world (Ames & Hall, 2001, p. 80. For etymology and further discussion, see Hall and Ames (1987, pp. 201–208). In the *Zhongyong*, Feng Youlan describes *tiān* as an ‘ethical T’ien’—the highest moral principle of the universe—stating, ‘What T’ien confers (on man) is called his nature’ (Y. Feng, 1997, p. 31) (*T’ien* is the Wade-Giles spelling of *tiān*).

centrality [zhōng].<sup>39</sup> When the feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony [hé]. Centrality is the great foundation of the world, and harmony is its universal path (*Zhongyong* 1:1–5).

Tu interprets this passage as focusing on the *jūnzǐ*'s subjectivity and, by extension, the 'human way'. The *jūnzǐ*'s caution regarding the unseen and unheard arises from the understanding that *dào* is not external but inherent. Since one's natural human tendencies (*xìng*) are imparted by *Tiān*, it follows that the Way is always present within ordinary existence. Cultivation, then, is not about compliance with external principles but about internal realisation. Tu frames this as an 'anthropocosmic' vision: while *xìng* are endowed by *Tiān*, the moral path is only realised through self-cultivation. As he notes:

Teaching involves nothing but self-realisation<sup>40</sup>... through the understanding of things at hand Heaven's true intentions are manifested... Man can make the Way great, but the Way cannot make man great... The human way is neither theocentric nor anthropocentric, but points to the mutuality of Heaven and man (1989, p. 9).

This mutuality implies that one must turn inward to realise their moral potential, rather than wait upon external grace. As Tu explains, 'what [one] neither sees nor hears is precisely the inner self upon which the manifestation of the Way is based' (1989, p. 7). Although this inner self is 'hidden' and 'subtle'—not immediately perceptible—it is, paradoxically, the most visible and manifest to the discerning, reflective *jūnzǐ*. Accordingly, the *jūnzǐ* practices *shèndú* 慎獨—not simply as vigilance in solitude, but as an ethical attentiveness to the nascent stirrings of the heart-mind. Following Tao Liang's reading of early Confucian texts, this practice involves causing one's will to be sincere (*chéng qí yì* 誠其意), an inward act of aligning one's volitions before they take external form.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Although the *Zhongyong*, is often compared to Aristotle's *Doctrine of the Mean*, because of connotations of neither exceeding one's actions or authority, of falling short (*Zhongyong*, 4). One primary difference between the Confucians and Aristotle stems from the fact that the *Zhongyong* states that *zhōng* is prior to feelings and actions and that it is the 'foundation' of all. Thus it is a metaphysical principle that grounds all reality. However, for Aristotle, the 'mean', as May Sim informs us, 'is limited to the sphere of human action' only and does not precede human actions and feelings, on the contrary his 'mean is a state of having feelings and appetites appropriately'. For Aristotle, 'virtues of character such as courage, temperance, and mildness are concerned with feelings and actions that admit of excess, deficiency, and a mean or intermediate state (*NE* 1106b16–18). [And that] the habit of choosing the intermediate state is virtue (*NE* 1106b28)' (2004, p. 255).

<sup>40</sup> This is why Confucius stated that: 'What the gentleman seeks, he seeks within himself; what the small man seeks, he seeks in others' (*Analects*, 15:21).

<sup>41</sup> While earlier interpretations, including those by Zhu Xi, often understood *shèndú* in spatial terms—'being cautious when physically alone'—recent scholarship, particularly Tao Liang (2014), has restored its original meaning as found in excavated bamboo texts such as the *Wǔxíng*. There, *dú* 獨 refers not to solitude but to a pre-contact, inner state (*wèifā* 未發) of the heart-mind, and *shèn* 慎 is best glossed as sincerity (*chéng* 誠). Thus, *shèndú* means to 'cause one's will to be sincere' (*chéng qí yì* 誠其意), a process of attentively harmonising the five inner virtues before they manifest outwardly. This introspective sincerity is not a retreat from the world, but the very ground from which ethical action emerges.

However, as Tu cautions, this attention to one's inner state must not be mistaken for indifference to the external world. The *jūnzǐ* is not detached but embedded in the concrete, familiar context of human relationships. It is in these lived, everyday interactions that *zhōngyōng* finds its true expression.

The critical self-examination advocated by the *Zhongyong* is, as Tu Wei-ming emphasises, 'personal but not subjectivistic'. In other words, Heaven is in me, and I am of Heaven. As he puts it, 'the assumption is that when a person is perceptive of the subtle manifestations of his inner feelings, he is, at the same time, particularly sensitive to the world out there', since this self-awareness opens one's 'mind and heart to the outside' (ibid., pp. 26–27). This is not about retreating inward in isolation but about deepening moral perception through one's embeddedness in the world. In Mencian terms, these 'subtle manifestations' can be understood as the innate moral seeds—compassion, shame, reverence, and a sense of right and wrong—that each person possesses. These must be cultivated into their corresponding virtues—*rén* (consummate conduct), *yì* (appropriateness), *lǐ* (ritual propriety), and *zhì* (living wisely)—to fully realise one's personhood. This view differs from certain strands of Western moral theory that prioritise abstract reason or impersonal rules; by contrast, the Confucian approach anchors moral growth in lived experience, affective resonance, and social interaction. Mencius emphasises the importance of beginning with the family: 'to embrace everything within the four seas'<sup>42</sup>, one must first perfect kindness within the household. Without this grounding, 'people would not even be able to care for their parents' (*Mencius*, 2A6).

For Tu, then, *zhōng* (centrality) is not merely an emotional balance but a state of being that reflects the central harmony of Heaven and Earth. When embodied, this inner condition results in:

a state of mind wherein one is absolutely unperturbed by outside forces. But it is more than a psychological concept of equilibrium since it is not so much an achieved ideal as a given reality... Accordingly, man becomes united with heaven and earth by the centrality inherent in each human being (1989, p. 20).

Tu further clarifies that *zhōng* should be understood as 'an ontological condition rather than a mental state of quiescence'. It applies specifically to that inner state 'before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused' (ibid.). This interpretation, however, raises a legitimate

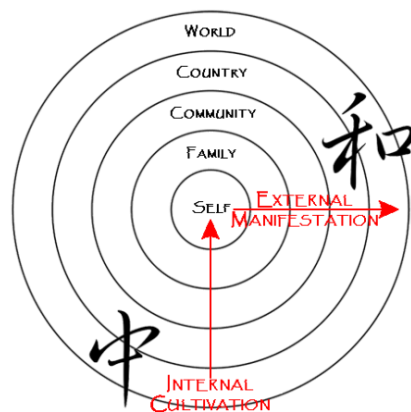
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<sup>42</sup> By the term the four seas, the ancient Chinese referred to the entire human habited land (world).

concern—one that May Sim brings to the fore. Is it ever realistically possible to attain such a pure state prior to emotional arousal? Sim argues that:

one can never be completely devoid of feelings [and...] it is contrary to their constant attempts to act appropriately in various situations. To try to attune one's acts to one's situations is to be affected by various feelings, and to order them well is the human achievement of *hé* rather than the total absence or negation of all feelings (2004, p. 257 footnote.5).<sup>43</sup>

In light of this, Sim proposes a more grounded interpretation: *zhōng* should be seen as 'a norm that regulates our feelings and all under heaven so that they become a harmony that is a full, relational likeness of the original empty equilibrium'. She emphasises that it is a 'given reality'—an ontological priority that underlies and regulates all of existence (ibid.). Thus, centrality becomes an attainable equilibrium, cultivated through the realisation of the cardinal Confucian virtues. In this way, *hé* (harmony) is the external expression of *zhōng*, achieved 'when the aroused feelings "each and all attain due measure and degree"' (Tu, 1989, p. 20).



The outward manifestation of one's cultivated inner being is what Tu refers to as 'commonality' (*yōng*). Once regulated, it leads to harmony and is what Ames and Hall call 'the familiar affairs of the day' (2001, p. 66).

The *Zhongyong* thus insists that although the Way of the *jūnzǐ* is vast and often hidden, it is ultimately 'verifiable', because it is enacted in the ordinary practices of everyday life—caring for one's family, helping friends, and fulfilling social roles (*Zhongyong* 12, ibid., p. 13). However, few are able to do this consistently or conscientiously—let alone achieve what Tu describes as the ability to 'creatively transform the existing world and formulate an ultimate order of existence which is powerful and pervasive enough to become a defining characteristic of human heritage' (1989, p. 32). There is, therefore, both a difference in degree and in kind between the *jūnzǐ* and the ordinary person. The *jūnzǐ* embodies the human lifeway so thoroughly that it is visible even in the smallest gestures—how she eats, speaks, or greets others. In this sense, she acts as a moral exemplar: her actions reflect the harmonious truths she has internalised through cultivation.

<sup>43</sup> See for instance *Zhongyong*, 27.6 for the *jūnzǐ*'s constant striving for self-improvement and 27.7 for his appropriate actions in various situations.

Nevertheless, the *jūnzǐ*, as a person fundamentally constituted by relationships, still requires the presence of others to attain full self-knowledge. Often, others are better able to discern our flaws than we are. This reflects a recognition of human fallibility. Yet, due to her inner discipline, the *jūnzǐ* always begins by looking within herself for fault and never blames others for her shortcomings. As Confucius analogises in the *Zhongyong*: ‘As in archery, so in the conduct of the exemplary person: In failing to hit the bull’s-eye, look for the reason within oneself’ (*Zhongyong* 14; Ames & Hall, 2001, p. 95). Such integrity demands truthfulness with oneself, but not as an isolated act of introspection. Rather, it is through the creative process of *chéng* 诚—understood not merely as sincerity or authenticity, but as the integrative alignment of thought, word, and deed within relationships—that the *jūnzǐ* approaches the state of *zhōngyōng* which is the subject of the next discussion.

### 3.4 Sincerity and Self-Realisation: *Chéng* 诚 in the *Zhōngyōng*

Sincerity [*chéng* 诚] is the Way of Heaven [天之道] To think how to be sincere is the Way of man [人之道]. He who is sincere is one who hits upon what is right without effort and apprehends without thinking. He is naturally and easily in harmony with the Way. Such a man is a sage [*shengren* 圣人]. He who tries to be sincere is one who chooses the good and holds fast to it (*Zhongyong* XX:18, Tu, 1989, p. 73).

The *Zhongyong* conceives the *jūnzǐ* as one who embodies *chéng*, a term often translated as ‘sincerity’, ‘integrity’, ‘creativity’, or being ‘true’ to one’s *tiān*-endowed nature. Each of these terms captures a dimension of its meaning.<sup>44</sup> In the passage above, *chéng* is described as not only the foundation of self-knowledge but also as the very ground of one’s identification with Heaven (Tu, 1989, p. 72). As Wing-tsit Chan also affirms, *chéng* ‘brings man and Heaven together’ (1969, p. 96). Through a deepening understanding of the self, the *jūnzǐ* comes to perceive and actualise her *tiān*-endowed nature. She does this not through passive introspection but through living in accordance with *chéng*, in line with Mencius’ assertion:

For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven (*Mencius*, VIIA.1, 2004, p. 145).

Achieving this kind of self-realisation demands sustained effort, both in learning and in ethical practice. Confucius’ disciple Yan Hui exemplifies this commitment—despite his extreme poverty,

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<sup>44</sup> For an in depth discussion of *chéng*’s meaning see Hall and Ames (2001, pp. 61–63); Ames (2021, pp. 11–15), chapter 4 of Tu Weiming’s *Centrality and Commonality*; and Wenyu Xie (2011, 2012).

he perseveres in his pursuit of *dào* through a love of learning. This 'learning' is not academic interest, but moral refinement—similar to the way Mencius praises the sage-king Shun:

When Shun lived in the depth of the mountain, he lived amongst trees and stones, and had as friends deer and pigs. The difference between him and the uncultivated man of the mountain was slight. But when he learned a single good word, witnessed a single good deed, it was like water causing a breach in the dykes of the Yangtse or the Yellow River. Nothing could withstand it (ibid., VIIA:16, p. 148).

To be *chéng* is to be true to oneself, yet this 'self' is dynamic, evolving through moral effort. As Xie Wenyu explains, *chéng* reflects a tension between 'the natural good and the idea of good' (2011, p. 502). The natural good is endowed by *Tiān* and is absolute; the idea of good is shaped through human experience and may evolve over a lifetime. Thus, the *jūnzǐ* is one who can refine the idea of the good through self-cultivation (ibid.). This dynamic process explains Chan's assertion that *chéng* is not simply a mental state, but 'an active force that is always transforming things and completing things, and drawing man and Heaven together in the same current' (1969, p. 96).

The *Zhongyong* (XX:12-21) acknowledges that this state is not equally accessible to all. Some individuals require 'a thousand efforts', while others may succeed 'by one effort' (Tu, 1989, pp. 73–74). People vary in their moral awareness and capacity for cultivation (XX:9), but ultimately, 'when knowledge is acquired, it comes to the same thing, and when the achievement is made, it comes to the same thing' (ibid., XXI, pp. 74–75). Education, therefore, becomes essential:

given sincerity [*chéng*], there will be enlightenment, and given enlightenment, there will be sincerity. [Nevertheless,] It is due to education that sincerity results from enlightenment (ibid., XXI, p. 74).

From the *Analects* and *Zhongyong*, the *jūnzǐ* may be characterised thus:

- Princely, a leader in service of the people.
- Noble and refined, akin to the ideal of a gentleman, but grounded in ethical excellence and virtue.
- Fallible, aware of her own imperfections and committed to self-improvement and that of others.

To embody these traits, the *jūnzǐ* must be in a state of *zhōngyōng*—able to look within without self-deception, to cultivate her inner self. But this in turn requires *chéng*—being true to one's Heaven-

endowed nature through persistent learning and practice. Only then can one manifest ‘right’ conduct: excelling in one’s ordinary roles and relationships.

Having now established the foundational characteristics and dispositions of the *jūnzǐ*, we turn next to a closer examination of the Five Constant Virtues (*wǔ cháng* 五常) that she must embody and enact. These are: *rén* 仁 (consummate conduct), *yì* 義 (appropriateness), *lǐ* 禮 (ritual propriety), *zhì* 智 (living wisely), and *xìn* 信 (making good on one’s word). Taken together, they form the ethical substance of the *jūnzǐ* and serve as the guiding compass of Confucian self-cultivation.

### 3.5 The Five Constant Virtues and the *Jūnzǐ*

#### 3.5.1 *Rén* 仁: The Heart of Confucian Ethics

Among the Five Constant Virtues (*wǔ cháng* 五常) that structure the Confucian moral universe, *rén* 仁 occupies the central and animating position. It is both the root and the lifeblood of ethical life in the Confucian tradition. The *Analects* references *rén* more than one hundred times, indicating its prominence not only as a virtue but as the guiding principle of moral cultivation (Slingerland, 2003, p. 9). Tu Weiming (1985, p. 52) identifies *rén* as the most fundamental value in Confucian ethics—indeed, as the *telos* of the human person. And yet, despite its frequency and foundational role, the term resists a singular, definitive translation. Renderings such as ‘humane,’ ‘humaneness,’ and ‘humanity’; ‘good,’ ‘goodness’; ‘Man of Virtue’ and ‘Man-at-his-Best’; ‘benevolence,’ ‘perfect virtue’; and ‘authoritative’ and ‘authoritativeness’ while helpful, fall short of its full semantic and philosophical richness (Di Fiori & Rosemont, 2017, p. 98).<sup>45</sup> In truth, *rén* is less a trait to be possessed than a dynamic relational orientation—a cultivated responsiveness to others that grounds the ethical identity of the *jūnzǐ* (君子), the morally exemplary person at the heart of this thesis.

Hall and Ames (1987, pp. 115–116) capture this relational dynamic when they describe *rén* as ‘an integrative process’ through which one becomes ‘a profoundly relational person,’ attainable only ‘in a communal context through interpersonal exchange.’ Rather than an isolated inner feeling or disposition, *rén* is a relational achievement—a quality constituted through the roles and

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<sup>45</sup> For an exegesis of the evolution in *rén*’s meaning and interpretation see Wing-tsit Chan (1955) and (1975). See also Fiori and Ames (2017) analysis of *rén* in the *Analects*.

relationships a person inhabits. It is not reducible to acts of charity or abstract goodwill; it is expressed in how one attends to others, fulfils one's roles, and embodies moral presence in everyday life. Confucius himself declared that 'The gentleman [*jūnzǐ*] never deserts benevolence [*rén*], not even for as long as it takes to eat a meal' (*Analects* 4:5).<sup>46</sup> This vivid image signals the constancy and centrality of *rén*: it is not episodic or discretionary, but dispositional—an enduring orientation that informs the entire ethical comportment of the cultivated person.

To appreciate the philosophical weight of this reinterpretation, however, it is crucial to understand that *rén* did not originate with Confucius. The term appears in pre-Confucian texts such as the *Shījīng* 詩經 and the *Zuǒ Zhuàn* 左傳, where it primarily denoted the benevolent concern of a ruler for the wellbeing of his people. In these early contexts, *rén* was tied to hierarchical obligation and political benevolence rather than to a universally applicable ethical disposition. What makes Confucius' treatment of *rén* so significant is his *transformation of it into a general, all-encompassing moral virtue*. According to Wing-tsit Chan (1975), Confucius was the first Chinese thinker to develop *rén* as a *universal ethical ideal* from which all particular virtues could be derived. He elevated *rén* to the status of a *cardinal virtue*, one that shapes and gives meaning to the entire fabric of Confucian moral life (Chan, 1969, p. 107). Tu Weiming (1968, p. 31) echoes this insight, noting that Confucius did not simply promote *rén* as one virtue among many, but as the *integrative principle* through which all other ethical norms are harmonised and given purpose. In Confucius' hands, *rén* becomes the basis for self-cultivation, the measure of moral development, and the ethical thread running through every meaningful human relationship.

Etymologically, the character 仁 is composed of two parts: *rén* (人), meaning 'person,' and èr (二), meaning 'two.' This composition gestures toward the inherently relational nature of the virtue—*rén* is the ethical life of a person in relation to others. As Roger Ames (2021, pp. 163–164) observes, the graph encodes a relational ontology: to be human is to be with others. A more ancient form, found on the Guodian bamboo strips, combines the graph for the 'lived body' of a pregnant woman (*shēn* 身) with 'heartmind' (*xīn* 心), evoking the intimate, embodied resonance of mother and child. *Rén* is thus not mere benevolence or sentiment, but a cultivated, aesthetic responsiveness—an embodied presence shaped through sustained moral engagement. It is not a solitary personal trait, but a co-created achievement enacted through roles, rituals, and relationships. As As Tu Weiming (1985) and Di Fiori & Rosemont (2017) emphasise, there is no *rén* in isolation; it always arises in

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<sup>46</sup> It is for this reason that in the *Zhongyong* (I-105), that the *jūnzǐ* is urged to be ever-watchful of her actions, whether alone or in the company of others.

context, within the fabric of human relationships. This supports my broader argument that Confucian ethics is rooted not in autonomous individualism but in a relational conception of selfhood, wherein the moral subject is always embedded in networks of family, community, and ritual.

Confucius himself insists on the indispensability of *rén* for any ethical life worth living. In *Analects* 7.16, he declares, 'Wealth and rank attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds.' The implication is clear: external success, unanchored by *rén*, lacks moral value. In *Analects* 4.5, he asserts that the *jūnzǐ* does not depart from *rén*, not even for the span of a single meal. Such statements reveal not only the virtue's ethical gravity, but also its continuity and persistence—*rén* is not a momentary act of kindness but a steady moral disposition, cultivated through attentiveness, care, and responsibility. Seen from this perspective, *rén* cannot be reduced to compassion alone, nor to obedience, nor to a vague humanistic sentiment. It is the *moral heartbeat* of the Confucian vision of the good life—one that takes seriously the emotional, aesthetic, and ritual dimensions of ethical practice. It gives the other virtues their animating spirit: *lǐ* (禮, ritual propriety) becomes hollow without *rén* (仁, consummate conduct), *yì* (義, appropriateness) becomes rigid, *xìn* (信, making good one's word) becomes mechanical, and *zhì* (智, living wisely or practical wisdom) risks degenerating into mere, and even dangerously manipulative, cleverness. Thus, to understand Confucian moral life is to begin with *rén*—not because it is the first among equals, but because it infuses the entire ethical constellation with its vital, humanising force.

The moral vision of *rén* finds one of its most powerful and enduring formulations in the thought of Mencius, who extends Confucius' emphasis on relational care by grounding it in an anthropology of innate moral potential. In his famous analogy from *Mencius* 2A:6, he asks us to imagine *suddenly* witnessing a child teetering on the edge of a well. The spontaneous alarm and desire to rescue the child, he insists, is not the product of calculation, law, or instruction—it is an *unlearned* expression of compassion, evidence of the *cèyǐn zhī xīn* (惻隱之心), or 'heart of compassion.' For Mencius, this spontaneous affective response is not merely emotional—it is proto-ethical, the first stirring of the virtue of *rén*. This 'heart' is one of the four moral sprouts (*sìduān* 四端) that form the basis of Mencius' virtue ethics: *rén* begins with compassion, *yì* with a sense of shame, *lǐ* with deference, and *zhì* with discernment (*Mencius* 2A:6). These are not fully developed traits, but moral potentials embedded within our natural human propensities (*xìng*, 性), which require care, nourishment, and cultivation if they are to flourish. In this view, *rén* is both innate and aspirational. In this view, *rén* is

both innate and aspirational. It is not a fixed essence but a capacity—a seed that must be tended through education, reflection, and sustained ethical practice.

Tu Weiming's reading of Mencius offers a powerful account of moral development. Compassion is not merely a reflexive sentiment but the ethical seed of self-transformation—the starting point of what Confucius called 'learning for the sake of the self' (*xué wéi jǐ*, 學為己). This form of embodied learning reshapes the self through moral effort, not technical training or abstract theory. As Tu (2024, p. 153) puts it, this process cultivates a concrete, relational self—a 'dynamic center of relationships' responsive to others and the cosmos. *Rén*, in this view, is not achieved through intention alone but through situated action: how one speaks, listens, touches, corrects, and forgives. Its ethical depth lies in its developmental logic—it grows, falters, and can be forgotten. The moral deficit of the modern world lies not in a lack of moral potential, but in the erosion of the relational and reflective conditions that allow that potential to unfold. In some cultural and institutional contexts shaped by strategic self-interest, bureaucratic rationality, and emotional detachment, the responsiveness essential to *rén* may wither. For Mencius—as for Tu—moral education must begin early, not by imposing rules, but by cultivating sensibility over a lifetime.

Moreover, Mencius does not separate emotion from reason, nor feeling from action. The heart of compassion is *not opposed to moral judgement*, but its very foundation. It is not the case that we first think and then feel; rather, we feel and then learn to reflect upon that feeling, to extend it, to regulate it, and to express it appropriately in ritual and conduct. In this view, *rén* is both the beginning and the end of ethical life—it is the first moral awareness and the mature disposition that results from years of reflection, relationship, and refinement. This deeply relational view of virtue offers a corrective to certain modern assumptions about ethics as rule-based or self-referential. In Confucianism, the self does not become moral by abstracting from others, but by entering more fully into relationship—with parents, teachers, friends, and the community. The *jūnzǐ*, then, is not someone who simply feels more deeply, but someone who has made care a principle of life—someone whose responses have been cultivated into a habitual attentiveness to others and to the moral tone of each situation.

While Mencius provides the philosophical grounding for *rén* as innate moral potential, its ethical significance cannot be grasped solely at the level of emotion or sentiment. In the fully developed moral life of the *jūnzǐ*, *rén* is not a fleeting reaction but a cultivated presence—a manner of being that is expressed not only in dramatic moral choices but in the subtleties of everyday relationships. It is here that *rén* takes shape as both moral practice and ethical atmosphere, infused into speech,

posture, listening, timing, silence, and correction. The *jūnzǐ* does not simply possess *rén* as a static quality, but brings it forth in each encounter, shaping the relational field in ways that elevate, dignify, and attune. As David Hall and Roger Ames (1987, pp. 131–138) argue, Confucian ethics is grounded not in abstract rules but in *aesthetic* order—where moral excellence arises from harmonising one’s conduct with the relational and situational dynamics of life. In this view, *rén* is not simply about doing good, but about being attuned—sensing what is needed, what is fitting, what would allow the other person, or the situation itself, to unfold with grace and dignity. The *jūnzǐ* does not impose moral order but co-creates it through presence. This co-creation occurs within relationships that are already structured by roles and rituals, which provide the necessary framework for moral improvisation. *Rén*, therefore, is not in conflict with *lǐ* (ritual propriety); it is what animates *lǐ*, what prevents it from collapsing into cold formality.

This study engages with the tension by examining how certain strands of modern ethical discourse tend to separate emotion from practice, and care from structure. In contrast, Confucian ethics offers a different perspective, suggesting that *rén* can be understood as ritualised feeling—emotion shaped into appropriate conduct, not suppressed but refined through sustained moral cultivation. This understanding is echoed in the work of Tu Weiming, who emphasises that *rén* finds its fullest expression not in rare acts of charity or heroism, but in the disciplined care expressed through relational roles. For Tu, *rén* is not an abstract sentiment but a cultivated moral presence—actualised through patterned conduct and embedded within the structured practices of everyday life, or *lǐ* (1968, pp. 30–35). These roles are not external constraints but the very spaces in which the moral self takes shape. In this regard, Confucian *rén* bears a striking resemblance to what Iris Murdoch, writing from a Platonic perspective in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), calls ‘moral attention’—the disciplined, loving regard for the other that resists abstraction and self-interest. For Murdoch, moral vision is not primarily about choice or rules, but about how we see: ‘I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of ‘see’, which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort’ (Murdoch, 1970, p. 37). Like the Confucian *jūnzǐ*, the morally developed person is one who has trained herself to attend to others with care and seriousness. This seeing is not passive; it is an ethical act—one that requires the displacement of the ego. As Murdoch puts it, ‘Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real’ (1959, p. 51), and ‘the enemy of morality is the fat relentless ego’ (1970, p. 52). This effort to *unself*—to decentre one’s own interests in favour of a truthful regard for the other—resonates with the Confucian ideal of *rén* as a cultivated responsiveness that emerges in everyday relationships. While Murdoch does not ground this moral attention in ritual or role-specific duties, as Confucianism does, she similarly insists that goodness is revealed in how we perceive and

respond to what is near. It is not displayed in dramatic moral performances but in what we might call the small acts of attention, just discernment, and humble love that shape moral life.

Moreover, *rén* is not merely reactive or sentimental. It has a quiet assertiveness to it—a willingness to engage, to correct, to hold space when needed. The *jūnzǐ* does not withdraw into moral quietism but participates, adjusts, and responds in accordance with the evolving demands of the situation. This is what makes *rén* not just a virtue of warmth, but a virtue of discernment and courage. To live with *rén* is not simply to feel for others but to bear the weight of relationship—to take responsibility for nurturing harmony even when it is inconvenient, difficult, or unrewarded. This atmosphere of care is most visible not in grand gestures but in the small acts that define one's everyday conduct. A respectful tone in a disagreement, the choice to listen rather than assert, the habit of remembering what matters to others—these are not minor details in Confucian ethics; they are the *substance of moral life*. *Rén*, then, is less about isolated acts of goodness than about the shaping of character into a consistent mode of responsiveness. The *jūnzǐ* does not simply feel or know what is right—she *embodies it in her presence*, turning moral potential into moral reality, day by day. In the context of contemporary moral life—marked by institutional distrust, individual alienation, and the erosion of meaningful social bonds—the Confucian virtue of *rén* offers both a critique and a hopeful alternative. We inhabit a moral landscape increasingly shaped by performativity rather than *praxis*—where virtue is signalled through symbolic gestures yet seldom integrated into sustained ethical life. In such a climate, ethical deliberation is frequently subordinated to strategic positioning, as seen in PR-driven apologies, performative allyship, and policy gestures calibrated more for optics than conviction. In such a paradigm, *rén* challenges the dominant narratives by proposing a vision of ethical life grounded not in rule-based abstraction or self-protective autonomy, but in *relational presence, emotional attunement, and moral responsibility*. What makes *rén* so striking in this regard is its refusal to isolate the self from others. It does not allow for moral identity without relational embeddedness.

To be humane, in the Confucian sense, is not merely to 'do good things' but to *be a certain kind of person*—a person whose conduct is shaped by love, responsibility, and attention to the particular needs of others. In this sense, *rén* directly resists the liberal ideal of the sovereign, self-contained individual. Instead, it proposes the relational self, a self that emerges not in separation but in connection, not in freedom from others but in freedom *with* and *for* others. Tu Weiming characterises Confucianism as a profoundly humanistic tradition—one that seeks not salvation through transcendence, but the full realisation of humanity within the fabric of social life. In his view, *rén* must be actualised 'in a given social condition' and embodied through conduct shaped by *lǐ*,

the norms of everyday propriety (1968, p. 35). This moral effort is not abstract or otherworldly; it is, as Tu suggests, a spiritual exercise grounded in relational roles and lived situations. In this way, *rén* serves as an implicit critique of both moral legalism and moral performativity. Against legalism, it refuses to reduce ethics to codified prescriptions, insisting instead on the primacy of *judgement, empathy, and context*. Against performativity, it refuses the temptation of moral theatre, calling instead for authenticity, humility, and sustained relational presence. It invites us to think of morality not as a currency to be displayed or exchanged, but as a quiet, continuous act of becoming—becoming attentive, becoming responsible, becoming trustworthy.

This approach to moral becoming is what defines the *jūnzǐ*. She is not the most clever, nor the most powerful, but the most consistent in care. Her greatness lies not in mastery but in *depth of relation*. She is *princely* not because of birth or title, but because of the moral dignity she brings into every role she inhabits—daughter, teacher, friend, citizen. In this, the *jūnzǐ* embodies the highest expression of *rén*: she turns ordinary human relationships into the site of moral transformation.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.5.2 *Lǐ* 禮: Ritual Propriety and the Embodied Moral Grammar

While *rén* provides the affective and moral centre of Confucian ethical life—the deep capacity to respond to others with compassion, presence, and attentiveness—it cannot alone determine how one ought to act in specific situations. Moral feeling, if left without structure, risks becoming impulsive or misdirected. This is where *lǐ* becomes indispensable. If *rén* is the inward wellspring of virtue, then *lǐ* is its outward form—the cultivated grammar through which ethical intent is expressed,

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<sup>47</sup> The *jūnzǐ* can be sharply contrasted with Aristotle's *megalopsuchos* ('great-souled man'), who, as Jacob Howland notes, is 'characterised by heroic, or godlike virtue, which finds its fullest expression ... in a deed whereby the whole community is saved' (2002, p. 32). In *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094b8–12), Aristotle emphasises that the greatest end of the virtuous person is the good of the polis, suggesting a civic and honour-bound conception of virtue. In contrast, the *jūnzǐ* embodies a moral ideal that is inward-looking and relational rather than political or heroic. One becomes a *jūnzǐ* not through greatness or recognition but by cultivating *rén* (humaneness) and *lǐ* (ritual propriety) in everyday conduct—fulfilling one's roles as child, friend, official, or citizen with integrity. There is nothing godlike or exceptional in this trajectory; his virtue is fully human and accessible. The *jūnzǐ* also stands apart from Aristotle's *phronimos*, the practically wise person. According to Rosalind Hursthouse, the *phronimos* is not a rule-follower but someone with a refined grasp of morally salient features, who perceives what is important, noble, or necessary in a given situation and thereby reaches the right decision—not by applying general rules, but through perceptive understanding grounded in virtue (2011, pp. 44–45). For Aristotle, the *phronimos* exemplifies the unity of moral and intellectual virtue, such that practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is inseparable from a virtuous character (NE 1144b–1145a). Yet, as Hursthouse and Nafsika Athanassoulis both emphasise, this figure is difficult to emulate: the *phronimos*'s perceptual skill and emotional harmony are precisely what the learner lacks (Athanassoulis, 2024, pp. 133–135; Hursthouse, 2011, pp. 42–54). Moral learners cannot simply imitate the *phronimos*, because they do not share their perspective; moral understanding, for Aristotle, must be grasped 'from the inside out.' By contrast, the *jūnzǐ* offers a more accessible moral model—he teaches not through exceptional insight but through visible, repeatable practice in human relationships. Where the *megalopsuchos* dazzles with grand public virtue and the *phronimos* commands respect through moral precision, the *jūnzǐ* quietly shapes the world through self-cultivation and relational harmony.

refined, and realised. The *jūnzǐ*, therefore, does not simply feel rightly but acts fittingly, allowing moral sensibility to find concrete expression through ritualised conduct. Confucian ethics is not spontaneous or abstract; it is patterned and embodied, unfolding within the structures of practice, role, and relationship. *Lǐ* ensures that the moral life of the *jūnzǐ* becomes visible, not in grand gestures, but in the everyday details of comportment, tone, and timing. In this way, *rén* and *lǐ* are mutually sustaining: *rén* animates *lǐ*, giving it depth and sincerity, while *lǐ* gives *rén* shape and clarity, preventing it from dissolving into sentimentality. It is through this lens that *lǐ* (禮)—often the most misunderstood of the Five Constant Virtues—must be approached. Frequently translated as ‘ritual,’ ‘ritual propriety,’ or ‘etiquette,’ the term encompasses far more than ceremonial observance or social polish. In classical Confucian thought, *lǐ* refers to the patterned forms of conduct that structure moral life itself: not only formal rites such as ancestral offerings and funerals, but also the seemingly mundane acts of daily life—greetings, gestures, manners of speech, and physical bearing.<sup>48</sup> *Lǐ* operates simultaneously as a normative framework and a *performative art*: it guides outward behaviour while shaping inward disposition, forming the medium through which moral cultivation becomes socially intelligible and emotionally resonant.

Confucius considered *lǐ* essential to the cultivation of virtue and the maintenance of social harmony. He warns: ‘Unless a man has the spirit of the rites, in being respectful he will wear himself out, in being careful he will become timid, in having courage he will become unruly, and in being forthright he will become intolerant’ (*Analects* 8.2). That is, without the grounding and refinement that *lǐ* provides, even seemingly good qualities can become distorted. *Lǐ* is what enables virtue to appear not only as good, but as good *in form*—rhythmic, measured, attuned to context. In this sense, *lǐ* is not just an outer shell of morality but its embodied structure, its moral aesthetic, and its relational grammar. This expansive understanding of *lǐ* is central to Tu Weiming’s interpretation. He describes *lǐ* as a dynamic process of self-transformation that links the individual to familial, social, political, and even cosmic orders—not through coercion or rigid conformity, but through relational harmony cultivated over time (Tu, 1972).

Tu emphasises that *lǐ* enables the self to ‘tune’ its intentions and actions to the rhythms of its environment. This vision evokes what might be described as a kind of ethical choreography—a

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<sup>48</sup> On this point, one might compare Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘forms of life,’ in which meaning arises not from isolated statements but from embedded social practices. Similarly, *lǐ* gains moral and emotional significance only within the lived patterns of ritual life. This comparison is not to conflate traditions, but to resist reading Confucian ritual as exotic or archaic.

patterned responsiveness that integrates moral form with relational depth. Thus, *lǐ* is not merely about following tradition; it is about participating in a dynamic moral ecology, where ethical action is ritualised and ritual performance is morally transformative. Rather than being imposed from outside, *lǐ* is internalised over time through repetition, correction, and reflection. It is not a static code but a living tradition, one that both shapes and is shaped by the *jūnzǐ*, whose ethical development it scaffolds. As such, *lǐ* must be approached not only as a formal structure but as a dynamic pedagogy—a curriculum of the self. Through the study and performance of *lǐ*, the self is slowly refined: its impulses ordered, its attention focused, its relationships deepened. And crucially, all of this is done in relationship to *rén*—for without *rén*, *lǐ* becomes rigid, performative, or hollow.

Having defined *lǐ* as the ritual grammar of Confucian ethics—a system of forms that express, cultivate, and sustain relational virtue—we can now turn to its deeper pedagogical and aesthetic dimensions. In the Confucian worldview, moral cultivation is not a purely cognitive exercise, nor is it reducible to rule-following. It is instead a matter of embodied habituation, in which one learns to act with moral grace by internalising forms that initially stand outside oneself. This is why *lǐ* plays such a pivotal role in the development of the *jūnzǐ*: it trains the whole person—body, emotion, attention, and intention—in the art of being human. Yet the depth of this training depends on more than form alone; without an animating moral sensibility, even the most refined ritual risks becoming empty. To avoid this danger, *lǐ* must be infused with *rén*, the ethical substance that grants ritual its humanising force. Without it, Tu Weiming warns, ritual becomes ‘empty formalism’ or ‘social coercion’ (Tu, 1968, p. 37)—like carving against the grain. Rather than passive form, *lǐ* is ‘a dialectical path through which man becomes more human’ (1972, p. 197), externalising *chéng* (誠, sincerity) through shared practice. One ‘cannot become truly human without... ritualization,’ which in this context means humanisation (ibid., p. 198). Tu describes the Confucian ideal of *dàtóng* (大同, great harmony)<sup>49</sup> as ‘the highest attainment of human culture’ (ibid., p. 199), showing how *lǐ* functions not merely as social convention, but as a medium of ethical cultivation and civilisational continuity.

The capacity to perform *lǐ* with grace and authenticity must be cultivated through repetition and refinement. From childhood onward, individuals are enculturated into a world of rituals—familial,

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<sup>49</sup> *Dàtóng* (大同) — the Confucian ideal of ‘great harmony’ or ‘grand unity,’ a utopian social order described in the *Lǐjì* in which virtuous governance, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive care for all—especially the vulnerable—are sustained through *lǐ* as a medium of ethical cultivation and civilisational continuity.

seasonal, social—that teach not only how to act, but how to feel. As Herbert Fingarette (1972/1998) argues, *lǐ* instils ‘a sense of the fitting’ through embodied practice. The performance of *lǐ* teaches one to anticipate others, to move in rhythm with communal life, and to respond with aesthetic and emotional nuance. It fosters a relational sensibility—what we might call ethical tact—that cannot be acquired by theory alone. This ethical tact is crucial for the Confucian project of self-cultivation. As previously noted, the self in Confucianism is not a pre-given substance but a relational project—a being-in-form whose moral substance emerges through the performance of roles. In this process, *lǐ* serves as both a mirror and a mould. It reflects the self’s current level of refinement and simultaneously shapes it toward the ideal. As Hall and Ames (1987) argue, Confucian ethics is *processual* and *relational*—grounded in lived roles, cultivated through *lǐ* as a performative medium, and shaped not by static rules but through the *jūnzǐ*’s responsive enactment of value. Moral coherence, in this view, is forged through ritual participation and contextual judgment, not imposed from above.

Rather than unfolding in a linear or uniform way, moral development in the Confucian tradition is gradual and affective. One may begin by imitating the motions of *lǐ* without fully grasping their significance. But over time, through repeated enactment, emotional resonance begins to build. Rituals once performed out of duty come to feel meaningful; gestures once mechanical become authentic. As ‘the crystallization of historical experience’ (Tu, 1972, p. 196), *lǐ* transmits ethical sensibility across generations. Through ritual, we remember our ancestors, honour our elders, and prepare the moral ground for future generations. It is through these acts of recognition and reciprocity that the Confucian cosmos is sustained. Thus, *lǐ* functions not only as moral education but as civilisational memory—a symbolic ecology that binds past, present, and future in a shared moral fabric.

Despite its educative power, *lǐ* is not invulnerable. Like any form, it is susceptible to distortion—especially when divorced from the animating spirit of *chéng* (誠), often translated as sincerity, integrity, or genuineness. For Confucius, and even more pointedly in the *Zhongyong*, *chéng* is the inner flame that prevents ritual from degenerating into empty performance. The practice of *lǐ* must never become mechanical; its efficacy lies not simply in external correctness, but in the moral quality of the performer’s presence. Without *chéng*, even the most beautifully executed ritual risks becoming aesthetic without ethical substance—a performance of form without sincerity. Tu Weiming warns that the Confucian vision of *lǐ* is never reducible to etiquette or social grace. Its force lies in the fusion of inner intention and outer form—action that expresses not mere conformity

but a felt commitment to the relational and cosmic order. Seen in this light, *chéng* becomes the existential axis of *lǐ*: one does not bow simply because one should, but because the act embodies genuine respect, humility, or grief. It is sincerity, not spectacle, that gives ritual its ethical soul. *Lǐ*, then, becomes a practice of presence—a discipline of attentiveness and grounded responsiveness. In an age of distraction and performance, this quality is radical. The *jūnzǐ* does not enact ritual to be seen or to comply, but to maintain ethical alignment: to stay rooted in relationship, embody gratitude, and honour the rhythms of life and death. Such acts are not empty formalities but exercises in moral attunement—sharpening perception, deepening emotion, and anchoring the self in meaning.

Fingarette (1972/1998) offers a compelling image here: he describes *lǐ* as a ‘social magic’ through which the world is transfigured—not by supernatural means, but through the ritualised intentionality of human beings. When enacted with *chéng*, a bow can restore trust, a funeral can sanctify grief, and a meal can convey reverence. Consider, for instance, the ritual of classroom discussion where students wait their turn to speak, address peers and teachers with respectful language, and listen attentively. When practised with sincerity, these conventions are not mere procedural rules—they create a space of mutual recognition and intellectual humility, allowing dialogue to unfold as a shared moral activity rather than a contest of opinions. These acts are not mystical in a theological sense, but sacramental in the Confucian sense: they reveal the sacred in the ordinary. They manifest a world in which relationships are not assumed but continually brought into being through ethical performance. The danger, of course, lies in ritual degenerating into rote repetition—form stripped of meaning. Confucius himself was acutely aware of this, warning in the *Analects* 8.2 that respectfulness without *lǐ* becomes tiresome, and caution without *lǐ* becomes timidity. Ritual is not a brake on emotion, but its ethical vessel; if employed mindlessly, it risks cracking under the weight of hypocrisy.

Tu Weiming diagnoses modern life as suffering from ritual erosion: we no longer know how to mourn, mark transitions, or express gratitude with meaning. What remains are often hyper-individualised habits or bureaucratised performances—rituals of the self or of institutions, frequently estranged from relational depth. As Tu (2024) notes, this ritual disintegration parallels a broader moral crisis in which the practices that once embedded us in community have frayed. For Confucianism, the remedy lies in *xué wéi jǐ* (學為己)—learning for the sake of the self—a form of embodied learning rooted in our shared humanity (2024, pp. 147–152). Like mastering an instrument, moral cultivation requires attunement to the rhythms of relational life. To perform *lǐ* with *chéng* is not to follow custom mechanically, but to inhabit form until it becomes expressive of

sincerity, reverence, and care. In an age of irony and strategic self-presentation, such embodiment is itself a moral act. It realises what Confucius called ‘rectifying the self’ (*zhèng shēn*, 正身): aligning who we are with how we live.

To grasp the full significance of *lǐ*, we must see it not only as a medium of personal cultivation, but as a foundation for communal and political life. *Lǐ* is more than habit; it is conceived within Confucianism as the cultural infrastructure of relational ethics—the connective tissue binding families, communities, and states. If *rén* is the heartbeat of Confucianism, *lǐ* is its circulation system: it channels virtue outward, sustains ethical awareness, and supports harmony across the social body. Confucius lived during a time of fragmentation—when the Zhou rites were losing authority and public trust was declining—and called not for nostalgia, but for the reinvigoration of ritual as a transformative ethic. His aim was not to preserve form for its own sake, but to infuse it with moral vitality. This required not just sincerity, but also discernment—and here the virtue of *zhì* (living wisely) becomes essential.

In Tu Weiming’s Confucian humanism, *lǐ* is not merely a social form but a medium of embodied moral cultivation. Yet its transformative potential depends on the integrity of the practitioner. When *lǐ* is severed from *rén*, *chéng*, or *zhì*, it can become rigid or alienating. The *jūnzǐ* must therefore internalise not only the structure of *lǐ*, but its spirit, limits, and moral ends. Tu warns that without a living ritual consciousness—what he calls *tǐ zhī* (體知, embodied knowing)—societies risk drifting into either atomised individualism or institutional sterility. In neoliberal contexts where performativity often replaces integrity, Confucianism offers a quiet resistance: ethics enacted through sincere, embodied practice. Properly lived, *lǐ* becomes a moral memory—a way of rehumanising interaction, slowing time, and reconnecting us to tradition as a source of ethical possibility.

Confucian *lǐ* also challenges modern liberal notions of personhood. Where liberalism centres the autonomous individual, Confucianism begins with the relational self—not as a denial of freedom, but as its condition. Participating in *lǐ* teaches that freedom is not the absence of form, but ethical creativity within form. The *jūnzǐ* is not unbound but well-formed; their moral presence is not imposed, but cultivated. As Tu Weiming writes, the Confucian person is ‘never an isolated individual but a dynamic center of relationships’ (ibid., p. 153). The predicament sometimes facing the modern self—its alienation, fragmentation, and anxiety—is not merely psychological but ritual: a loss of the forms and rhythms through which ethical life is enacted. Even when *lǐ* is guided by *rén* and infused with *chéng*, it must still be tempered by moral discernment: *yì* moral appropriateness. Not every

ritual suits every context; not all forms promote justice. The *jūnzǐ* must discern when *lǐ* fosters harmony and when it calcifies. *Yì* ensures that *lǐ* remains a living, responsive practice—one capable of evolving without losing its moral core. It is to *yì*, this discerning eye of ethical appropriateness, that we now turn.

### 3.5.3 *Yì* 義: Appropriateness and Discerning Moral Sense

If *rén* is the humane pulse of Confucian ethics, and *lǐ* its cultivated rhythm, then *yì* (義) is its moral compass—the capacity to discern what is fitting, right, appropriate, and ethically responsive in a given situation. Though commonly translated as ‘righteousness,’ ‘justice,’ or ‘duty,’ these English equivalents often obscure the distinct texture of *yì* in the Confucian moral vision. Unlike some conceptions of ‘justice’ in Western liberal traditions, which may denote fairness through impartial application of rules, or ‘duty’ in Kantian deontology, which emphasises obedience to universal maxims, *yì* is rooted in context-sensitive moral discernment. It does not arise from the application of fixed principles but from the cultivated ability to perceive what is *appropriate* within the particular relational and situational web of human life. In this sense, *yì* is the virtue that allows the *jūnzǐ* to judge wisely—not simply what is technically correct or socially expected, but what is *morally fitting*. It is a virtue attuned to the complexities of lived roles, emotional nuance, and timing. Confucius famously underscores this point in *Analects* 4:16: ‘The gentleman understands *yì*; the petty person understands profit.’ The contrast here is not merely between morality and greed, but between two modes of reasoning—one grounded in relational discernment, the other in instrumental calculation. The *jūnzǐ* is not governed by expedience or convention but by an inner sense of integrity: a cultivated sensibility that seeks to honour the situation, the person, and the moral stakes of each decision.

The character 義 itself reflects this layered significance. Composed of the radicals for ‘sheep’ (羊), often associated with harmony and sacrificial offering, and ‘I’ (我), denoting the self, it gestures toward an ethical alignment of the self with the moral good. *Yì*, in this etymological framing, is not about denying the self, but about harmonising it with what is appropriate and worthy. To act in accordance with *yì* is not merely to follow a rule or fulfil a role, but to bring the whole self into alignment with the *appropriate* action—with sincerity, care, and grounded moral intelligence. *Yì* also functions as a kind of ethical filter for the other virtues. Where *rén* inclines one toward compassionate concern, and *lǐ* toward ritual propriety in one’s roles and relationships, it is *yì* that ensures these impulses are not misapplied. It tempers sentimentality, prevents rigidity, and guards

against moral misjudgement. Without *yì*, *rén* can devolve into indulgent leniency, *lǐ* into hollow formalism, and *xìn* (making good on one's word) into blind loyalty. This danger is exemplified in the figure of the 'village worthy' (*xiāng yuán* 鄉原), whom Confucius calls a 'thief of virtue' (*Analects* 17.13) and whom Mencius criticises as someone who appears irreproachable yet lacks genuine moral direction (*Mencius* VII B37). As Winnie Sung (2016) observes, the *village worthy* represents 'appearance-only hypocrisy': a superficial conformity to social norms that mimics virtue while lacking the discerning core of *yì*. Consider the bureaucrat who always follows protocol, speaks in measured tones, and avoids controversy—but does so not out of moral conviction, but to preserve reputation and social standing. Such a person may never offend, but neither will they intervene when injustice arises, especially if doing so threatens their status. They embody propriety without principle—ritual without righteousness. In such figures, ethical life risks being reduced to performance, not principle. *Yì* clarifies, calibrates, and refines. It is the virtue that allows the *jūnzǐ* to move between roles and obligations without losing their ethical orientation—serving not only as a moral compass, but as a virtue of balance and proportion. In this way, *yì* does not compete with *rén* and *lǐ*; it perfects them.

While Confucius lays the foundation for understanding *yì* as the virtue of appropriate moral discernment, it is in the writings of Mencius that *yì* acquires a deeper psychological and developmental richness. For Mencius, *yì* is not merely the product of rational calculation or cultural instruction, but an innate moral tendency—a seed of virtue present in all human beings. He names this seed the 'heart that knows shame' (*xiūwù zhī xīn* 羞惡之心), one of the four moral sprouts (*sìduān* 四端) that define our ethical potential. These sprouts are: *rén*, rooted in compassion; *yì*, in moral aversion and dignity; *lǐ*, in respect and deference; and *zhì*, in discernment and understanding.

The sprouts are not fully formed virtues, but incipient emotional responses—natural inclinations that, if cultivated, can blossom into a refined and stable moral character. Like the germination of a seed, their growth depends upon nourishment: reflection, education, habit, and moral attention. In this context, *yì* is understood not as a rule-following faculty but as a visceral sense of what one must not do—a refusal that arises from a felt recognition of moral limits. It is the intuitive recoil from disgraceful or dishonourable conduct, even when such conduct may offer material gain or social reward. Mencius illustrates this vividly in a well-known passage (2004, p. 6A:10), in which he describes a person who, though starving, would feel ashamed to accept food from a neighbour who offers it with contempt. The shame here is not a mark of pride or vanity, but a sign of moral dignity—

the deep recognition that certain compromises cannot be made without ethical cost. This response, according to Mencius, is a natural expression of *yì*: a refusal grounded not in ideology or calculation, but in an embodied awareness that to accept certain conditions would be to violate one's moral self. Such moments of refusal are not incidental in Confucian ethics—they are formative. They mark the emergence of moral identity, the point at which a person begins to hold themselves to a standard that transcends appetite, fear, or social convenience. In this way, *yì* does not supplement *rén*, but fortifies it. Where *rén* draws us toward others in care, *yì* demands that we do so with moral clarity. It warns when compassion risks colluding with injustice, or when ritual obedience suppresses moral voice. Without *yì*, *rén* can become indulgent, and the moral life dangerously malleable.

Mencius' elevation of shame to this ethical status is especially striking when contrasted with certain contemporary interpretations of emotion as either irrational or repressive. In the Mencian framework, shame is not a pathology but a moral sensor—a cultivated affect that helps one stay oriented when rules are unclear or roles conflict. The *jūnzǐ*, in this view, is someone whose *yì* has matured beyond reactive discomfort into steady moral resolve: the intuitive, principled ability to say, 'This I cannot do,' even when no one is watching and no consequence is guaranteed. This moral stance brings Mencius into continuity with Confucius but also marks a significant development. He roots *yì* in the body, in affect, in pre-conceptual experience. And in doing so, he affirms a deeply Confucian insight: that ethics is not something we reason our way into from the outside, but something we grow into from within.

Having examined *yì* (appropriateness) as both a moral compass and an affective sprout of virtue, we now turn to its expression within the relational matrix of Confucian life. For Confucianism, ethical action is never abstract or universalised; it is always rooted in roles—daughter, friend, teacher, parent, minister—and each of these roles carries with it a unique set of expectations, responsibilities, and emotional tones. The *jūnzǐ* is not asked to follow rigid laws or detached principles, but to discern what is morally appropriate within the evolving dynamics of relationship. This is the heart of what Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames (2016) describe in *Confucian Role Ethics*. The self in Confucianism is not an autonomous individual who happens to have relationships, but a *relational being constituted by roles*. One is not a generic person with moral obligations to all, but a specific person enmeshed in concrete relationships that shape the very meaning of moral life. In such a framework, *yì* becomes the virtue of contextual judgement—the cultivated ability to understand what is required, fitting, and dignified within a given role, at a given time.

Crucially, *yì* protects this role-based system from collapsing into mere formalism or hierarchy. Without *yì*, role ethics could encourage passive conformity—subordinates obeying superiors, children obeying parents, ministers flattering rulers. But *yì* introduces a critical moral agency. It enables the *jūnzǐ* to question, to pause, to refuse—to act not just in accordance with role, but in accordance with what is right. What is *fitting* for a father may not be fitting for a minister; what is *appropriate* in friendship may be unjust in governance. *Yì* allows one to negotiate these tensions without abandoning the relational frame, ensuring that moral decisions remain grounded, flexible, and responsive. This interpretive flexibility is not merely theoretical; it is reflected in Confucius' own pedagogical and ritual practices. Confucius was not a rigid traditionalist. He adjusted ritual expectations in response to deeper ethical concerns and praised students who exercised independent judgement over those who merely followed precedent. When criticised for asking questions in the Grand Temple, he replied, 'The asking of questions is in itself the correct rite' (*Analects* 3.15), affirming that ritual should be guided by understanding, not rote performance. He also taught that 'it is better to err on the side of grief than on the side of formality' (*Analects* 3.4), valuing sincerity over ceremonial exactness. This principled flexibility, grounded in *yì*, deepens the Confucian understanding of ethical responsiveness. It is *yì* that turns *lǐ* into living form, *rén* into fitting action, and *xìn* (making good one's word) into credible discernment. The *jūnzǐ* does not navigate life through rigid codes or abstract calculation. She reads situations attentively—listening to tone, sensing timing, and discerning the subtle dynamics of power, role, and feeling. She does not rely on ready-made scripts but responds from a cultivated moral sensibility. Her actions are never arbitrary; they are responsive. And this responsiveness is not indecision—it is *yì* in motion: an attunement to the moral texture of lived roles. What emerges is a vision of ethical life that is neither rigidly rule-bound nor morally unanchored. *Yì* provides the balance between sincerity and structure, between inherited norms and present needs. It safeguards Confucian relationality from stagnation while ensuring that moral judgement remains human, situated, and ethically alive.

### 3.5.3.1 Zhōng 忠 and Shù 恕

To understand how *yì* operates within Confucian relational ethics, it is essential to consider *zhōng* (忠) and *shù* (恕)—two closely linked virtues that express *yì* (appropriateness) as both inward sincerity and outward perspective. They ensure that appropriate action remains humane: neither rigid nor abstract, but animated by commitment and care.

*Zhōng*, often translated as ‘loyalty’, is better understood as wholeheartedness or doing one’s utmost—a sincere, full-bodied engagement with one’s role. It implies that action is not merely correct in form, but rich in intention. As Cua puts it, it is ‘giving the fullest expression to one’s commitment’ (2014, p. 302), while D C Lau notes that one enacts *zhōng* through what one has learned via *shù* (cited in Ames, 2011, p. 201). It prevents *yì* from becoming cold or strategic by grounding moral discernment in integrity and self-investment. Yet *zhōng* is not blind allegiance. Confucius cautions against uncritical devotion, even in friendship: ‘Advise them to the best of your ability... but stop when there is no hope of success’ (*Analects* 12.23). Subordinates are expected to remonstrate with rulers (*Analects* 13.15, 13.23), and children to correct parents gently (*Analects* 4.18). *Zhōng* must be guided by *yì*, for without it, one may commit to the unworthy (Cua, 2014, p. 303). In this way, *yì* justifies the adjustment of *lǐ* to context.

If *zhōng* internalises *yì*, *shù* externalises it. Typically translated as ‘reciprocity’, *shù* is more precisely an ‘other-regarding generosity’—a ‘thoughtful and heartfelt deference to others’ (Ames, 2011, p. 195). It calls for empathetic perspective-taking: imagining how one’s action would be received by another.<sup>50</sup> Confucius calls it the ‘single thread’ of his teaching (*Analects* 15.23), exemplified in: ‘Do not impose on others what you do not desire yourself’ (*Analects* 12.2, 15.24), and ‘Use yourself as a measure to gauge others’ (*Analects* 4.15). This formulation avoids the potential presumptions of the Golden Rule—namely, that one’s own desires or sense of good are universal (Allinson, 1985, p. 307). Instead, it requires reflection, sensitivity to difference, and alignment with *rén*. *Shù* is not indulgent; desires must be evaluated in context, and not all should be satisfied (Cua, 2014, pp. 304–305). In this sense, *shù* tempers *yì*, ensuring that moral discernment is not only principled but humanely attuned.

Together, *zhōng* and *shù* make *yì* both responsive and relational. Acting as twin stabilisers, *zhōng* ensures it is enacted with wholehearted commitment, while *shù* guides its application with empathy and proportion. These dispositions root *yì* in sincerity and perspective, enabling it to navigate the complexities of role, relationship, and moral timing. The *jūnzǐ* does not pursue *yì* in isolation, but embodies it through this interplay of inner integrity and outward attentiveness. This relational grounding allows Confucian ethics to maintain moral seriousness without legalism, and principled

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<sup>50</sup> This aligns with the etymology of *shù*, composed of *rú* 如 (‘to follow’) and *xīn* 心 (‘heart-mind’), which supports Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 interpretation of *shù* as *tuījǐ* 推己—‘extending oneself’ in empathetic consideration of others. Xu Shen 許慎, in the *Shuowen jiezi*, defined *shù* generically as *rén*, and Mencius likewise described it as the shortest path to benevolence: ‘Strengthen your empathy and you will find that this is the shortest way to *rén*’ (Mencius, VIIA,4, cited in Lippiello, 2010, p. 94).

integrity without self-righteousness. Crucially, *zhōng* (忠) and *shù* (恕) mediate between *yì* (義, appropriateness) and *rén* (仁, consummate conduct). *Yì* identifies what is fitting to do; *shù* brings that judgment to life by imagining its impact on others and adjusting it with empathy; *zhōng* then carries it out with steadfast sincerity and wholehearted commitment. In this way, *yì* becomes more than an act of discernment—it becomes an embodied and compassionate way of living, grounded in one's roles, attuned to the feelings of others, and responsive to the needs of each situation.

In an age marked by ethical exhaustion, institutional decay, and performative virtue, the Confucian vision of *yì* emerges as both a challenge and a remedy. There is a growing tendency in some contexts toward strategic self-presentation, where virtue becomes a matter of optics—performed for visibility, rewarded through metrics, and measured by appearances. Within such a landscape, *yì* offers a countervailing ethic: one that prioritises integrity over convenience, quiet discernment over moral theatre, and appropriate action over socially calibrated performance. Unlike procedural ethics that rely on compliance or abstract codes, *yì* demands that moral agents remain reflective and committed—even when their decisions bring no applause, no reward, and no institutional endorsement. It is a form of moral resistance: a refusal to reduce ethical life to spectacle or utility. 'The *jūnzǐ* is ashamed to speak of things he does not practise,' Confucius tells us (*Analec*ts 14.27). This shame is not weakness but a sign of ethical seriousness—the desire to maintain coherence between one's words, actions, and moral discernment. *Yì*, then, becomes the virtue that holds the self together in a time of fragmentation.

*Yì* is also a form of ethical resilience—steadfast without being confrontational, and principled without being rigid or self-denying; it is grounded in relational awareness and guided by a clear sense of what is appropriate. *Yì* is the courage to discern and to act—not for recognition, but because the situation calls for it. This might mean resisting groupthink, declining opportunism, or holding to convictions that no longer align with dominant narratives. In every case, *yì* asks not 'What will succeed?' or 'What will be seen?' but 'What is fitting here and now?' Where some discourse is increasingly shaped by algorithms and institutional life often rewards performance over principle, *yì* reminds us that moral life is not a brand. It is about becoming the kind of person for whom integrity is not simply a value but a way of breathing—someone who feels discomfort in moral compromise, even when it is rewarded; someone for whom right action has become second nature.

As this thesis argues, this moral orientation cannot be systematised or automated. It must be cultivated. And cultivation requires a return to the slow work of self-formation: learning to see clearly, feel responsibly, and respond with both discernment and resolve. *Yì* therefore is not a trait

to be claimed but a virtue to be lived—formed gradually, clarified through experience, and embodied in the particular. Without it, *rén* may become sentimental, *lǐ* performative, and *xìn* (making good on one’s word) hollow. But with *yì*, the moral life gains its core: a compass that does not point outward to applause, but inward to what is fitting, dignified, and true. In this way, *yì* does not only link the classical and the contemporary—it *binds the virtues together*. It is the discerning force that keeps Confucian ethics from becoming rote, indulgent, or inert. And it is precisely this capacity for reflection-in-action that makes the *jūnzǐ* a figure not of purity or piety, but of *moral depth, relational courage, and ethical presence*.

Yet while *yì* grounds Confucian ethics in principled discernment and appropriate action, it does not act alone. In a world of overlapping duties, emotional complexity, and unpredictable outcomes, the *jūnzǐ* must also possess the ability to see clearly, understand deeply, and respond wisely. This is the role of *zhì* (智)—often translated as wisdom or understanding—which ensures that right action is not only well-intended, but also well-informed. Where *yì* anchors ethical judgement in integrity and appropriateness, *zhì* refines it through perception, experience, and foresight. *Zhì* enables the *jūnzǐ* to interpret complexity, discern shifting contexts, and anticipate the moral weight of action or inaction. Without *zhì*, *yì* may remain sincere but naïve; with *zhì*, it becomes ethically agile. As we now turn to this virtue, we explore how wisdom plays a crucial role in the moral vision of the *jūnzǐ*—not by mastering rules, but by becoming ever more responsive to the unfolding texture of life.

### 3.5.4 *Zhì* 智: Moral Insight and Practical Wisdom

Among the Five Constant Virtues, *zhì* (智)—typically translated as ‘wisdom,’ ‘moral insight,’ or as Ames (2021) puts it ‘living wisely’—occupies a unique integrative position. While *rén* evokes compassionate conduct, *yì* moral discernment, *lǐ* ritual form, and *xìn* the act of making good on one’s word, *zhì* offers the moral clarity that allows these virtues to function together in coherent and contextually attuned ways. It is the virtue of perceiving the moral shape of a situation—of understanding the web of relationships involved and judging how best to respond. Without *zhì*, even the most sincere intentions risk being misdirected. In this sense, Confucian wisdom is not a matter of cleverness or intellectual detachment, but of lived, relational insight—at once perceptive, intuitive, and practical.

Etymologically, the character 智 contains the radicals *zhī* (知), meaning ‘to know’, and *rì* (日), meaning ‘sun’ or ‘daylight’. This composition implies a form of knowledge that illuminates: a clear-

sightedness that sheds ethical light on one's surroundings. As Ames (2011, p. 190) notes, *zhì* is shaped through the interplay of learning (*xué* 學) and reflection (*sī* 思)—a process through which cognitive, emotional, and moral sensibilities are fused. Wisdom, in the Confucian tradition, is not the accumulation of information, but the moral light that reveals how best to align thought, emotion, and action in a given context. It is what enables the *jūnzǐ* to grasp not only what is at stake, but how to act in a way that harmonises intention with appropriateness. Confucius does not define *zhì* in abstract or speculative terms, but consistently anchors it in lived experience. 'The man of wisdom is never in two minds,' he states (*Analects* 9.29). Wisdom is not about certainty or omniscience, but the ability to discern a clear path when others are paralysed by doubt or indecision. The *jūnzǐ*, through living wisely (*zhì*), becomes ethically attuned—capable of interpreting the moral demands of a situation with grace, subtlety, and responsiveness. This perceptual and ethical acuity is not innate. Like the other virtues, *zhì* must be cultivated through experience, reflection, and community. The *jūnzǐ* becomes wise by listening carefully, observing deeply, learning from failure, and participating fully in the shared moral life. *Zhì*, then, is not a faculty one simply possesses, but a character trait one gradually develops through continuous ethical engagement.

Mencius develops this account by closely linking *zhì* to moral action. In 6A:15, he declares: 'Those who know what is right but lack the courage to do it are not wise.' Here, wisdom is not mere discernment, but the resolve to act rightly—even when such action is difficult, dangerous, or unrewarded. For Mencius, *zhì* is both perceptive and motivational: it sees the right course and is moved to follow it. The truly wise person does not just recognise the good, but possesses the inner strength to pursue it without guarantee of success. In this way, *zhì* becomes inseparable from moral courage. Moreover, *zhì* is included among the *sìduān* (四端)—the 'four sprouts' of virtue. While *rén* is linked to compassion, *yì* to a sense of shame, and *lǐ* to deference, *zhì* corresponds to the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Yet this is not a cold, computational capacity. It is a cultivated moral sensitivity, one that emerges from experience and deep reflection. As Mencius explains, the moral sprouts must be nourished through education, habit, and attention, or else they will wither. *Zhì*, as the discerning sprout, enables the agent to recognise when a course of action aligns—or fails to align—with what is appropriate, fitting, and worthy.

This moral discernment is neither deductive nor instinctual. It is an embodied responsiveness, cultivated through repeated engagement with the moral complexity of lived experience. The person of *zhì*—the cultivated capacity to live wisely—reflects critically on their desires, tempers reactive impulses, and evaluates the appropriateness of their actions within a wider ethical horizon. As Antonio Cua (2014, p. 304) notes, this entails assessing not only the object of desire but the manner

of its satisfaction—ensuring it accords with *rén* (consummate conduct). *Zhì*, then, demands more than fidelity to principle; it requires an ability to anticipate how a response will affect others, shape relationships, and reveal or distort one’s moral character. In this sense, *zhì* functions as a virtue of moral perception. It enables the *jūnzǐ* to navigate what Cua calls ‘hard cases’—those situations where no fixed rule or prior precedent can determine the right course of action. In such cases, *zhì* makes possible the exercise of *quán* (權), or moral discretion: the ability to weigh circumstances, assess competing goods, and judge what is timely (*shí*) and fitting (*yì*). This is not moral relativism, but an ethically grounded responsiveness—a commitment to context-sensitive judgement that refuses both rigidity and arbitrariness. Like adjusting seasoning to suit a particular dish, *quán* requires attunement, proportion, and moral clarity, all of which depend on the cultivated discernment of *zhì*.

The *Analects* reinforce this vision of *zhì* as more than cognitive acuity. In 6.20, Confucius states: ‘To be fond of something is better than merely to know it; to find joy in it is better than merely to be fond of it.’ Wisdom, then, is not a dry capacity, but a form of deepening attachment to the moral world—an affective alignment with what is right. It reflects not only understanding, but delight in what is good and fitting. Hall and Ames (1987, p. 54) elaborate this by comparing the wise person to water: flexible, responsive, and adaptive—actively shaping the world through a gentle but persistent force. Wisdom, on this view, is aesthetic as well as ethical. It is about learning how to move with the grain of a situation, rather than imposing rigid frameworks upon it. This aesthetic dimension of *zhì* is perhaps most powerfully captured in Hall and Ames’ musical metaphor. They write that wisdom is like ‘playing the right note at the right time’ (ibid., p. 56)—not by rigid adherence to a score, but by attunement to the rhythm and tone of the moment. The *jūnzǐ* acts wisely not by applying external rules, but by inhabiting the moral field so fully that their responses emerge with fluidity, grace, and appropriateness. This responsiveness, however, is not spontaneous improvisation. It rests on long training—on ritual familiarity, emotional cultivation, and ethical sensitivity.

The connection between *zhì* —the cultivated capacity to live wisely—and *lǐ* (ritual propriety) is critical here. While *lǐ* offers form, *zhì* ensures that form remains expressive rather than hollow. The wise person does not merely perform rituals; they understand their timing, tone, and purpose. They know when a bow is not enough, when silence speaks more deeply, when formal gestures must yield to personal presence. Without *zhì*, *lǐ* becomes mechanical; with *zhì*, it becomes a living art. In this way, *zhì* sustains the vitality of tradition, ensuring that inherited forms remain responsive to present realities. This interpretive and performative quality gives *zhì* particular relevance today. In

a world marked by institutional breakdown, ethical confusion, and performative virtue, *zhì* offers a counterpoint to both algorithmic decision-making and moral spectacle. Wisdom resists the reduction of ethical life to scripts, metrics, or ideological purity. It calls for presence: for the ability to read complexity with care and to respond not with certainty, but with attuned discernment. In this sense, *c* is not the opposite of ambiguity, but the capacity to move wisely within it.

As Tu Weiming explains, Confucian wisdom is not reducible to abstract cognition or technical skill, but emerges through self-cultivation as a relational and embodied mode of discernment. He describes this as ‘embodied knowing’—a transformative insight rooted in the *original heart* (*běnxīn*), where cognition, affect, and moral commitment are integrated through continuous practice (2024, pp. 147–151). Such wisdom is not the result of theoretical reasoning alone but of lived moral participation. The person of *zhì*—the cultivated capacity to live wisely—develops the capacity to ‘see with the heart’: a union of thought, feeling, and responsiveness that reflects moral maturity rather than mechanical correctness. This cultivated judgement enables the *jūnzǐ* to read the moral demands of a moment—across role, ritual, feeling, and tradition—and to respond with resonance and integrity. Wisdom in this sense is aesthetic as well as ethical: the capacity to ‘play the right note at the right time’ (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 56), not by following a script but by attuning to the rhythm of the situation. Wisdom becomes second nature—not in the sense of habitual reaction, but as a deeply formed readiness to perceive moral texture and act with fitting sensitivity. Mingjun Lu (2022) deepens this view by showing that *zhì* in early Chinese philosophy is not only practical and ethical but also metaphysical. Lu distinguishes *zhì* from *zhī* (知), arguing that while the latter refers to cognitive or informational knowledge, *zhì* denotes an intuitive, luminous grasp of moral order—what she calls a ‘spontaneously illuminating awareness’. This awareness does not impose itself on reality but resonates with it, offering an attuned, generative way of knowing that participates in the ongoing, relational process of *dào* as way-making. Though this chapter focuses primarily on the ethical and relational dimensions of *zhì*, Chapter 5 will return to Lu’s insights in greater depth, showing how this expanded vision of wisdom becomes crucial when inherited rituals falter and new moral insight must arise from within.

Within the Confucian ethical constellation, *zhì* serves as the harmonising virtue. It interprets and balances *rén* (consummate conduct), *yì* (appropriateness), *lǐ* (*ritual propriety*), and *xìn* (making good one’s word) when they come into tension, enabling action that is not only morally sound but situationally wise. While *rén* draws us into compassionate concern, *yì* alerts us to what is appropriate, *lǐ* offers ritual form, and *xìn* builds trust through making good on one’s word, it is *zhì* that enables the *jūnzǐ* to prioritise, weigh, and adjust with discernment. It provides not a fixed

formula, but a kind of moral orientation—an attuned capacity to stay grounded in ambiguity and to move through it with clarity, flexibility, and composure. In an era increasingly defined by fragmentation, polarisation, and moral performance, *zhì* offers a quietly radical model of wisdom. It resists simplification, embraces complexity, and insists that ethical life cannot be outsourced to systems, scripts, or ideologies. The person of *zhì* is not one who knows all the answers, but one who knows how to remain attuned—to relationships, to changing conditions, and to the evolving demands of a shared moral life. To be wise, in the Confucian sense, is to stay awake in the midst of uncertainty, and to act with grounded clarity when clarity seems hardest to find.

Having explored *zhì* as the virtue that harmonises perception, reflection, and action, we now arrive at the final and perhaps most socially visible expression of the cultivated moral self: *xìn* (信), or making good on one's word. If *zhì* enables the *jūnzǐ* to see rightly and respond wisely, then *xìn* ensures that those actions can be counted on—that virtue is not merely performed, but sustained, recognised, and lived in the relational world. It is through *xìn* that the internal coherence of character becomes external credibility.

### 3.5.5 *Xìn* 信: Trustworthiness and Moral Consistency

*Xìn* (信)—typically rendered as 'trustworthiness' or 'sincerity'—refers to more than simply fulfilling a promise or telling the truth. For Confucius, *xìn* is best understood as 'making good on one's word' or 'living up to one's word'—a performative commitment in which words are enacted and made real through one's actions (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 56). This virtue does not signify passive honesty or contractual reliability but the active ability to realise one's speech as deed. As Hall and Ames explain, *xìn* is close in spirit to the archaic notion of 'plighting one's troth': it is the claim that one has the cultivated ability, integrity, and resources to make what one says come to life (ibid., p. 62). This understanding makes *xìn* a profoundly ethical act: a convergence of intention, speech, and realisation. Without this convergence, moral life becomes fragmented, and personhood itself is compromised. Confucius affirms this in *Analects* 2.22: 'I am not aware that one can become a person without living up to one's word.' Hall and Ames emphasise that for Confucius, *xìn* is not merely a virtue among others, but a condition of moral credibility. It is a necessary—but not sufficient—basis for becoming a person (*jén*), for it enables the social recognition and interpersonal trust upon which the ethical community depends (ibid., p. 61).

The ethical force of *xìn* lies not in correspondence with an objective truth, but in its capacity to bring meaning into the world through reliable and sincere performance. Hall and Ames emphasise that

Confucius' understanding of truth is not propositional or referential, but performative: 'truth is not a matter of "saying it like it is," but rather of "making it become what it says"' (ibid., p. 62). To speak truthfully, in this Confucian sense, is to pledge one's capacity to realise what is said—to make one's words effective within the lived world of relationship and ritual. This is why *xìn* is not separable from *chéng* (誠), often translated as sincerity, authenticity, or integrity. *Chéng* is the inner dimension—the coherence of intention and character—while *xìn* is its outward realisation. Together they form a continuum between inner moral formation and social credibility. As Hall and Ames argue, *chéng* refers to the cultivated 'consistency between one's words and one's world'—not a static truth, but a creative moral alignment of intention, expression, and action (ibid., p. 59). *Xìn*, as the social enactment of this alignment, enables the *jūnzǐ* to become someone others can count on—not simply because of predictability, but because their actions resonate with their commitments. Trustworthiness in this sense is neither legalistic nor sentimental; it is an aesthetic and ethical achievement, realised moment by moment through sincere and capable engagement with others. This understanding of *xìn* as performative coherence carries significant implications for Confucian moral life. It means that speech is not a neutral conveyance of internal states, but a moral act with real-world consequences. One's utterances are a measure of one's ethical maturity: to say something is to take responsibility for its realisation. Thus, *xìn* functions as both a moral discipline and a relational promise. It invites the speaker to be cautious, intentional, and self-aware—qualities that are essential in Confucian education and self-cultivation.

The power of *xìn*, then, is inseparable from the context in which it is expressed. Hall and Ames emphasise that Confucian communication is not the private transmission of beliefs from one autonomous agent to another, but an act situated within a shared cultural matrix of meaning and value. In this matrix, words are more than signals—they are events. To speak with *xìn* is to participate in the world-constituting function of language, whereby the self, others, and the world are co-shaped through morally charged expression (ibid., p. 57). Thus, the *jūnzǐ* does not merely assert propositions; they contribute to the ongoing moral articulation of relational life. In this sense, *xìn* becomes a kind of ethical artistry. It is not simply about being dependable, but about giving shape to trust through the careful crafting of language and conduct. Hall and Ames describe this as a form of moral creativity, whereby the individual becomes an agent of meaning—one who gives weight to words through their lived embodiment (ibid., p. 63). This is why the failure to live up to one's word is not merely a personal defect, but a breakdown in relational integrity. It damages the moral field in which others must also act, making it harder for trust, cooperation, and genuine ethical exchange to take root. Importantly, *xìn* is not conceived as a virtue of fixed, universal application. Its expression is necessarily context-sensitive, attuned to the nuances of role, relationship, and

timing. The trustworthiness of a person does not lie in mechanical consistency, but in the appropriateness of their moral responses as seen over time. To be *xin* is not to rigidly keep promises regardless of circumstance, but to honour the spirit of commitment within the evolving relational landscape. In this way, *xin* shares with *zhi* the need for discernment, but its distinct focus lies in the sustained coherence between one's words and one's moral presence.

In a contemporary context shaped by fragmented institutions, algorithmic communication, and the erosion of moral trust, *xin* stands out as a virtue of particular urgency. Hall and Ames caution against reducing *xin* to a narrow notion of 'truth-telling' that assumes a detached, objectivist model of truth. In contrast, Confucian *xin* demands ethical depth and relational fidelity—a consistency of self across time and situation that allows others to inhabit the moral world with confidence (ibid., p. 62). In an age where language is often deployed for effect rather than resonance, where words serve as branding rather than binding, *xin* calls for something quieter and more difficult: a fidelity to meaning that is enacted, not displayed. This performative vision of *xin* also resists moral spectacle. It asks not for the appearance of virtue, but for the realisation of virtue in time. To be *xin* is to develop a character in which speech is not cheap, in which what is said is backed by cultivated capacity and sincere intent. It demands the integration of past, present, and future selves in a shared ethical trajectory. One speaks from a centre, not as a performance but as a presence. In this way, *xin* becomes a form of resistance—against moral opportunism, rhetorical inflation, and the instrumentalisation of language.

Just as *zhi*—the cultivated capacity to live wisely—provides the perceptual clarity to discern what is fitting, *xin* provides the consistency and depth that allows others to trust that discernment will be lived out. Together, they form the axis on which Confucian ethical life turns: *zhi* enables moral responsiveness; *xin* ensures moral credibility. Without *xin*, wisdom loses traction. Without *zhi*, trust becomes inert. The moral self, in the Confucian tradition, is not a fixed essence but a living expression—formed in part by what one says but ultimately measured by how faithfully one lives it.

Before turning to the conclusion, it is worth pausing to see the Five Constant Virtues not as discrete traits, but as an integrated moral ecology. Like the elements of a well-tuned ensemble, each virtue amplifies and refines the others: *ren* supplies the ethical heart, *yi* directs its flow with discernment, *li* offers it rhythm and form, *zhi* provides clarity and balance, and *xin* secures its continuity through consistency and trust. But *xin*, as Hall and Ames make clear, is not reducible to a notion of truth-telling grounded in a fixed, literal correspondence between word and world. It is a performative

coherence—an ability to realise one’s words through sincere presence and moral action (ibid., p. 62). It allows others to inhabit the ethical world one helps to shape, grounding moral life not in appearance but in dependable enactment. Together, these five virtues form a relational grammar of the good life—a dynamic interplay through which the *jūnzǐ* not only cultivates personal virtue but becomes a reliable source of moral presence in the world. Imagine, for instance, a village elder resolving a local dispute—not by citing law, but by listening with compassion (*rén*), judging with fairness (*yì*), speaking with appropriate tone and timing (*lǐ*), sensing the unique tension of the moment (*zhì*), and making a commitment that is honoured over time through embodied sincerity (*xìn*). This is not abstract idealism but lived Confucianism: ethical life as a coherent practice of care, discernment, and responsibility, rooted in relationship and responsive to the world.

### 3.6 Conclusion

The Confucian vision of moral life culminates in the figure of the *jūnzǐ*—not an idealised paragon of perfection, but a fallible, reflective, and deeply committed moral agent who strives to harmonise the self with others through the embodiment of the Five Constant Virtues. As I argue throughout the thesis, the *jūnzǐ* is not born but becomes—*not through passive submission to rules but through active engagement with life, others, and the dào*. This process of transformation is neither self-serving nor altruistic in the abstract; it is a dynamic and situated practice of self-cultivation that seeks to actualise one’s humanity through relationship and ethical responsiveness. The *jūnzǐ* becomes more fully herself through others, not for their praise, but because her own flourishing is inseparable from theirs.

Each of the Five Constant Virtues contributes to this unfolding in distinct but interdependent ways. *Rén* (仁), the affective heart of Confucian ethics, is the virtue of compassionate responsiveness—*not occasional sentiment but a steady moral presence, cultivated in and through relationship*. It animates all other virtues and grounds the self in benevolent concern for others. *Yì* (義), appropriateness, serves to refine and restrain this care, directing it toward what is fitting, just, and contextually sensitive. It gives ethical weight and discernment to the moral agent, allowing her to act even in morally ambiguous situations, and to speak and stand where others remain silent.

*Lǐ* (禮), or ritual propriety in one’s roles and relationships, is neither superficial etiquette nor rigid traditionalism. Rather, it is the embodied expression of *rén* and *yì*—*a relational aesthetic that gives ethical life texture, rhythm, and form*. Yet even *lǐ*, with its moral beauty, can become hollow without

discernment. This is where *zhì* (智)—the cultivated capacity to live wisely—becomes indispensable. It is the clarifying light of practical understanding, a moral intelligence that enables the *jūnzǐ* to harmonise the other virtues, to see through complexity, and to act with grace and poise. Finally, *xìn* (信), the act of making good on one's word, offers the moral culmination of the cultivated self. It is not only a matter of honesty, but the lived continuity between word and deed, between intention and action—a virtue that allows the *jūnzǐ* to be counted on, even when others falter. *Xìn* functions both personally and institutionally: it sustains ethical life at the interpersonal level and underpins the credibility of communities and institutions alike. In a world increasingly marked by institutional fragility and the pressures of performative virtue, *xìn* offers a slow, steady ethic of moral repair.

Throughout this study, the *jūnzǐ* is shown to be not only an ethical exemplar but also a moral participant—*someone who lives relationally, who reflects, recalibrates, and takes responsibility*. She is noble not by status but by character: a person whose everyday conduct dignifies those around her, not by withdrawing from the world but by living more deeply within it. This view is not elitist but radically accessible. As Confucius insists, 'Is *rén* far away? If I desire it, it is here' (*Analects*, 7:30). The *jūnzǐ* becomes through practice, not birth—through effortful engagement, not exceptional endowment. In the final analysis, the *jūnzǐ* does not merely exemplify Confucian values; she embodies them, not in static perfection but in the ongoing labour of ethical presence. Her life is an answer—not to abstract moral theories but to the real human need for integrity, care, discernment, ritual, and trust. She shows, as Tu Weiming has said, that 'the ordinary is the locus of the sacred'—that to live well with others, moment by moment, is to participate in the moral reweaving of the world.

If the *jūnzǐ* represents the culmination of Confucian moral cultivation—a figure shaped through the lifelong alignment of thought, feeling, and action—then the family is its generative ground: the site where moral sensibility first takes root, where the ethical self is initially formed, and where the rhythms of ritual, care, and responsibility become embodied practices. It is to this foundational space that we now turn.

## CHAPTER 4: Reframing Filial Obligation Through Confucian *Xiào*

### 4.1 Introduction – The Family as Moral Ground

In both Confucian and Western ethical traditions, the family is foundational—it is the primary site where moral life takes root. It is within the lived rhythms of familial relationships that a person first learns the demands of care, the practices of responsibility, and the rituals that shape character. Yet in the Confucian tradition, the centrality of family is not merely cultural—it is philosophical. The family is not a private sphere divorced from ethics and politics, but the crucible of moral becoming. The self, in this view, is never autonomous or abstract; it is a relational self (*guānxi* 關係), constituted by roles—child, sibling, grandchild—performed with attentiveness and reverence. This ethical embeddedness is encapsulated in *xiào* (孝), often translated in English as ‘filial piety.’ But this translation obscures more than it reveals. As Rosemont and Ames (2009) argue, ‘piety’ suggests duty to a divine authority or static obedience, whereas *xiào* is better understood as ‘family reverence’—a cultivated responsiveness rooted in gratitude, attentiveness, and care. *Xiào* expresses not rigid hierarchy, but a deep moral attunement to the sacrifices that sustain life. It is about reverence, not repayment; attentiveness, not transaction. This ethical orientation is vividly rendered in the *Shi Jing* (詩經)<sup>51</sup>:

*O my father, who begat me!  
O my mother, who nourished me!  
Ye indulged me, ye fed me,  
Ye held me up, ye supported me,  
Ye looked after me, ye never left me,  
Out and in ye bore me in your arms.  
If I would return your kindness,  
It is like great Heaven, illimitable.  
(Shi Jing II.5 (202))<sup>52</sup>*

This poem captures not merely gratitude but also a moral orientation that sees the child’s ethical life as rooted in the profound, embodied care from her parents. The ethical gesture here is not transactional; it is expansive, aspiring to match the magnitude of Heaven itself. For the Confucian

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<sup>51</sup> The *Shijing*—also known as the *Book of Odes*, *Classic of Poetry*, or *Book of Songs*—is considered the foundational text of the Chinese literary canon. It is a collection of 305 anonymous poems, likely originating from various regional courts during the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE), and traditionally said to have been compiled by Confucius (551–479 BCE).

<sup>52</sup> <http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?l=Shijing&m=NOzh&c=5&s=2> : from the *Shijing* the “Book of Odes”, James Legge translation.

tradition, such familial ties are the generative conditions of ethical life, not reducible to biological relation or legal contract, but expressed through the cardinal Confucian virtues.

While the emphasis on the family as a moral training ground is not exclusive to Confucianism—indeed, in the Abrahamic traditions, honouring one's parents is enshrined in divine law—what distinguishes Confucian ethics is the philosophical centrality of the family. The household is not simply a private realm; it is the foundation upon which broader political and social ethics are built. A harmonious family is a precondition for societal harmony; to serve one's parents well is to cultivate the virtues necessary for the ethical governance of a polity. Contemporary socio-political realities make this moral centrality ever more urgent. In the context of ageing populations<sup>53</sup>, retrenched welfare states, and intensifying social precarity, the family has re-emerged as a crucial locus of support and care. In societies such as China<sup>54</sup> and Singapore<sup>55</sup>, filial obligation is codified not only as a moral expectation but also as a legal duty, with laws requiring adult children to provide for their ageing parents. Even in contexts often described as more individualistic, such as the United States—where filial responsibility laws remain active in over half of the states (L. Yu, 2019)—and England, where no such laws are enforced, the importance of filial care retains ethical significance for many families.<sup>56</sup> Yet the legal codification of filial duty does not capture the affective and moral texture that Confucian ethics so richly articulates.

Crucially, the Confucian conception of family is not wedded to static hierarchies or rigid patriarchal forms. While historical Confucianism may have valorised vertically structured kinship, its deeper moral architecture is amenable to contemporary reinterpretation. The ethical focus is not on form but on function—on the presence of care, relational integrity, and mutual cultivation. As Furstenberg *et al.* (2020) contend, the contemporary family increasingly derives its moral legitimacy not from

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<sup>53</sup> According to the UN, in 2017, 13% of the world population was aged 60 and above. By 2050, it is projected that this age group will comprise nearly a quarter or more of the world population except in Africa. At present only Europe has 25% of its population in this age group (United Nations, 2017, p. 11). This fuelled by global life-expectancy expected to rise to 77 years by 2050 (p.8)

<sup>54</sup> See The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (《中华人民共和国老年人权益保障法》), published in 1996, revised in 2009, 2012, 2015, and 2018, of particular interest is Article 13: 'The elderly shall be provided for mainly by their families and their family members shall respect, care for, and look after them.'

<sup>55</sup> In Singapore, adult children are obliged to support their parents under the Maintenance of Parents Act 1996.

<sup>56</sup> See William Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England, Vol. I (1856), which articulates the moral foundation of filial responsibility: 'The duties of children to their parents arise from a principle of natural justice and retribution. For to those who gave us existence we naturally owe subjection and obedience during our minority, and honor and reverence ever after; they who protected the weakness of our infancy are entitled to our protection in the infirmity of their age; they who by sustenance and education have enabled their offspring to prosper ought in return to be supported by that offspring in case they stand in need of assistance' (cited in Blustein, 1982, p. 181).

biological or legal structure, but from the quality and constancy of its caregiving relation. As we will explore in greater depth, same-sex couples with children, adoptive parents, blended and chosen families—all may embody the Confucian virtues, not by mirroring historical forms, but by fulfilling ethical functions. In this context, *xiào* (filial reverence) emerges not as a relic of tradition, but as an enduring moral orientation. To embody *xiào* is to be attuned to the sacrifices that sustain life and to respond not merely with obedience but with reverence. Family life, understood through this lens, is a site of ethical labour: raising children, supporting ageing parents, and building intergenerational solidarity are moral practices that constitute our *becoming* human beings.

What is at stake, then, is not the preservation of familial form, but the continuity of familial function as a moral project. As Confucius himself intimates, the loss of the family as an ethical foundation would entail not merely social or economic dislocation but a profound moral impoverishment. The virtues that make life liveable—care, attentiveness, responsibility—are first cultivated in the microcosm of the family. It is here that we learn not only that others matter, but that their wellbeing is inseparable from our own. In a world of changing family structures and evolving social norms, the Confucian vision offers both continuity and critique. It reminds us that while familial configurations may shift, the ethical imperatives they embody remain vital. The family, far from being an anachronism, continues to serve as the moral ground of our shared human *becoming*. To understand how the family functions as a moral crucible in Confucian thought, we must turn to the virtue that undergirds its ethical life: *xiào*, or family reverence.

## 4.2 The Confucian Foundation – *Xiào* 孝, as Ethical Starting Point

At the heart of Confucian moral philosophy lies *xiào* (孝), often translated as ‘filial piety’—a term that, as previously noted, fails to capture its ethical depth. Rather than implying passive obedience or hierarchical duty, *xiào* is better understood as ‘family reverence’—a cultivated responsiveness grounded in gratitude, attentiveness, and moral discernment (Rosemont & Ames, 2009). Unlike piety in the Abrahamic traditions, which is oriented toward divine authority, *xiào* arises from the intimate, lived experience of familial care. It is shaped by the felt realities of love (*ài*, 愛), respect (*jìng*, 敬), and a sense of what is fitting (*yì*, 義)—qualities nurtured within the rhythms of everyday life. In this sense, *xiào* is not an imposed duty but an evolving disposition formed through sustained relationships.



The classical pictograph for *xiào*—a younger figure supporting an elder—visually expresses this ethic of intergenerational care, reflecting a core Confucian insight: that moral life begins not in abstraction or universal laws, but in the embodied and affective

ties of family. These bonds are not merely preparatory; they are foundational. *Xiào*, then, is more than a single virtue—it is the generative ground from which others, such as *rén* (仁, consummate conduct) and *yì* (義, appropriateness), emerge. To practise *xiào* is to begin cultivating the emotional attunement and relational awareness at the heart of Confucian moral life.

As the *Xiaojing* (孝經 *The Classic of Family Reverence*)<sup>57</sup> makes clear, *xiào* is not reducible to obedience; rather, it involves reverent attentiveness to the needs, wisdom, and wellbeing of one's parents and elders. The cultivation of this virtue within the family becomes the seedbed for all other ethical relations. The centrality of *xiào* in Confucian ethics is not merely thematic but structural. The family is the paradigmatic site of moral formation, and *xiào* is the virtue that animates it. Confucius himself repeatedly returned to the theme in the *Analects*. When asked about the meaning of *xiào*, he responded not with rules but with a vision of relational responsiveness: 'Nowadays for a man to be filial means no more than that he is able to provide his parents with food. Even hounds and horses are, in some way, provided with food. If a man shows no reverence, where is the difference?' (*Analects* 2.7). The ethical value of *xiào* lies not in the act of provision *per se*, but in the quality of regard that underpins it. Material support, when devoid of reverence, becomes ethically inert. This relational conception of virtue stands in significant contrast to some moral frameworks that emphasise autonomy or impartial rationality. In Confucian thought, the self is not an autonomous being or abstract rights-holder, but a person shaped through relational ties, grounded in duty, care, and emotional connection. The moral life, in this tradition, begins *not* with universal principles but with situated roles: parent, child, elder, younger. The ethical task, then, is not to transcend these roles, but to inhabit them well. This is not a call for rigid traditionalism, but an invitation to view the family as a dynamic setting for the cultivation of virtue.

*Xiào* is thus both the root and the rhythm of moral development. It is the initial posture through which the child learns to be human: not by reasoning from abstract principles, but by responding to the care received with attentiveness, gratitude, and respect. This response is not contingent upon the perfection of the parent. As *Analects* 4.18 reminds us, even filial devotion must be exercised with moral discernment: 'In serving your father and mother you ought to dissuade them from doing

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<sup>57</sup> The *Classic of Xiaojing*, written during the Qin-Han period, is the key Confucian text on the virtue of *xiào*.

wrong in the gentlest way. If you see your advice being ignored, you should not become disobedient but should remain reverent.’ This balance—between reverence and critique, affection and autonomy—speaks to the maturity of *xiào* as a virtue. It is not blind obedience, but ethical responsiveness. Indeed, the Confucian commitment to *xiào* reflects a fundamental vision of reality that prizes continuity and relational embeddedness. To honour one’s parents is not merely to acknowledge past benefits, but to affirm the intergenerational transmission of ethical life. In Tu Weiming’s words, *xiào* is ‘the continuous well-being of a chosen heritage’ (1989, p. 42). This heritage is not genealogical in the narrow sense; it encompasses the values, practices, and dispositions that shape human flourishing. As such, *xiào* is not a duty to the past alone, but a bridge between generations—a way of carrying forward what is worth preserving, and transforming it in light of present needs.

Such a conception is particularly salient in an age of diverse family forms. Confucian ethics, at its best, is not about preserving a fixed structure, but about fostering the conditions for moral cultivation. As Furstenberg et al. (2020) emphasise, the moral significance of family lies not in its biological or legal structure, but in its capacity to embody the values of care, reverence, and shared growth. Whether adoptive, blended, or chosen, contemporary families can fulfil the same ethical functions as traditional kinship forms. What ultimately defines family, they suggest, is not lineage, but the ongoing labour of love—acts of caregiving, attentive presence, and the cultivation of enduring intergenerational bonds. In this sense, *xiào* serves as both an ethical principle and a moral compass. It calls us to recognise our dependence on others—not as a weakness, but as a site of moral possibility. To practise *xiào* is to affirm that we are not self-made, that we are shaped by those who loved, taught, and sustained us. And it is to respond to that shaping not with resentment or detachment, but with reverence, attentiveness, and care.

Through *xiào*, Confucianism offers a vision of moral life grounded not in isolated autonomy, but in shared history, relational obligation, and ethical becoming. In a fragmented world, this vision remains not only relevant but urgently needed. Yet in a world of plural family forms and shifting norms, the practice of *xiào* cannot remain static. The structures of family have diversified, but the ethical challenge remains: how can the Confucian virtues take root in forms that differ from their historical origins?

### 4.3 Reimagining Confucian Familial Ethics in Contemporary Family Forms

The traditional Confucian conception of the family—often historically represented as vertically extended, patriarchal, and grounded in patrilineal descent—has been subject to significant reconfiguration in the modern era. In both East Asian and Western societies, a multiplicity of family forms now coexist, often challenging inherited assumptions about kinship, duty, and relational hierarchy. Same-sex partnerships, single-parent households, adoptive and blended families, and cohabiting couples without formal marriage have become not merely tolerated but, increasingly, integral components of contemporary family life. This transformation is well documented in empirical studies, with scholars such as Sofia Gameiro (2024) and Sharon Sassler (2024) noting the diversity of caregiving arrangements and the erosion of the nuclear family as the dominant norm. In some quarters, these changes provoke anxiety, interpreted as symptoms of moral decline or social fragmentation. However, a more generous reading—one informed by the ethical insights of Confucianism—would attend not to the outer form of familial structures, but to their *inner* ethical functions.

Confucian virtues are not exclusive to traditional family formations; they are cultivated wherever there are opportunities for care, responsibility, and sustained moral engagement. Thus, a contemporary family that prioritises interdependence, nurtures empathy, and instils a sense of moral responsibility in its members—regardless of whether it resembles the classical Confucian model—can be seen as ethically legitimate, perhaps even exemplary. The real criterion, from a Confucian perspective, is not conformity to tradition for its own sake, but whether the family serves as a site of human flourishing, ethical refinement, and harmonious relationality.

This interpretive generosity within Confucian ethics becomes especially apparent when applied to concrete examples of contemporary familial arrangements. Take, for instance, the case of adoptive families. Traditional Confucianism often privileged biological lineage due to its concern with ancestral continuity and the performance of ritual obligations toward one's forebears. Adoption was, at best, tolerated if it served to perpetuate the family line. Yet, when we consider the ethical aims of the family—care, cultivation, and relational harmony—the picture becomes more nuanced. When a couple adopts a child and nurtures her physical, emotional, and moral development, they perform exactly the kind of caregiving that Confucian ethics esteems. If *xiào* (family reverence) is grounded not in blood, but in loving nurture, attentiveness, and moral formation, then such families fully embody the Confucian spirit. As Furstenberg *et al.* (2020) demonstrate, adoptive families often display a heightened awareness of their ethical responsibilities, navigating issues of identity and

belonging with deliberate moral attentiveness. The authors note that 'interviews with adoptive parents highlight the importance of establishing and legitimizing their relationship with their adoptive child through shared family practices, family experiences, and creation of a family history' (p. 1417).

A similar point can be made for families headed by same-sex couples. At first glance, these may seem to conflict with the heteronormative assumptions of classical Confucian family ideology. However, a more philosophically sophisticated Confucianism would ask whether such families cultivate the core virtues: do they foster *rén*, instil a sense of *lǐ* in children, honour their own parents, and contribute to the flourishing of each member? If so, then they function ethically as families in the Confucian sense. Shared moral labour, co-parenting with reciprocity and mutual respect, and the conscious integration of both biological and chosen kin networks reflect the Confucian ideal of harmonious relational life. That they do so in ways that depart from historical norms should not disqualify them; rather, it should prompt a reassessment of what those norms were always intended to achieve: not the perpetuation of fixed forms, but the realisation of human flourishing through appropriately ordered relationships.

The multigenerational household offers perhaps the clearest continuity between classical and contemporary expressions of Confucian familial ethics. In such households, grandparents, parents, and children live together, sharing responsibilities, caregiving, and decision-making across generations. This arrangement closely mirrors the traditional Confucian family structure, in which moral education was embedded in daily life and the rhythms of intergenerational coexistence. It is here that family reverence (*xiào*) operates in both directions reciprocally: the young learn to care for their elders, while the elders remain active moral exemplars. As Confucius reminds us in *Analects* 2.7, feeding one's parents is insufficient if not accompanied by reverence; the rituals of daily life—caring, listening, offering companionship—are where moral cultivation takes root. In a society where loneliness<sup>58</sup> and neglect of the young<sup>59</sup> and elderly is rising<sup>60</sup>, such households embody a countercultural ethic of mutual responsibility, sustained by affection rather than obligation alone. The Confucian vision of familial interdependence finds one of its most compelling modern manifestations here.

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<sup>58</sup> According to the Office of National Statistics (2024), there were 8.4 million people living alone in the UK in 2023; this was 30% of all households and 13% of all people living in households.

<sup>59</sup> According to NSPCC (2023) there has been a 106% increase in child cruelty and neglect offences in England in the past 5 years.

<sup>60</sup> A systematic review and meta-analysis by Yon et al. (2019) reported past-year prevalence of some form of abuse in community settings at approximately one in six people aged 60 years and older. Further, abuse appears to be even more prevalent in institutional settings: the same review found that up to 64.2% of staff in institutional care settings reported perpetrating some form of abuse against older adults.

Stepfamilies, by contrast, pose a unique challenge to Confucian orthodoxy, insofar as they complicate the traditional genealogical model. Yet it is precisely this complexity that opens space for a richer ethical interpretation. A step-parent who voluntarily assumes responsibility for a child, with no biological imperative to do so, displays a form of *rén* that is both deliberate and profound. If this care is met by filial responsiveness over time, the family can cultivate *xiào* not as an inherited duty, but as an earned and deeply human relationship. This aligns with Rosemont and Ames' (2009) insistence that *xiào* is not about the formal correctness of a role, but about the affective and moral energy invested in it. The child may not initially refer to the step-parent in filial terms, but through sustained interactions of care, trust, and mutual effort, such a relationship can come to embody the same ethical weight. Stepfamilies, in this sense, do not merely test Confucian categories; they enrich them by showing how ethical kinship can be formed through choice and cultivated action.

The empirical literature increasingly supports this expanded Confucian view. Furstenberg *et al.* (2020) demonstrate, adoptive and blended families—particularly those formed through same-sex partnerships or non-biological caregiving—often display a remarkable degree of intentionality in forming emotionally supportive, morally attentive environments. These families are not bound by social expectation or tradition; they must, instead, continuously reaffirm their bonds through acts of care, dialogue, and mutual accommodation. As the authors note, 'gay men and lesbians who form families straddle prevailing biogenetic notions of relatedness with countervailing ideas about the voluntary nature of family bonds' (p. 1414). This exemplifies the kind of relational effort most deeply valued in Confucian ethics: care that is not automatic or merely inherited, but consciously cultivated through sustained moral attention. Braithwaite and Oliver-Blackburn (2024, p. 303) show that stepfamilies often engage in painstaking emotional labour to build trust and belonging, especially where prior relationships have left wounds or ambiguities—for instance, when a step-parent quietly supports a teenager's need for self-expression by repainting their bedroom, picking up comfort snacks late at night, or consistently offering nonjudgmental presence and emotional warmth. These families do not merely replicate traditional roles—they actively reinterpret them, guided by what the Confucians would recognise as *li*, the creative adaptation of rituals to suit one's context, and *rén*, the underlying humaneness that renders these rituals meaningful.

This brings us to a broader insight: that the ethical legitimacy of a family, from a Confucian standpoint, lies not in its formal structure but in its moral orientation. A household formed through IVF, adoption, cohabitation, or remarriage may depart from traditional familial configurations, but if its members strive to embody core Confucian ideals, then it fulfills the ethical substance of

Confucianism, regardless of form. Confucian thought—especially in the work of thinkers like Mencius and Xunzi—has never been narrowly legalistic or structurally rigid; rather, it is concerned with cultivating the dispositions and practices that make us fully human. As modern families stretch the boundaries of kinship, these transformations invite a return to the ethical heart of Confucianism: not blind obedience, but a conscious commitment to care, responsiveness, and mutual moral growth. Seen in this way, diversity in family structures is not a threat to Confucian ethics but a contemporary canvas on which its enduring ideals can be reimagined and renewed.

To better appreciate the distinctiveness—and potential limits—of Confucian familial ethics, it is helpful to place it in dialogue with Western philosophical models of filial obligation, where the emphasis often shifts from relational embeddedness to individual autonomy, reciprocal justice, or biological ties.

#### **4.4 Western Models of Filial Obligation—A Comparative Analysis**

Western philosophical traditions have long grappled with the question of filial obligation, often situating it within frameworks of procreation, gratitude, friendship, or justice. These models, though intellectually rigorous, tend to operate within ontological assumptions markedly different from those of Confucian ethics. Whereas Confucian thought begins with relational embeddedness, Western accounts tend to foreground individual autonomy, consent, and reciprocity. This contrast is not merely conceptual—it reveals divergent moral ontologies, each with its own strengths and limitations.

One of the earliest and most influential Western treatments of filial duty emerges in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here, the parent-child bond is initially cast in biological terms. Aristotle claims that 'parents love their children as being a part of themselves, and children their parents as having originated from them' (1989, p. 1161b17). The moral force of filial obligation is thus rooted in procreation: in the parents' act of giving life and the child's origin in that act. Yet Aristotle also acknowledges that this biological connection alone is insufficient to sustain the moral weight of the relationship. He observes that the 'common upbringing' shared by siblings can engender 'friendship' (1989, p. 1161b17), suggesting that the affective and educative dimensions of parenting are as ethically salient as the generative act. This insight foreshadows later critiques of the biological model, particularly those raised in the early modern period. John Locke, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, repudiates the patriarchal absolutism of thinkers such as Sir Robert Filmer, who in his book *Patriarcha*, had likened paternal authority to monarchical sovereignty. For

Locke (1690, section 56), procreation does not confer ownership. Rather, parents are entrusted with a moral task: to ‘preserve, nourish, and educate’ their children until they reach maturity. Authority over the child is temporary, justified only by the duty of care. Children, in turn, are not property but moral agents-*in*-formation. The obligations they may bear toward their parents arise not from biology but from the parents’ success in raising them toward moral and intellectual autonomy.

Locke’s account is notable for its moral sophistication, yet it remains embedded in Enlightenment assumptions about reason and agency. Filial duty, in his view, is conditional upon the parent having fulfilled their educative role. This raises a normative concern: what of parents who lack the material resources or social opportunity to provide such an education? Are their children thereby exempt from all obligation? Locke’s theory, by tying obligation to a specific standard of parental performance, risks rendering invisible the ethical richness of familial life that unfolds even in conditions of hardship or imperfection. As Daniel Callahan observes,

[b]y the procreation of children parents create a social unit that otherwise would not and could not exist. If children do not select their parents, neither do parents select their individual children... the family relationship is not something one can simply take or leave. It is a fundamental and unavoidable part of our social nature as human beings (1985, p. 34).

This insight underscores what Locke’s model obscures: that the family is not merely a contingent site of caregiving success or failure, but a morally constitutive relationship. It is this irreducible embeddedness that Confucian thought takes as its starting point.

The reduction of filial obligation to parental performance is amplified by Immanuel Kant (1784), who famously defines Enlightenment as ‘man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage’—his inability to use reason without another’s guidance. Kantian moral theory demands that parents foster their child’s capacity for autonomous reasoning. Yet autonomy, for Kant, is not relational but procedural: it consists in the individual’s capacity to will universal maxims. The parent–child relationship, while acknowledged as necessary for early development, is ultimately seen as a preparatory stage to be transcended. Once the child attains autonomy, the moral tie to the parent is weakened, if not severed. This framework overlooks the possibility that autonomy might be constituted *within* relational contexts, rather than simply existing prior to them. It is precisely this possibility that Confucian ethics foregrounds. *Xiào* does not negate the importance of autonomy, but it situates it within a matrix of affective and moral formation. The child becomes an ethical agent not by abstracting from the family, but by learning, *through* it, the virtues that make autonomy meaningful: care, attentiveness, self-restraint, and moral discernment. Autonomy, in this view, is relationally

scaffolded—it grows from embeddedness, not in opposition to it. Consider, for instance, a man in his late twenties, uncertain whether to end a long-term relationship. Through regular, non-directive conversations with his father—spaces of openness rather than instruction—he gradually clarifies his values and desires. His autonomy emerges not in isolation from relational life, but through it.

The limitations of procreative and educational models of filial duty are explored in Augustine's *Confessions*, where parenthood is portrayed with deep ambivalence. While he acknowledges his mother's moral influence, he simultaneously denies her agency, attributing her warnings to divine inspiration:

She wished, and I remember in private with great anxiety warned me, 'not to commit fornication; but especially never to defile another man's wife.' These seemed to me womanish advices, which I should blush to obey. But they were Thine, and I knew it not: and I thought Thou wert silent and that it was she who spake; by whom Thou wert not silent unto me; and in her wast despised by me, her son, the son of Thy handmaid, Thy servant. But I knew it not... (Bk II, para. 7 Pusey, 2001).

For Augustine, human agency is the capacity of the will to choose and act, yet it is impaired by original sin and depends on divine grace for its proper orientation toward the good; thus, even seemingly independent human actions are ultimately sustained by God's will. In this way, he fundamentally removes his mothers's independent agency by ascribing her moral counsel not to her own will, but to God speaking through her. Parental care is reframed here as an instrument of divine grace, which can be seen as diminishing parental moral agency. Elsewhere, Augustine implies that children exist for the spiritual refinement of the parent. This instrumentalisation—coupled with original sin—empties the parent-child relationship of mutuality or reciprocal moral formation.

Such theological voluntarism stands in marked contrast to earlier Roman and Stoic conceptions of filial duty, which are grounded in the principle of gratitude. Cicero, in Book I of *On Moral Duties* (1887), suggests that children owe gratitude to their parents not simply for being born, but for benefits intentionally conferred—those conferred willingly, generously, and with the child's good in mind. This introduces a conditional model of obligation: only when parental care meets certain criteria does it merit a moral response. Seneca, in *On Benefits* (2009), develops this logic further. He argues that the mere act of procreation does not automatically entitle parents to gratitude, especially if the child was born unintentionally or for reasons unrelated to beneficence. For Seneca, gratitude arises not from biology but from sustained acts of care, education, and moral guidance—acts that enable the child to recognise and appreciate the benefits received. Crucially, Seneca

allows that children can fully repay, and even surpass, the benefits bestowed upon them, particularly when they provide assistance or honour to their parents in adulthood. Gratitude, in this framework, is not a permanent debt but a reciprocal and conditional response, sensitive to both intention and outcome.

Aquinas, writing in the medieval Christian tradition, departs from Augustine's emphasis on procreation as the basis of filial obligation, arguing instead that the family is a natural community grounded in moral responsibility and the formation of virtue. While he agrees with Aristotle that children can never fully repay their parents, he faults Aristotle for not distinguishing between the child as dependent and the child as a distinct moral agent. For Aquinas, the child 'subsists in himself and is distinct from others' (in Blustein, 1982, p. 57), and therefore cannot be subject to absolute parental authority. Filial obligations—obedience, respect, and reverence—are not contractual but arise from *pietas*, a form of gratitude for benefits freely given, including physical care, education, and moral formation. Aquinas distinguishes obedience (tied to command), respect (to rank), and reverence (to character), all of which mature children owe to their parents. These duties are moral, not legal, and express themselves most fully in acts of honour, appreciation, and care—especially in old age. This conception of *pietas* closely parallels the Confucian ideal of *xiào*, where gratitude and caregiving form the heart of ethical life

The Confucian response to such accounts would be both appreciative and critical. While recognising the moral value of gratitude, Confucians argue that it fails to capture the formative, asymmetrical, and enduring nature of the parent–child bond. Jia Yi (200–169 BCE), a Chinese essayist, poet, and political thinker of the Western Han dynasty, articulates this view in his treatise *Xinshu* (*New Writings*), where he emphasises the moral and political importance of early childhood education. As Erin Cline (2015, p. 113) explains, Jia Yi would reject the notion that any adult act could surpass the benefit of early parental care, since those initial years represent a singular and irreplaceable opportunity for moral cultivation. From a Confucian perspective, filial obligations are not transactional but existential: they do not rest on discrete acts of benefit, but on a deep recognition of the conditions that make ethical life possible. Unlike the Stoic framework, where gratitude is a proportional response to discrete acts of generosity, Confucian filiality (*xiào*) reflects an enduring moral orientation: a continuous acknowledgment of the conditions that made one's ethical life possible.

A similar critique applies to modern accounts that attempt to ground filial duty in friendship. Jane English (1979) famously contends that grown children owe their parents nothing unless a friendship

has developed between them. Acts of care must be rooted in emotional affinity; once affection dissipates, so too does obligation. This view, while safeguarding emotional authenticity, makes filial duty contingent on subjective feeling. It offers no account of the moral weight of history, identity, or formative experience. As Chenyang Li (1997) argues, such a theory risks treating family members as ‘self-interested strangers.’

By contrast, Confucianism affirms that moral life begins with roles one does not choose. The ethical challenge is not to opt in or out of these roles, but to inhabit them well. *Xiào* demands not repayment or friendship, but reverence: a cultivated awareness of the care that made one’s life—and moral life—possible. This does not mean that parents are immune to critique. Confucian texts are clear that filial devotion must be tempered by moral discernment. The concept of *quán* 權—the exercise of moral discretion in cases where established norms offer no clear guidance—paired with *yí* (appropriateness), enables the child to respond flexibly yet ethically to familial obligations. *Quán* recognises that ethical life is not governed by fixed rules alone, but often requires sensitive judgment in light of changing circumstances.<sup>61</sup> In contrast to rigid obedience, *xiào* calls for an attuned responsiveness to context—recognising that fulfilling one’s role may sometimes require interpreting or even modifying traditional norms through thoughtful moral reasoning. But it does mean that the relationship itself, even when strained, remains ethically significant. Western models, then, offer valuable insights into the mechanics of filial duty—its sources in procreation, gratitude, and reciprocity. Yet they may fall short in fully accounting for the moral distinctiveness of the parent–child bond: its asymmetry, intimacy, and identity-constituting character. Confucian ethics, through the lens of *xiào*, offers a richer vision—one that understands the family not as a contract among equals, but as a site of moral formation, ethical responsiveness, and intergenerational continuity.

The preceding comparative analysis has illuminated both the parallels and disjunctions between Confucian and Western models of filial obligation. Yet to fully assess the philosophical robustness of *xiào*, it is not enough to juxtapose it with external traditions. A deeper examination must also turn inward—toward the tensions and vulnerabilities within Confucianism itself. This self-critical turn is not a departure from the text’s argument, but its deepening: it affirms that a living tradition must be willing to interrogate its own assumptions in order to remain morally and philosophically credible. Section 5 therefore shifts the analytic lens from contrast to critique, asking not only what Confucianism offers, but what it must contend with to fulfil its ethical promise.

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<sup>61</sup> For an extended analysis of *quán* as moral discretion, see Antonio S. Cua (2014).

## 4.5 Reinterpreting Western Thought Through a Confucian Lens

To reinterpret Western models of filial obligation through a Confucian lens is not merely to critique their limitations, but to reframe some of their assumptions within a relational moral ontology—one in which personhood, responsibility, and virtue may be understood as emerging not from abstraction or autonomy alone, but from embeddedness, history, and affective responsiveness. This reinterpretation suggests that many of the aims Western thinkers pursue—moral formation, authentic care, reciprocal respect—can be fruitfully elaborated within a Confucian framework of *xiào*, where the family is not viewed as a contractual nexus but as an ethical crucible.

Locke's vision of filial obligation, for instance, locates moral responsibility in a parent's fulfilment of duties—especially education and protection. In Locke's formulation, children owe respect only if their parents have dutifully performed their role. But this makes obligation a matter of earned entitlement, potentially undermining the enduring nature of familial relationships. A Confucian re-framing would recognise that even imperfect parents, through their presence and care, shape the moral horizon of the child. While Locke successfully critiques patriarchal notions of ownership and rejects procreation as a sufficient ground for obligation, Confucianism shifts the emphasis from transaction to transformation. The parent does not earn devotion, nor does the child calculate moral debt; rather, through *xiào*, the child grows into an awareness of ethical rootedness—recognising the formative power of those who nurtured them, even when that nurturing was marked by incompleteness or constraint.

Kant's model, too, may be recast. His concern is to protect the autonomy of moral agents, and to resist heteronomous justifications for moral duty—those grounded in external authority or influence rather than in one's own rational will—as well as those based on mere sentiment. Yet, in seeking to protect rational independence, Kantian ethics may not fully account for the formative nature of early relational life. A Confucian response would not reject autonomy, but would insist that it must be relationally scaffolded. We are not born autonomous; we are taught to become so, through families that model deliberation, integrity, and responsiveness. The Kantian adult may emerge with the capacity to reason morally, but it is the family, shaped by *xiào*, that provides the soil in which this capacity grows. To imagine moral agency without reverence for this process is, for the Confucian, to forget one's roots.

This formative interdependence within the family also recasts Stoic theories of gratitude. Cicero and Seneca evaluate obligation by weighing benefits received against benefits returned, assessing intention and magnitude. But from a Confucian perspective, this logic may not fully capture the

moral particularity of familial care, especially its formative and non-reciprocal dimensions. As Cline (2015, p. 113) explains, Jia Yi would describe a mother's care as qualitatively incomparable—a form of devotion enacted not only in self-sacrifice, but in attention to the child's total development. According to Cline's reading, no later act can match or discharge this gift, precisely because early parental care provides a unique and irreplaceable opportunity for moral cultivation. The relationship, therefore, is not exhausted through reciprocity; it is deepened through reverence. Thus, while Seneca allows that the child might 'repay' the parent by surpassing their gifts, Confucianism denies that such acts constitute moral closure. One does not 'clear the ledger' with one's parents; one grows into the practice of honouring them. Even Aquinas, who distinguishes between obedience and honour, can be read as retaining a more vertically structured conception of familial obligation, in which parental authority remains pronounced. The Confucian perspective values deference, but always subjects it to ethical discernment. When a parent acts immorally, the child must respond with respectful remonstrance—not rebellion, but moral clarity. In this sense, Confucianism offers a relational model in which both parent and child are morally accountable to each other. The asymmetry of the relationship is acknowledged but not absolute; both are engaged in moral cultivation and are called to act with *rén* (consummate conduct), *yì* (appropriateness), and *lǐ* (ritual propriety)—virtues that guide not just behaviour, but the moral quality of their interactions.

The Western model perhaps least amenable to Confucian integration is Jane English's (1979) friendship-based account. She argues that adult children owe nothing to their parents unless a friendship has developed — a relationship of mutual affection and chosen reciprocity. On this view, the ending of love renders obligation null. This stance foregrounds individual choice in moral life and tends to treat relationships more as *elective affinities*—voluntary bonds sustained by mutual attraction, in contrast to the given and enduring ties of kinship—than as formative responsibilities. From a Confucian perspective, such a conception is limited in its capacity to recognise the lasting ethical significance of familial ties beyond chosen affection. Obligation is not contingent on affection; it is rooted in shared history and moral formation. The child may not feel warmth or friendship toward a parent, but the early care received—the sleepless nights, the bodily presence, the moral initiation—cannot be undone or disavowed. The task is not to force affection, but to respond to this history with reverent integrity. As Chenyang Li (1997) argues, obligation arises not from sentiment but from the roles and relationships that define our lives. Nicholas Dixon similarly suggests that duties may endure even when affection fades, because former relationships shape who we are. 'To treat a former close friend as a stranger [...] is to discount our former friendship, and indirectly devalues both of us' (1995, p. 79). While not grounded in law or contract, such obligations can reflect the moral residue of shared investment. Confucianism, by contrast, frames

filial duty as constitutive of moral identity rather than simply derivative of past interaction. It is not a leftover feeling, but an enduring structure of care and identity. As Daniel Callahan puts it, ‘the family relationship is not something one can simply take or leave’ (1985, p. 34); it is a fundamental part of our moral becoming. To sever ties with one’s parents is, in this light, to deny not only the relationship, but part of oneself.

Importantly, Confucianism does not demand sentimental loyalty or romanticised harmony. *Xiào* does not preclude critique. Mencius and the *Analects* both make clear that filiality involves moral discernment. The reverent child must *not* remain silent in the face of injustice; she must speak, remonstrate, even correct. But this critique arises from within the relationship, not against it. It is a form of ethical care, not detachment. This framing also enables a re-reading of Aquinas’s distinction between natural and acquired obligations. Aquinas sees the child’s duty as natural and inescapable, grounded in *pietas*—the virtue that expresses gratitude and reverence toward parents and country.<sup>62</sup> But whereas Aquinas roots *pietas* in divine command and natural hierarchy, Confucians locate filial obligation in ritual formation and moral responsiveness. The duty to one’s parents is *not* absolute, but it is enduring—it arises from the life that was given and the moral capacities that were formed. The duty owed to one’s parents does not disappear simply because the parent fell short in their role, or because the child no longer feels close to them emotionally.

Moreover, Confucianism offers an alternative to concerns — found in some liberal and Kantian traditions — that obligation may compromise individual freedom. Kant’s wariness of externally grounded duties, liberal contractualist emphasis on consent, and friendship-based models such as Jane English’s all treat obligation as potentially suspect unless freely chosen. In the Confucian model, obligation is not coercion, but cultivation. One becomes most fully human not by escaping ties, but by deepening them ethically. The self is not bounded, but extended — always in relation, always in the process of becoming through those relationships. Where such Western accounts grapple with a perceived tension between autonomy and obligation, Confucianism presents a vision in which the two are interdependent. The child becomes autonomous through reverent participation in familial roles; the adult sustains ethical life by carrying forward the will and work of the previous generation. As Tu Weiming writes: To be filial is not merely to continue the family line its primary purpose ‘is the ethico-religious obligation of the son to his father’—to continue and transmit, in a critical way, the work of his father (1989, p. 42). The legacy being honoured is not merely biological:

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<sup>62</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, (II-II, q. 101, esp. a.1-21947), where he presents filial duty as a moral obligation rooted in the natural bonds of generation and upbringing, distinguishing it implicitly from duties arising from voluntary contract or agreement.

it is ethical, cultural, and spiritual. And it is in this transmission—not in repayment—that filiality finds its highest expression.

Thus, the reinterpretation of Western models through a Confucian lens reveals a deeper structure of moral life. It affirms the embeddedness of the self, the formative nature of early care, and the possibility of reverence without sentimentality. It calls us to reimagine obligation not as debt, but as devotion—not as a cost imposed, but as a commitment chosen again and again, in light of who we have become and who we continue to honour. This philosophical reinterpretation gains further urgency when we consider the contemporary ethical and policy landscapes in which familial care is increasingly precarious.

## 4.6 Critical Reflections on *Xiào* 孝 and the *Xiaojing*

### 4.6.1 The Pedagogical and Esoteric Nature of Confucian Teaching

To appreciate the tensions embedded within the Confucian virtue of *xiào* (孝), one must begin not with dogma but with pedagogy. Confucius, as portrayed in the *Analects*, was not a philosopher of edicts but a master of moral formation, deeply attuned to the complexities of ethical development. He understood that moral understanding cannot be reduced to universal laws or rigid formulae. As William Sin (2020) argues, Confucius's teaching method frequently relied on the interplay between exoteric (explicit, didactic) and esoteric (implicit, intuitive)<sup>63</sup> forms of instruction. His use of ambiguous moral cases was not a failure of ethical clarity but a deliberate pedagogical strategy designed to cultivate discernment, judgment, and moral sensitivity.

A paradigmatic example of this esoteric pedagogy appears in *Analects* 13.18, where the Governor of She says, 'In our village, when a father steals a sheep, the son gives evidence against him.' Confucius responds, 'In our village, fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. Straightness is to be found in such behaviour.' At first glance, the passage appears to endorse the concealment of wrongdoing. Yet, as Yong Huang (2017) elucidates, the son's silence does not reflect moral evasion but rather moral discernment. Within the Confucian framework, the relationship between father and son constitutes a space of ethical intimacy in which loyalty and

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<sup>63</sup> Unlike the conventional association of esotericism with secret or mystical knowledge, William Sin (following Leo Strauss) defines it as a pedagogical method through which Confucian texts subtly provoke personal reflection and moral self-cultivation. In contrast, *exoteric* interpretations focus on surface-level, doctrinal readings that emphasise compliance and systematisation over individual moral agency.

trust can make possible private correction and transformation. Uprightness, in this context, is not defined by impersonal justice but by sustaining the relational conditions through which virtue can be cultivated. Confucius's refusal to issue a moral verdict might be read not as an abdication of ethics, but as an invitation to weigh competing values—justice, loyalty, mercy, and social consequence—within the complexities of lived human relationships.

The relational and context-sensitive approach is best described, as Ni Peimin suggests, through the concept of *gongfu* (功夫)—a form of moral cultivation that emphasises embodied practice, responsiveness to particular circumstances, and the gradual development of moral intuition. As Ni (2016) argues, genuine ethical insight in the Confucian tradition 'requires much more than the intellect to perceive, to understand, and to appropriate. One's reason must be aided by cultivated intuition' (quoted in, Sin, 2020, p. 210). Confucius's pedagogy accordingly aims not to resolve moral dilemmas through fixed principles, but to train students to perceive the morally salient features of a given situation and to respond with discernment. This is exemplified in *Analects* 11.22, where Confucius gives seemingly contradictory advice to two different disciples—urging Ran Qiu to act and Zilu to wait. The apparent inconsistency reveals that moral judgment depends on the individual's character, role, and relational obligations, not merely on the external features of a case. This reflects their contrasting temperaments: Ran Qiu, overly cautious, is urged to act; Zilu, impulsive, is told to wait. Confucius tailors his guidance to fit each student's character and context.

Such an approach rests on a broader understanding of the self as inherently relational. Roger Ames and David Hall (1998, p. 23) have articulated this perspective by describing the Confucian self as a 'focal point within a field of roles and relationships,' rather than as an atomistic, autonomous subject. Ethical development, in this view, is not achieved in isolation, but through the continuous negotiation of obligations across familial, social, and political contexts. One classical text that elaborates this vision is the *Xiaojing* (Classic of Family Reverence), a foundational work widely used for moral instruction throughout Chinese history. Far from being a rigid code of conduct, the text can be read as offering a form of ethical initiation—inviting the reader to grapple with the layered complexities of relational life and moral responsiveness. To interpret it prescriptively is to flatten its philosophical richness and pedagogical subtlety. As William Sin (2020, p. 207) notes, Confucian texts often deploy moral ambiguity not as a sign of ethical indecision, but as a method to sharpen perception and 'stimulate' critical engagement with 'virtue in practice'. To study *xiào*, therefore, is not merely to learn what one ought to do, but to cultivate the dispositions necessary to think morally, to feel responsively, and to act with discernment. It is a form of training not only in ethical action, but in ethical perception—an education in the subtle art of living well with others.

#### 4.6.2 Filiality and Justice: A Site of Ethical Negotiation, Not Contradiction

Among the most persistent critiques of *xiao* is its potential to subordinate universal moral principles to familial loyalty. This tension is most famously illustrated in *Mencius* 5A:3, where the sage king Shun spares his criminal father Gusou and continues to honour him, even appointing his murderous brother Xiang to a vassal state. For many contemporary readers, such acts appear to undermine justice in favour of blood ties. Qingping Liu (2003) views these episodes as emblematic of a broader Confucian tendency to elevate ‘consanguineous affection’ above impartial ethical standards, thereby distorting the character of the *jūnzǐ*. ‘Shun’s action,’ Liu argues, ‘not only broke the law “from a proper source,” but also forsook his sacred duty as a “father-mother officer (父母官 *fùmǔ guān*)” for all of his subjects’ (2007, p. 5).<sup>64</sup> This critique is further reinforced by passages such as *Analects* 13.18—previously discussed—which appear to endorse familial concealment of wrongdoing. For Liu and others, such teachings foster nepotism, favouritism, and the erosion of public justice (2007, pp. 3–7).

However, many such critiques appear to rely on a legalistic or universalist reading of the text, overlooking the interpretive traditions that view these passages not as prescriptive rules but as morally suggestive cases shaped by context. Peimin Ni (2016) argues that such examples are not moral endorsements but invitations to consider the particularities of ethical life. In traditional Chinese society, harsh punishments such as amputation or facial tattooing were common for petty thefts (Van Norden, 2008, p. 126). In such a context, a son’s silence might reflect not moral failure but a higher expression of compassion and justice. More importantly, the Confucian tradition itself does not advocate blind loyalty. Xunzi is unequivocal: ‘There are three cases in which the filial son does not follow orders’. In each case—danger, disgrace, and beastly conduct—the son is morally required to act against parental command in order to uphold greater ethical principles (Bk. 29, 2016, p. 325). This emphasis on moral discernment within filial contexts challenges the view that Confucianism necessarily prioritises familial loyalty over other moral considerations. Moreover, the very structure of the *Xiaojing* offers a counterbalance to this concern. Chapter 15 explicitly endorses remonstrance (*jiàn*, 諫) as a filial obligation. Confucius says, ‘If confronted by reprehensible behavior on his father’s part, a son has no choice but to remonstrate with his father’ (Rosemont &

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<sup>64</sup> Father–mother officer refers to a traditional Confucian and imperial Chinese concept of the ideal ruler or magistrate—someone who governs the people with the same care, affection, and responsibility that a parent would show their own children.

Ames, 2009, p. 113). While the *Xiaojing* may not provide a procedural blueprint for how to remonstrate without damaging familial harmony, its inclusion of this obligation affirms that moral accountability is integral to the practice of *xiào*.

In summary, the tension between filial loyalty and justice is real but not irresolvable. It is better understood as a site of ethical negotiation, one in which the Confucian tradition demands not blind allegiance but a balancing of competing goods. Confucian ethics begins not with abstract individuals, but with persons situated in webs of social roles and responsibilities. Moral action, then, depends on understanding and negotiating these roles with discernment and flexibility—sometimes requiring the courage to remonstrate, even against those we revere most.

#### 4.6.3 Ritual Formalism and the Challenge of Inner Sincerity

A further critique of *xiào*, particularly as expressed in the *Xiaojing*, concerns its pronounced emphasis on ritual (*lǐ* 禮) and formalised behaviour. While ritual plays a central role in Confucian ethics, critics have questioned whether an overreliance on external forms risks eclipsing the sincerity (*chéng* 誠) that gives moral substance to filial acts. The concern is not with ritual *per se*, but with its potential to become performative rather than formative—to function as a hollowed-out formality rather than a medium of genuine ethical expression. Neo-Confucian thinkers such as Zhu Xi were acutely aware of this danger. Zhu emphasised the necessity of aligning ritual with sincerity, warning that ethical life could degenerate into rote behaviour if external observance lacked internal resonance (cited in Rosemont & Ames, 2009, p. 9). Keith Knapp (2005) similarly critiques the evolution of *xiào* in later imperial China, where mourning rituals became ‘elaborate to the point of theatricality,’ thereby obscuring the relational and affective dimensions of filiality (quoted in Rosemont & Ames, 2009, pp. 4–5). As Walter Slote (1998) observes, when divorced from intentional moral cultivation, Confucian rituals risk degenerating into what might be called *symbolic capital*—tools for reinforcing social legitimacy rather than fostering virtue (cited in Rosemont & Ames, 2009, p. 2).

However, defenders of Confucianism argue that ritual, properly understood, is not a superficial shell but a vital conduit for moral cultivation. Rosemont and Ames contend that ritual is ‘the very medium through which moral sentiments are expressed and refined’ (2009, p. 44). It is not merely a symbolic overlay on ethical life, but a formative practice that harmonises inner sentiment with outward action. The practice of *xiào*, in this view, is inseparable from the cultivation of broader virtues such as consummate conduct (*rén*); it is through the disciplined rhythms of ritual that one learns to respond

with care, attentiveness, and emotional attunement. Ritual is not a substitute for sincerity but can function as its embodiment—an embodied rhythm that trains moral perception and relational sensitivity. The *Xiaojing* itself acknowledges this delicate balance. Chapter 18, for instance, prescribes a mourning period not exceeding three years: ‘Mourning must not exceed three years to make it clear to the people that they must find closure’ (Rosemont & Ames, 2009, p. 115). The text thus recognises that even grief, however profound, must be ethically calibrated—not indulged without limit but ritually structured for the sake of personal renewal and social continuity.

What emerges is a Confucian vision in which *lǐ* and *chéng* are mutually reinforcing. Ritual, when infused with sincerity, does not constrain moral life—it enables it. Far from eclipsing the ethical core of *xiào*, ritual serves as its vessel, guiding the practitioner toward a more cultivated responsiveness to others. Rather than being rejected, Confucian ritual must be reinterpreted: not as rigid formalism, but as a moral discipline that sustains the inner life of virtue through embodied practice.

#### 4.6.4 Beyond Obedience: *Xiào* 孝, Authority, and the Relational Self

Among the most significant critiques of *xiào*, particularly as articulated in the *Xiaojing*, is its historical entwinement with hierarchical and patriarchal structures. Critics argue that *xiào*, when interpreted rigidly, has served to legitimise authoritarian rule, suppress dissent, and marginalise women. These concerns arise not only from historical misuse but from the *Xiaojing*’s own textual architecture, which explicitly links familial deference with political obedience. Chapters 2 through 6 draw analogies between the filial son and the loyal minister, asserting that the emperor’s love for his own parents guarantees his benevolence toward the parents of others (Rosemont & Ames, 2009, p. 106-109). This mapping of private reverence onto public loyalty risks transforming *xiào* into a political tool of compliance, wherein moral sentiment masks asymmetrical power relations. Hu Pingsheng (1999) critiques this dynamic, warning that *xiào* has historically functioned less an ethical ideal and more a mechanism of political control, binding subjects through a language of virtue that masked the asymmetries of power (cited in Rosemont & Ames, 2009, p. 3). In dynastic contexts, such rhetoric secured loyalty to rulers through affective discourse rather than institutional accountability.

Feminist scholars have extended this critique by interrogating the *Xiaojing*’s gendered exclusions. Chapter 9 of *Xiaojing* proclaims that ‘in family reverence there is nothing more important than venerating one’s father... placing him on a par with Heaven’ (Rosemont & Ames, 2009, p. 110). This formulation explicitly privileges paternal reverence, prioritising male lineage and authority while

rendering women's roles derivative or invisible. As Hu notes, such framing emerges from feudal clan structures in which moral agency was coded as masculine and normative. Here, filiality becomes not merely an affective virtue but a legitimating ideology for entrenched gender and political hierarchies.

Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee (2006) deepens this feminist critique by examining how gender hierarchy became embedded within classical Confucian discourse, particularly through the transformation of the *nèi-wài* (inner-outer) distinction.<sup>65</sup> While later Confucian texts rigidly assigned women to the domestic sphere and men to the political realm, *nei* and *wai* were not originally gendered binaries. Rather, they functioned as relational markers indicating ritual positioning, spatial orientation, or boundaries of civilisational order. Over time, however, these flexible categories were naturalised into a male-female opposition that justified both domestic confinement and political exclusion. In Chapter 4, of her book, *Confucianism and Women*, Rosenlee argues that this process transformed a dynamic cosmological schema into a socially entrenched patriarchal order that constrained women's moral agency and civic participation. Drawing on Lisa Raphals, she cautions against reading these terms as ontological absolutes and instead reclaims *nèi-wài* as a fluid relational logic. The real danger, she suggests, lies in how Confucian cosmology—particularly in its Han interpretations—came to ontologise roles through metaphysical constructs such as *yīn-yáng*, presenting gender hierarchy not as a historical contingency but as a reflection of cosmic necessity.

Sin Yee Chan (2023) complements and extends this analysis by grounding the *nèi-wài* critique in institutional history. While she agrees that Confucianism need not ontologically fix gender roles, Chan demonstrates how *nèi-wài* evolved into a regulative framework that shaped access to education, political participation, and moral recognition. Though largely absent from early texts like the *Analects* and *Mencius*, the distinction became central to later ritual writings such as the *Liji* and *Yijing*, where it codified gendered spaces and duties (2023, p. 409). Women, Chan argues, were not simply relegated to the domestic sphere; they were systematically excluded from the ethical and political ideal of *jūnzǐ*, the cultivated person tasked with moral leadership and social transformation. Yet, like Rosenlee, Chan insists that this historical exclusion did not entail a belief in women's inherent moral inferiority. Drawing on Mencius's assertion that all people share the same innate moral endowment (*Mencius* 6A.6), she shows how women exercised moral agency

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<sup>65</sup> *Nèi* (內): often equated with inside, private, family, or feminine. *Wài* (外): often equated with outside, public, state, or masculine. Rosenlee argues these dualist mappings are Western projections, not faithful to Confucian or classical Chinese thinking.

through roles as mothers, remonstrative wives, and indirect educators. Using Bourdieu's concept of 'dominated power,' Chan reframes domestic influence not as passive compliance but as circumscribed ethical authority. Together, Rosenlee and Chan reveal a tradition shaped by exclusion yet not morally foreclosed—a tradition whose ethical resources remain open to reinterpretation and reconstruction.

While these feminist critiques expose the structural asymmetries built into classical Confucianism, defenders such as Rosemont and Ames (2009) contend that hierarchy in Confucian ethics need not imply domination. Rather than envisioning authority as a vertical command structure, they interpret Confucian relational roles—such as parent and child, elder and younger—as grounded in differential but reciprocal moral responsibilities. Authority, in their reading, is a contingent and earned status, sustained not by coercion but by conduct aligned with *rén* (仁, consummate conduct) and *yì* (義, appropriateness). Even in highly stratified relationships, they argue, Confucianism embeds mechanisms for critique and correction, most notably through the virtue of *jiàn* (諫), or remonstrance. Thus, while hierarchical, Confucian ethics contains internal checks on abuse, framing power not as possession but as an ethical performance subject to constant scrutiny. Rosenlee's work builds on this structural insight but moves beyond it in two key respects: first, by interrogating the metaphysical frameworks that have historically underwritten gender subordination, and second, by constructing an alternative vision of Confucian feminism.

In Chapter 3 of her 2006 book, *Confucianism and Women*, Rosenlee demonstrates that the gendering of *yīn-yáng* was not present in early Confucian texts but emerged distorted in Han-era cosmological synthesis. Initially, *yīn* and *yáng* were correlative forces—sun and shadow, warmth and cold—grounded in cycles of transformation, not fixed opposites. Yet later interpretations assigned normative value to these categories, associating *yáng* with male authority and *yīn* with female subordination. Rosenlee warns against projecting Western-style dualisms onto these concepts and argues instead for reclaiming their original complementarity. As she puts it, 'our Confucian feminism affirms the complementarity and reciprocity of *yīn-yáng* and *nèi-wài* as the basic structure of human relations' (2006, p. 157). Properly understood, these paired categories affirm relational interdependence, not essentialist hierarchy. This reconfiguration enables a vision of *xiào* not as passive obedience, but as a dynamic and ethically responsive form of care—mutual, discerning, and attuned to context.

In her more recent work, Rosenlee (2023) pivots from critique to constructive theorising. She articulates a hybrid Confucian feminism that draws from classical values while reconstructing

gender relations to reflect ethical reciprocity. Central to this vision is the proposal to replace the traditional spousal relationship in the Five Cardinal Relationships with friendship (*yǒu*, 友), anchored by trust (*xìn*, 信): a bond defined by mutual respect, gender neutrality, and shared cultivation. Such a reformulation not only dismantles patriarchal marriage norms but also makes space for same-sex partnerships and plural family models. In parallel, Rosenlee advances a Confucian care ethic based on *rén* that prioritises responsiveness to dependency over liberal ideals of autonomy or formal equality. This ethic extends beyond the family, encompassing civic and political life. In this broader frame, *xiào* becomes a paradigmatic practice of relational care—an anchoring virtue that links moral cultivation to social and political responsibility.

The reconstruction of *xiào* as an ethical and political virtue rooted in care raises further questions about how Confucian relationality engages broader philosophical debates about autonomy, impartial justice, and the moral claims of strangers. Can a tradition grounded in kinship and role-specific duties accommodate pluralism and liberal ideals of individual rights? One of the most profound philosophical challenges to the Confucian ideal of *xiào* arises from the tension between relational identity and individual autonomy. Whereas many Western liberal paradigms tend to locate moral responsibility within autonomous agents and emphasise rights, independence, and self-determination, Confucianism offers a contrasting view of the self as inherently relational. This ontological divergence undergirds many critiques of Confucian ethics, particularly those that regard familial obligations as constraints upon freedom or as impediments to impartial justice.

Jiwei Ci (2001) articulates this critique with particular clarity. He argues that by rooting moral identity in kinship and hierarchical roles, Confucianism fails to equip individuals with the ethical tools necessary to engage with strangers or navigate pluralistic societies. According to Ci, ‘the relational model leaves individuals ethically at sea when familial reference points are absent’ (Ci, quoted in Rosemont & Ames, 2009, p. 3). From this perspective, the Confucian self is too embedded—its identity too entangled in familial roles—to respond adequately to ethical demands that arise outside of those relationships. Qingping Liu (2003) presents a compelling critique, asserting that Confucianism’s prioritisation of consanguineous affection over public duty leads to nepotism, biased morality, and inconsistencies in legal practices. He argues that the Confucian emphasis on kinship bonds often undermines social justice and public welfare. In Liu’s view, Confucianism’s preference for familial loyalty leads to the erosion of civic virtue and the subversion of impartial governance.

While these critiques raise legitimate concerns, Peimin Ni and others have urged a more nuanced reading of Confucian ethics. Ni (2014a) argues that Confucianism reframes justice not through universalist abstraction, but through a commitment to relational embeddedness, where dignity emerges ‘through the process of establishing and promoting others’ (p. 187). Ethical deliberation, then, begins within the particularities of one’s relational ties, which function not as constraints but as the medium through which moral identity and agency are formed. Rosemont and Ames reinforce this view by reconstructing Confucian personhood as inherently relational: the self is not an isolated will but a ‘concrete person standing in a multiplicity of role relations’ (2009, p. 38). Autonomy, on this view, is not the absence of relational obligations but the cultivated ability to navigate and ethically shape them—a form of relational autonomy rooted in real human experience. This resonates with Mencius’s teaching that *xiào* is the foundation of *rén* (1A7). One becomes ethical not by transcending family ties, but by deepening one’s responsiveness within them and extending that care outward. Here, relational obligations are not constraints but foundations. One does not transcend the family to become ethical; one deepens one’s moral sensibility through the family and extends it to the world.

Contemporary scholars have also pointed out that relational models of identity may be better suited to addressing moral challenges in interdependent, pluralistic societies. Feminist ethicists such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984)<sup>66</sup> have likewise emphasised the importance of care, context, and responsiveness over abstract rights and detached impartiality. In this respect, Confucian ethics offers a cross-cultural resource for rethinking autonomy as situated, embodied, and affectively mediated. Chenyang Li (1994) expands on this convergence by placing the Confucian ideal of *rén* in direct dialogue with Gilligan’s and Noddings’ care ethics. He argues that both traditions eschew universalist moral principles in favour of context-sensitive, relationship-centred moral judgment. Like Noddings’ ‘one-caring,’ the Confucian person achieves virtue through sustained responsiveness to others, particularly within asymmetric and non-contractual relationships such as parent and child. Li (1997) highlights that while both Confucian and Western traditions value proximity, emotional attunement, and moral cultivation, they diverge sharply in their ontological assumptions—and both must confront the challenge of exclusion, particularly of those not seen as fully moral agents. Nevertheless, Li maintains that the Confucian framework—once

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<sup>66</sup> See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), for seminal articulations of feminist care ethics that provide a useful comparative framework for relational models of morality, including those in the Confucian tradition.

disentangled from its patriarchal overlays—shares with care ethics a commitment to moral life as relationally constituted and affectively sustained.

From within the Confucian tradition itself, Sin Yee Chan (2023) affirms a similar vision of relational ethics that resists patriarchal essentialism. She argues that the Confucian model, when properly understood, does not assign moral inferiority to those in potentially subordinate roles (such as wife or child), but instead affirms the capacity for equal moral cultivation across genders. For Chan, the ethical viability of Confucianism lies in its emphasis on reciprocal obligation and relational selfhood—not in fixed gender norms. This interpretive move strengthens the case for a Confucian feminism that maintains role-based ethics without reproducing patriarchal subordination. Building on this trajectory, Lisa Rosenlee (2023) offers perhaps the most expansive vision of relational ethics as both moral and political. Her Confucian feminism engages directly with feminist care ethics, including the work of Gilligan, Noddings, Held, and Kittay. She argues that while early care theorists rightly critique liberal individualism, they often fail to account for the structural and political dimensions of caregiving. In contrast, Confucian ethics not only valorises care within the family but institutionalises it in the political sphere: rulers are expected to govern with the same nurturing attentiveness that parents owe to children. This framework, Rosenlee contends, offers a politically robust model of care that transcends the limitations of both liberal and early feminist paradigms. Rather than bifurcating public and private morality, Confucianism envisions a continuum of care that links family ethics to just governance. From this perspective, *xiào* is not merely a domestic virtue but a civic principle—one that grounds a politics of mutual responsibility and ethical responsiveness.

Still, challenges remain. In situations where familial relationships are toxic, abusive, or irreparably damaged, the Confucian emphasis on enduring reverence can appear morally untenable. Critics worry that relational ethics may demand engagement or loyalty where withdrawal or estrangement would be more just. Confucians must, therefore, articulate how *xiào* can be expressed in ways that honour one's moral memory without perpetuating harm. The tradition itself offers resources for addressing this concern. *Analects* 4:18 and the *Xiaojing*'s Chapter 15 both affirm the right—indeed, the duty—of remonstrance, even when it risks disrupting familial harmony. Chapter 1 of the *Xiaojing* grounds filial reverence not in obedience, but in care for one's own integrity: 'Your physical person with its hair and skin are received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins.' This suggests that filial reverence starts with self-respect. In harmful relationships, protecting oneself may be not a rejection of *xiào*, but its rightful expression—honouring one's origins without enabling further harm. Xunzi further insists that moral

clarity must take precedence over filial deference when the two are in conflict (*Xunzi*, Book 29, p. 325). These texts suggest that *xiào* must always be tempered by practical wisdom (*zhì*, 智), the exercise of moral discretion (*quán* 權) and appropriateness (*yì*, 義), which function as safeguards against uncritical obedience.

Ultimately, the Confucian model challenges us to reimagine autonomy not as the rejection of relational ties, but as the refinement of ethical agency within them. It asks: What does it mean to act freely not despite our obligations, but through them? To be fully autonomous, in this view, is to become an agent capable of discerning when to uphold a relationship, when to critique it, and when to transform it. This is not an easy task, but it is a deeply human one—and one for which *xiào* offers both challenge and guidance.

#### 4.6.5 Cultural Particularism and the Question of Universality

A recurring concern among critics of the *Xiaojing* and the broader Confucian framework is the degree to which its moral prescriptions are culturally bounded. Rooted in the familial, hierarchical, and ritualistic norms of early Chinese society, *xiào* (family reverence) may seem ill-suited to modern pluralist contexts that prioritise individual autonomy, equality, and legal universality. Scholars such as Walter Slote and Keith Knapp have argued that the *Xiaojing*, while offering profound insight into the moral architecture of relational life, reflects a particular cultural and historical moment—one that privileges familial continuity, patrilineal descent, and ancestral rites (Knapp, 2005; Slote, 1998). Qingping Liu presses this critique further by arguing that Confucianism's emphasis on 'consanguineous affection' risks clashing with more widely accepted liberal-democratic values. In his view, the Confucian emphasis on familial loyalty can be interpreted as enabling nepotism and favouritism, thereby risking the erosion of public trust and institutional integrity. 'Confucianism decisively places consanguineous affection above the legal system and other universal principles of human behavior.' It, Liu contends, 'takes these actions, not as an offense, but as the greatest virtue' (Liu, 2007, p. 13). This, he suggests, raises the question of whether *xiào*—so deeply intertwined with cultural specificity—can be translated into a normative framework for global ethics.

Yet defenders of Confucianism argue that this critique misconstrues both the spirit and scope of its teachings. While the form of Confucian ethics is undoubtedly shaped by its cultural milieu, its ethical substance—especially as articulated in *xiào*—is potentially universal. Rosemont and Ames (2008, 2009) argue that the Confucian ideal of family reverence (*xiào*) offers more than culturally specific prescriptions—it articulates a vision of ethical life grounded in relational responsiveness, care, and

mutual cultivation. Far from being bound to its historical context, they suggest, *xiào* embodies principles of human connection and moral development that can meaningfully inform ethical relationships across diverse cultural and social settings. Peimin Ni (2014a, 2016) reinforces this perspective, arguing that although Confucianism emerged within a historically and culturally specific context, its ethical insights express a broadly human aspiration: to live meaningfully through relationships. Rather than portraying the self as autonomous and detached, Ni describes the Confucian individual as fundamentally situated within networks of familial and social roles. On this view, *xiào* should not be dismissed as a relic of feudalism, but understood as a dynamic and context-sensitive ethical orientation—one that continues to offer guidance for cultivating relational responsibility, civic participation, and care across generations.

Furthermore, the Confucian tradition itself allows for adaptability. As Rosemont and Ames remind us, the *Analects* contains examples of ritual innovation and reform, including Confucius's preference for frugality over ostentation in ceremonial dress (*Analects* 9.3). Such gestures suggest that tradition is not static but evolutionary. What matters is not the replication of historical forms, but the cultivation of ethical substance through appropriately contextualised practice. In this light, the universality of *xiào* lies not in the literal replication of Confucian rites or hierarchical family structures, but in its emphasis on relational attentiveness, moral cultivation, and reverence for those who have shaped our lives. As Tu Wei-ming emphasises, Confucianism should not be viewed as a static doctrine of the past, but as a dynamic tradition undergoing ongoing revitalisation, reinterpretation, and application in response to changing cultural and historical contexts. Its enduring presence in East Asia illustrates how moral self-cultivation can persist and adapt within modernity (Tu, 1996, pp. 23, 30).

Thus, while the *Xiaojing* is undeniably rooted in ancient Chinese sociopolitical norms, the moral vision it offers—of a self formed through care, responsibility, and moral responsiveness—has relevance well beyond its original context. In an age marked by rootlessness, alienation, and institutional withdrawal, *xiào* offers a reminder that ethical life begins not in abstraction, but in the concreteness of relationship.

## 4.7 Conclusion – From Repayment to Reverence

The ethical weight of *xiào*, grounded in Confucian relational philosophy, extends far beyond classical Chinese thought. It resonates with pressing questions of our time: how to care across

generations, how to affirm moral agency within families, and how to sustain ethical life in an age of atomisation and institutional withdrawal. As modern societies grapple with demographic ageing, diminishing state welfare, and the transformation of family structures, the Confucian vision of familial reverence offers both moral orientation and structural reimagination.

In East Asian societies, filial obligation remains more than a cultural expectation; in many contexts, it is a juridical imperative. China and Singapore, for instance, have codified filial support in law. Singapore's Maintenance of Parents Act allows elderly parents to sue their children for financial maintenance. As L. Yu (2019) notes, over half of all U.S. states likewise retain some form of filial responsibility legislation. These legal frameworks reflect an enduring belief that the family—however it is configured—remains the most stable site of intergenerational care. Yet Confucian ethics warns against reducing filiality to legal compliance or economic utility. As Confucius cautions in *Analects* 2.7, mere material provision without reverence (*jing* 敬) is ethically hollow, indistinguishable from the feeding of beasts. *Xiào*, properly understood, is not transactional; it is consummatory. As Rosemont and Ames (2009) put it, the ethical substance of care lies not merely in the act but in how it is performed—with joy, attentiveness, and moral intentionality.

Consider Rosemont and Ames' example of a child choosing between massaging her grandmother's aching shoulder or going out to play with friends. The Confucian insight is that the moral value of the act lies not in the external behavior alone, but in the child's inner disposition. The child who helps only out of obligation, or who does so begrudgingly, cannot be praised; rather, 'you must want to ease your grandmother's pains, be happy to do so, and prefer doing it to joining your playmates. This is consummatory conduct' (2009, p. 28). Such responsiveness does not arise spontaneously, but is cultivated through habituation and the particular intimacy of the filial bond—one formed through sustained care and affection, often across generations. Equally, the grandmother's role in this dynamic is not passive: in the Confucian tradition, elders have the responsibility to receive such care with gratitude, to model virtue through their conduct, and to avoid imposing demands that could turn willing affection into reluctant compliance. Because the relationship is one of love rather than contract, a grandmother would not compel her granddaughter to massage her; rather, she would create the conditions in which such an act is freely and joyfully offered. This stands in contrast to some liberal frameworks, where care is often framed as an obligation to be fulfilled rather than a disposition to be embodied. In Confucian ethics, *xiào* becomes not a constraint on autonomy but a site of ethical flourishing—a practice through which autonomy itself is reimaged as responsiveness to the relationships that shape our moral becoming. This relational and dispositional framework takes on particular resonance in contemporary contexts

shaped by evolving family structures. Furstenberg *et al.* (2020) argue that many contemporary families are no longer anchored solely in biological or marital ties, but are instead sustained through caregiving practices and relational commitment. They highlight that ‘the Western kinship system offers a great amount of discretion to individuals to define their relatives beyond the nuclear household’ (p. 1407), and that kinship is often constructed through ‘the act of parents “doing” caretaking’ (p. 1415). Although the authors do not explicitly invoke Confucian ethics, their discussion of adoptive, same-sex, and voluntary kinship structures resonates with the Confucian ideal of *xiào*—a moral orientation toward care, reciprocity, and intergenerational responsibility. These families, formed through intention rather than tradition, exemplify what Furstenberg *et al.* describe as ‘a broad cultural acceptance of an inclusive approach to incorporating potential kin in “family relationships”’ (p. 1423).

Recent scholarship further supports this reinterpretation: Chenyang Li (1994) drew compelling parallels between Confucian *rén* and feminist care ethics, highlighting a shared emphasis on emotional attunement, moral particularity, and relational responsiveness. Sin Yee Chan (2023) argues that while Confucian ethics affirms differentiated roles, it does not reduce those in subordinate positions to moral inferiority, thus opening space for egalitarian readings of *xiào*. Building on this, Rosenlee (2023) reconceives Confucian care not only as a familial ethic but as a political ideal—grounding state legitimacy in the same moral attentiveness that defines good parenting. Together, these perspectives enrich a feminist Confucian vision in which *xiào* is reframed not as submission to hierarchy, but as the cultivation of reverence across both intimate and civic life.

The Confucian tradition, whilst historically aligned with patriarchal and patrilineal structures, also contains the conceptual tools to accommodate this diversity. Its moral core is relational, not essentialist. What truly matters is not adherence to one's lineage, but the development of sincere and respectful care. This moral flexibility enables Confucianism to stay true to its foundational values while allowing them to evolve. Rather than being assigned at birth or based on gender, roles are understood as fluid and shaped by a person's ethical character and contributions. This enables the affirmation of moral agency in contexts historically excluded from heteronormative or hierarchical family models. In turn, *xiào* becomes not a relic of the past, but a resource for rethinking kinship, obligation, and the self in pluralistic societies.

The contrast with some strands of Western liberal moral theory is especially illuminating. In certain frameworks where individual autonomy is emphasised, filial duty may appear conditional: one

supports parents if they were exemplary, or if affection is mutual. As discussed in earlier sections, theorists such as Jane English (1979) and Jeffrey Blustein (1982) propose friendship-based or gratitude-based models that tie filiality to parental performance. These accounts are compelling but fragile—particularly in a time of familial fragmentation, estrangement, and emotional ambivalence. Confucian ethics offers an alternative: a vision of duty rooted not in coercion or sentimentality, but in relational embeddedness. One honours one's parents not because they were perfect, but because they were formative. *Xiào* does not erase harm, nor does it demand idealisation. It calls for ethical memory—the discernment to recognise and respond to the shaping forces of one's life, even when they are flawed.

This orientation of the basis for filial duty raises hard questions: how does one practise *xiào* in cases of trauma or neglect? What forms can reverence take when intimacy is not possible? Confucianism does not offer simplistic answers. Rather, as Mencius and the *Analects* make clear, filiality requires the cardinal Confucian virtues. Filial reverence is not blind obedience but moral discernment. One may remonstrate with parents, maintain ethical distance, or transform reverence into remembrance. In all cases, the aim is not submission, but responsible engagement. These insights have implications beyond the private sphere. In healthcare, Confucian ethics challenges autonomy-based models by foregrounding relational decision-making and the moral authority of elders. In education, it affirms that virtue is cultivated not in isolation, but through intergenerational transmission. In public policy, it argues that eldercare should be publicly supported as a shared moral commitment, not privatised as a familial burden. Confucianism thus refuses the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. It affirms care not as a fallback when systems fail, but as the basis from which systems should be built.

Ultimately, *xiào* teaches that we are not self-made. We are formed by the moral labour of others—parents, guardians, kin, and community. To live well is to live reverently: to honour those ties, to reflect upon them, and to respond with gratitude, integrity, and joy. In a world that often prizes detachment and forgetfulness, the Confucian vision offers a compelling alternative—a life rooted in memory, relationship, and moral cultivation.



## CHAPTER 5: Education of an Ethical Exemplar – The *Jūnzǐ* 君子

### 5.1 The Ethical Ideal of the *Jūnzǐ*

#### 5.1.1 The Reimagining of Nobility: From Bloodline to Virtue

The Confucian reimagining of nobility does not begin with revolution but with redefinition. Prior to Confucius, the term *jūnzǐ* (君子) typically designated a title of hereditary rank, one assigned to the children of nobles regardless of their demonstrated moral standing. It was a name given by birthright, conferred through lineage and maintained by entitlement. Yet within Confucius' thought, this designation undergoes a transformation both radical and quiet: *jūnzǐ* becomes not a social category but an ethical aspiration. It comes to signify not those born into privilege, but those who cultivate a kind of inner excellence through ritual discipline, moral sensibility, and relational attunement. Confucius transformed and enlarged *jūnzǐ*'s meaning by de-emphasising the superiority of birth, allowing all persons to aspire to nobility of character through cultivating moral excellence (*dé*). Xunzi echoes this aspiration, arguing in *Chapter 23* that although human nature is bad, anyone can become a *jūnzǐ* through disciplined practice of ritual propriety (*lǐ*) and sustained moral effort (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016). This ethical shift inaugurates a vision in which human worth is not inherited but formed, not given but grown. Confucius connoted *jūnzǐ* with 'nobility of refinement rather than blood', thereby enabling social and political distinctions to be attributed to merit rather than ancestry (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 164). The *jūnzǐ* thus becomes not only a moral ideal but a sociopolitical counter-image, one whose authority is grounded in the radiance of character rather than the power of inheritance.

This redefinition does not merely revise a term; it inaugurates an anthropology. For if nobility is earned through cultivation rather than lineage, then the human being is not a static entity to be ranked, but a dynamic moral project to be undertaken. The distinction between the *jūnzǐ* and the *xiǎorén* (small-minded person) becomes one of orientation rather than nature. As cited in Cua (2014, p. 295), Xunzi writes, 'With respect to inborn nature... the *jūnzǐ* and small-minded persons are one and the same... but their pursuits are opposite.' Moral nobility, in this schema, is not the property of a few, but the calling of all. The *jūnzǐ* is not the exception but a latent possibility—realised through labour, reflection, ritual, and ethical becoming. And thus nobility is no longer the name of a class: it is the name of a calling. What is being redefined here is not merely social status, but the very conditions under which a life becomes worthy of trust, reverence, and emulation.

The role of education in this vision is profound. The *jūnzǐ* is never merely good by temperament, nor wise by nature; rather, like Confucius, she is one who has undertaken the lifelong project of ethical formation. Such education cannot be divorced from ethics, for it does not concern itself with cognitive mastery or technical competence, but with the refinement of judgement, tone, and character. As the *Analects* (2.12) reminds us, the *jūnzǐ* is not a vessel for a single purpose, but one whose mind moves freely among the arts and whose conduct is shaped by an aesthetic sensitivity to the moral texture of things. Poetry (*Analects* 16.13), music (13.3; 14.12), and ritual propriety (6.27) are not embellishments but core to the cultivation of discernment. According to Kaizuka (2002, pp. 96–97), the *jūnzǐ* unites two fundamental aspects: moral exemplarity and cultural refinement. These are not bifurcated qualities but convergent paths, whereby the rituals and expressive forms of civilisational life shape the inner architecture of moral discernment. The refined *jūnzǐ* is not an aesthete, but one whose speech, bearing, and relational presence express moral weight and clarity.

That this figure once denoted aristocratic lineage only deepens the radical nature of its redefinition. Confucius opens the symbolic space of *jūnzǐ* to all who commit to the slow work of self-cultivation. As cited in Cua (2014, p. 296), de Bary (1991) affirms that the noble man becomes a model for those in leadership, embodying a life of higher responsibilities—not grounded in rank, but in moral character. This presence is not performative but earned—a quiet gravity shaped by coherent words and deeds, offering ethical orientation to others. Yet this is no easy life. The *jūnzǐ* may be required to renounce comfort, to endure solitude, or to embrace poverty without bitterness. As the *Analects* observe, the *jūnzǐ* is content in modest conditions (1:12) and may be called to sacrifice even his life for the sake of principle (15.9). His nobility lies not in what he possesses, but in what he becomes willing to give.

In this way, the redefinition of *jūnzǐ* not only transforms the meaning of nobility but reorients the very horizon of moral life. It suggests that to become human is not a matter of affirming one's individuality, but of submitting the self to the demands of virtue, of allowing one's identity to be formed through practice, ritual, and the moral care of others. Nobility, in the Confucian imagination, is not an essence to be discovered but a disposition to be cultivated. The *jūnzǐ* is not born—he is made. And the materials of her making are not prestige or genius, but humility, patience, and the slow, luminous labour of becoming what one ought to be. This vision of moral formation finds a later echo in Matthew Arnold's (1869) view that education ought to transmit 'the best which has been thought and said,' not as a static inheritance, but as a means of humanising the person through reflection and discernment (in Johnson, 1972, p. 165). Yet as Standish (2007, p. 44)

cautions, the value of the past lies not in its age, but in its role as an evolving attempt to grasp what matters in human life. Like the Confucian path of self-cultivation, such an education is never finished, but becomes an ongoing project of ethical refinement and relational responsibility. In Confucian thought, this ongoing moral cultivation is inseparable from the relational fabric through which the self takes form.

### 5.1.2 Relational Personhood: The Role-Embedded Self

In the Confucian tradition, as previously stated, the self is not conceived as a solitary unit defined solely by internal states or autonomous reason. It does not precede its relationships nor exist in abstraction from them. Instead, personhood is fundamentally relational—shaped, refined, and expressed through one's roles and responsibilities. One does not first have a self and then act in the world; one becomes a self through enacting ethical roles. These roles—child, parent, teacher, friend—are not accidental or external to who one is; they are constitutive of identity itself.

Roger Ames articulates this vision by describing the Confucian self as a 'focus-field'—a centre of relational energy within a dynamic field of social interactions (1999, p. 191). In this image, the self is not a static, interior container but a relational node, shaped by and shaping the interactions in which it participates. The individual is, in Ames' words, 'a productive focus of the experiences and interactions constituting that society' (ibid.). This model differs from many influential Western frameworks that present personhood primarily as a form of private interiority. The contrast is especially vivid in light of Cartesian dualism, which, as Hall and Ames (1987) argue, separates mind from body and reason from relation—producing a more disembodied, self-contained subject. In contrast, the Confucian self is emergent from patterned, participatory life: responsive, performative, and always situated. It is a site of continual becoming—moral, social, and aesthetic.

This leads to what Ames and Rosemont call '*Confucian role ethics*', which they distinguish from both rule-based and virtue ethics. Moral identity is not based on the possession of inner traits nor on adherence to fixed laws, but on *how* one lives and enacts the roles one inhabits (Ames, 2011; Rosemont & Ames, 2016). In this framework, each role carries its own ethical demands, and it is through performing these well that one's humanity is cultivated. The self is an ethical project, worked out in the rhythms and negotiations of ritual life. To be ethical is to be appropriate in relation to one's role—to act with *yì*, to speak with *lǐ*, and to feel with *rén*.

This role-constituted personhood is nowhere more clearly symbolised than in the very structure of the language. David Wong draws our attention to the character for *rén* (仁)—a composite of ‘person’ (人) and ‘two’ (二). This visual composition renders explicit the Confucian claim: ‘the Confucian character *rén* 仁—joining ‘person’ (人) and ‘two’ (二)—symbolises this relational ontology’ (2004, p. 420), one which is also present, albeit in more intimate form of mother and child, on the more ancient Guodian bamboo strips, where *rén* combines the graph for the ‘lived body’ of a pregnant woman (*shēn* 身) with ‘heartmind’ (*xīn* 心). To be human is, by definition, *to-be-in-relation*. The very grammar of personhood offers a counterpoint to the image of the atomised self and affirms the relational web through which moral life is formed. The symbolic grammar of relation finds further depth in the lived experience of selfhood. Henry Rosemont rejects the idea of a fixed inner self, using the metaphor of an onion to illustrate that identity is made up of our ethical roles: ‘I peel off successive layers... And what is left when there are no moral layers? Nothing at all’ (2015, p. 14). As our relationships shift, so too does our sense of self: ‘As our roles change with the passing of years... I become quite literally a different person’ (ibid., pp. 94–95). This is not a loss of self, but its ongoing reformation through moral engagement. To enact a role—son, friend, citizen—is to participate in a living ethic shaped by context and care.

Tu Weiming offers a complementary insight by rejecting the idea of the self as a private possession. ‘The Confucian self worth cultivating is never a private possession of a single individual but a shareable experience that underlies common humanity’ (1985, p. 57). The notion of ‘learning for the sake of the self’ (*wèi jǐ zhī xué*, 為己之學), often misunderstood in some Western contexts, is not an affirmation of selfishness but of depth. As Tu clarifies, this is not about selfishness, but about cultivating one’s full humanity—so that one may serve others more truly, not by design, but by depth of being (2010, p. 188). The *jūnzǐ* does not cultivate the self to escape society but to deepen her capacity for moral contribution within it. This account of the self also reframes our understanding of ritual. Ames (1991, p. 105) critiques Fingarette’s portrayal of the self as ‘an empty room’—a metaphor that, in Ames’ view, risks suggesting a passive or hollow centre around which ritual merely circulates. In contrast, Ames argues that the self is already patterned by *lǐ* (ritual), constituted through active participation in the relational choreography of daily life. One does not acquire a self and then enter into ritual; rather, the self is discovered *in* ritual. In this frame, the *jūnzǐ* is not a sovereign agent imposing meaning onto the world, but one who enacts meaning through presence—through the sincerity with which she bows, the attentiveness with which she listens, and the care with which she speaks. Each act becomes a disclosure of self, and each moment a site of moral expression.

Altogether, this vision of role-embedded personhood differs significantly from strands of liberal individualism that privilege autonomy over obligation, and inner conviction over relational responsibility. The Confucian model does not oppose autonomy but reframes it as something cultivated within relationship, not despite it. It insists that we do not find ourselves in withdrawal, but in participation. The *jūnzǐ* is not the one who isolates herself in pursuit of purity but the one who enters more deeply into the fabric of life—refining herself in the presence of others, responding to the world with care, and becoming human in the company of those who call him to virtue.

### 5.1.3 Becoming Human: *Rén*, *Yì*, and the Embodied Continuity of Character

To be human in the Confucian tradition is not to attain a fixed essence or to reach a static moral end. It is to enter a continual process of ethical becoming—a recursive, embodied practice shaped by ritual, reflection, and relational responsibility. Confucius sketches this unfolding in the *Analects* (2.4), mapping moral growth across the decades of his life. This is not perfectionism: it is cultivation. The self is not discovered but formed—like a garden, nurtured through intention and response. At the heart of this process are two interwoven virtues: *rén* (仁) and *yì* (義). *Rén*, often translated as humaneness, benevolence, compassion or consummate conduct, begins in spontaneous responsiveness to the other. Mencius illustrates this with the image of the child near the well (2A.6)—our impulse to save the child is not reasoned but a reflex of care. This affective movement, the ‘heart of compassion’ (*cèyǐn zhī xīn* 惻隱之心), is not the fullness of virtue but the seed from which it grows. As Tu Weiming observes, the beginning of moral self-transformation lies in nurturing our relational sensibilities—a process cultivated through education, ritual, and reflection (1985, p. 69). Importantly, this humaneness is not abstract or internal. *Rén* is best understood as a relational ontology: a way of being that arises from and through relationships. The very character for *rén*—a composite of ‘person’ (人) and ‘two’ (二) and of the more ancient graph for the ‘lived body’ of a pregnant woman (*shēn* 身) with ‘heartmind’ (*xīn* 心)—signals that humanity exists only in relation. The Confucian self is not wholly a sovereign entity, but a site of dynamic interaction, shaped by roles, ritual, and responsiveness. *Rén* is a presence before it is a principle. The *jūnzǐ* does not proclaim *rén*; she carries it—in how she listens, walks, bows, and speaks.

Yet care, untethered, can become indulgent. This is where *yì* enters—ethical fittingness or moral appropriateness. It is the inward capacity to recognise and respond rightly to each situation. Mencius identifies this as the ‘heart of shame’ (*xiūwù zhī xīn*, 2A6)—a visceral response to what is unworthy. This shame is not embarrassment, but resistance to degradation, as seen in 6A10, where

even a starving man refuses food offered with contempt. *Yì* protects *rén* from sentimentality. It grants boundaries, allowing the practitioner to say, ‘This I cannot do,’ even when compassion tempts otherwise.

*Yì*, however, is not rigid. It is moral improvisation, attuned to context. Rather than asking, ‘What should one do?’ *yì* asks, ‘What should I do here, now, in this relationship?’ This capacity for discernment makes the *jūnzǐ* ethically credible. *Yì* is what keeps ritual (*lǐ*) alive, adaptable, and meaningful. It is supported by two further relational qualities: *zhōng* (忠), or doing one’s utmost, and *shù* (恕), putting oneself in the other’s shoes. *Zhōng* brings sincerity to one’s commitments; *shù* invites reflective empathy—placing oneself in the other’s position. These prevent *yì* from becoming cold or brittle, allowing it to function as a felt clarity that is both principled and compassionate.

*Rén* and *yì* are thus embodied. The *jūnzǐ*’s authority stems not from rank, but from the quiet radiance of *dé* (德)—a coherence of character sensed before it is explained. Virtue is enacted, not declared. It appears in tone, timing, and gesture. The *jūnzǐ* persuades not by argument but by presence. This is what Confucius means when he says that *rén* must never be set aside, not even for a meal (*Analects* 4.5), and what Tseng Tzu echoes when he says the *jūnzǐ* carries *rén* as a burden until death (*Analects* 8.7). These are not fleeting moods or isolated deeds but the rhythms of a life. Continuity of character arises not from grand acts but from countless small expressions—bowing rightly, refusing unjust gain, offering quiet care.

To become human, then, is not to perfect the self, but to participate in its becoming—to shape and be shaped by the ethical field of relation. *Rén* draws us outward with care; *yì* returns us to moral precision. Together, they form the heart of the *jūnzǐ*—not a flawless person, but one whose presence makes ethical life feel possible, credible, and worthy.

## 5.2 Embodied Ethics and Relational Authority

### 5.2.1 Living *Lǐ* 禮: Ritual as Ontological Patterning

In the Confucian vision of moral cultivation, *lǐ* (禮) is not an ornamental layer laid over ethical life, nor merely a tool for reinforcing social decorum. It is, as Tu Weiming insists, the very grammar of ethical being—a cultivated form through which the moral self becomes intelligible and effective in the world. *Lǐ*, as Tu Weiming describes it, is the dynamic process by which one becomes human

through participation in a moral community (Tu, 1972). This vision evokes something like an ethical choreography, as one tunes their intentions and actions to the relational rhythms of life. In this light, ritual becomes not a script to be followed but a pattern to be embodied—a practice through which the moral life gains structure, elegance, and resilience. The *jūnzǐ*, then, is not one who imposes order from above, but one who lives with such moral gravity that their presence itself becomes a source of coherence. Their actions are measured, not mechanical; graceful, not decorative; and always attuned to the ethical weight of form.

*Lǐ* governs not only ceremonies and formalities but the small gestures of everyday life—how one walks into a room, the tone with which one greets a friend, the silence one allows to speak. *Lǐ* is not merely about following tradition; it is about participating in a dynamic moral ecology, where ethical action is ritualised and ritual performance is morally transformative. It is in this capacity that *lǐ* functions as a medium of self-formation. As Xunzi emphasises, ritual draws the individual out of their inborn self-centredness and, through deliberate repetition and habituation, shapes them into a moral being (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016 chap. 23). Through repetition, reflection, and refinement, *lǐ* tunes impulse into intention and transforms behaviour into presence.

This conception finds powerful articulation in Herbert Fingarette's *The Secular as Sacred* (1972/1998), who describes ritual as the artistic and moral shaping of conduct. Ritual, for Fingarette, is not external to the moral life—it is the moral life rendered in form. The beauty of a bow, the cadence of a voice, the structure of a lesson: all are expressions of ethical substance, not just style. For the *jūnzǐ*, this performative dimension is not secondary. It is through this aesthetic-moral unity that ethical gravity is made visible. Consider the teacher who, as students enter the classroom, greets each one by name with a gentle nod, placing her phone face-down on the desk to signal full presence. She begins the lesson not with hurried instructions, but with a pause—allowing the room to settle—then poses a carefully chosen question in a low, steady voice. When a student answers, she listens without interruption, allowing silence to stretch before responding with thoughtful elaboration. She is not merely modelling professionalism. She is forming an atmosphere—an ethical space in which others are invited to attend, to respond, to grow.

Tu's (1999) understanding of *lǐ*—aesthetic form as ethical substance—reinforces this union of form and moral meaning. As Tu suggests, *lǐ* is not mere convention but a ritual process through which 'the body becomes a fitting expression of the self' (ibid., p. 33). A bow is not just a gesture, nor is a funeral merely a cultural practice. When enacted with *chéng* (誠), or sincerity, they become

moments of ethical resonance: they make care visible. They disclose the self not through self-expression, but through attunement. In this sense, *lǐ* becomes a pedagogy—a curriculum of the body. The self learns through form how to inhabit meaning, just as the calligrapher learns to breathe through the brush. But this pedagogy is not passive. The *jūnzǐ* does not receive *lǐ* as a fixed code; she participates in its evolution. Tu is clear that *lǐ* is not static, but a dynamic, living tradition—a process of self-transformation and mutual shaping between self and society (1972, pp. 194–195). In this sense, *lǐ* is not coercion but communion—not submission to external rules but harmonisation with a shared moral world. The rituals of greeting, mourning, celebrating, teaching—each becomes a site where meaning is not only preserved but created anew. The *jūnzǐ* is not a moral bureaucrat, but a choreographer of care.

Tu's portrayal of *lǐ* as a living tradition of embodied care is echoed by Chenyang Li, who likens *lǐ* to cultural grammar. Just as grammar allows one to speak a language with precision and resonance, *lǐ* teaches one to move through the social world with ethical clarity. '*Lǐ* cultivates members toward the goal of *rén*,' Li writes (2007, p. 311). And it does so not through imposition, but through form. It trains the body in timing, teaches the heart to listen, and allows the spirit to dwell in reverent rhythm. This is why Confucius could say, 'Unless a man has the spirit of the rites, in being respectful he will wear himself out... in having courage he will become unruly... in being forthright he will become intolerant' (*Analects* 8.2). Without the inner attunement that *lǐ* requires, even the virtues can become distorted. *Lǐ* is what allows them to be not only right, but also right in form—measured, rhythmic, and morally graceful.

When separated from *rén*, however, *lǐ* risks becoming mere performance. Confucian thinkers repeatedly warn against this danger: the hollowing out of ritual into empty display. As Tu (1968, p. 33) emphasises, 'the essence of ritual lies not in its performance but in the ethical intention that informs it.' *Lǐ* must be inhabited, not merely enacted; its power lies not in formal correctness but in the sincerity and moral purpose that animate it. The *jūnzǐ* does not engage in *lǐ* to be seen, but to live it as a medium of moral presence. This concern echoes Confucius' critique of the 'village worthy' (*xiāngyuàn* 鄉愿), whose conformity conceals a lack of inner virtue (*Analects* 17.13).<sup>67</sup> For Confucius, the danger lies not in ritual itself, but in its detachment from the moral heart.

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<sup>67</sup> For Mencius' elaboration on this saying, see the Mencius, VII.B.37.

Yet when *lǐ* is reunited with *rén*, when it flows from sincerity and care, it transforms. And when this happens—when the bow is given not just with correctness, but with care; when the word of thanks is offered not out of habit, but from within relationship—then *lǐ* becomes an aesthetic expression of the moral life—a mode of ethical embodiment where form and virtue are no longer distinguishable. It becomes a mode of ethical expression so refined that form and virtue are no longer distinguishable. It is no longer a question of what one should do, but how one *ought* to be. The *jūnzǐ* does not ask how to teach ethics. She teaches through gesture. Through attention. Through the quiet authority of composure. And in doing so, she renders moral seriousness visible—not through declaration, but through the artistry of form.

### 5.2.2 Cultivating *Zhì* 智: Wisdom as Moral Intuition

If *rén* draws the heart outward in care, *yì* refines that impulse with fittingness, and *lǐ* gives it rhythmic form, then *zhì* (智) is what allows the *jūnzǐ* to see clearly within complexity, to weigh tensions without paralysis, and to act wisely where rules falter. In Confucian thought, *zhì* is not cleverness, nor a cache of abstract knowledge. It is a cultivated faculty of moral discernment that fuses intuition with contextual sensitivity—clarity of thought with clarity of heart. *Zhì* is relational, responsive, and practical: an ethical intelligence attuned to what is most fitting in each unfolding moment.

In Chapter 3, *zhì* was introduced as the cultivated capacity for moral discernment—an embodied wisdom rooted in experience, relational attunement, and ritual practice. Drawing on Hall and Ames, this account emphasised how *zhì* enables the *jūnzǐ* to balance the other virtues with clarity and care. However, in moments of moral rupture—when inherited forms are destabilised or context becomes radically ambiguous—this relational discernment must deepen. Here, Mingjun Lu’s (2022) account of *zhì* as luminous, intuitive knowing offers a broader horizon: one in which wisdom is not only ethical, but metaphysical; not only responsive, but generative. The discussion below explores how this expanded notion of *zhì* can support ethical action when form is insufficient, and ritual may need to be reinterpreted from within.

Mingjun Lu (2022) significantly deepens the ethical and relational account of *zhì* by demonstrating that it is not merely a form of moral discernment, but also a metaphysical concept in classical Chinese philosophy. Etymologically, the character 智 combines *zhī* (知, ‘to know’) with *rì* (日, ‘sun’), suggesting not just knowing, but illuminated knowing—a wisdom that sheds light on moral reality (p. 216). Lu notes that ancient texts often use *zhì* (智) interchangeably with *zhī* (知), but this

masks an important distinction: while *zhī* (知) in its modern forms (e.g. *zhīshi* 知识, ‘knowledge’) connotes informational or analytical awareness, *zhì* (智) conveys a deeper, intuitive grasp of ethical and cosmological order. This depth is rooted in its role as one of Mencius’s four *sīduān* (四端), or moral sprouts. As Lu explains, Mencius views *zhì* as both moral intuition—the ability to discern right from wrong—and metaphysical orientation, grounded in the natural tendency (*xìng*, 性) of all things (pp. 217–218). In contrast to *zuò* (造), which denotes strained or artificial thinking, *zhì* aligns with *dào* by working with the flow of things, as exemplified by the sage Yu’s flood management: rather than resisting the water, Yu channels it according to its natural path (*Mencius* 8.26). Thus, *zhì* becomes a mode of knowing that is both attuned and non-coercive—wisdom as resonance rather than domination.

Lu further clarifies that the ancient concept of *zhì* encompassed both what we now distinguish as *zhì* (practical intelligence) and *huì* (慧, intuitive or philosophical insight). In this broader sense, *zhì* is akin to what she calls ‘wisdom of universality’—comparable to Aristotelian *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) and *sophia* (theoretical wisdom), or Bacon’s ‘pure knowledge of nature and universality’ (pp. 215–216, 219). It is a form of knowing that arises not from analytic reason alone, but from *dèxìng zhìzhī* (德性之知), ‘knowledge arising from moral nature’—a reflective, luminous awareness anchored in *dào* (p. 218). The luminous quality of *zhì* is not static. It must be cultivated. The metaphor of the metaphysical mirror (玄鑑, *xuánjiàn*) runs throughout Lu’s analysis, echoing Daoist and Neo-Confucian imagery. The sagely mind, like a mirror or still water, reflects things as they are—untainted by ego or desire (pp. 221–223). Cheng Yi calls this the clarity of *liángzhī* (良知), or ‘innate conscience’, and insists that only when the mind is cleared of distortion can *zhì* emerge as true discernment. For Wang Yangming, *liángzhī* is both moral principle and metaphysical essence: The innate conscience of my mind is the principle of Heaven (p. 227).<sup>68</sup>

Crucially, *zhì* (智), or living wisely, entails what Lu calls *prudential wisdom*—the capacity to recognise and respect limits, both ethical and cognitive. This is captured in the Confucian concept of *zhīzhǐ* (知止), often translated as ‘knowing where to stop,’ but more precisely rendered in the *Great Learning* as ‘knowledge of the ultimate end.’ As the text puts it: ‘[Only] *zhìzhī* (知止) allows

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<sup>68</sup> Wang Yangming identifies *liángzhī* (良知) as the ontological ground of the mind, where moral knowing is both the essence of the self and an expression of cosmic principle.

one to settle down with firm goals; firm goals lead to a calm mind; a calm mind is favorable to *lǜ* (慮), prudent thinking; and only prudent thinking ensures right actions' (quoted Lu, p. 235). *Zhìzhǐ* thus marks not just a limit, but a teleological clarity—that is, a clear sense of the ultimate end or purpose—that guides wise action. This layered meaning becomes clearer when read alongside its homophones: *zhìzhī* (致知), 'to extend knowledge,' and *zhìzhì* (知至), 'to know the highest' or the first principles of things. Together, they suggest that wisdom is not endless accumulation, but oriented discernment—knowing enough, and knowing toward what end. In this sense, *zhì* is not only a light that reveals but a compass that restrains and directs. Crucially, this wisdom is not divorced from tradition; Lu shows that *zhì* enables the *jūnzǐ* to reinterpret *lǐ* (ritual propriety) faithfully in changing contexts by grasping its metaphysical essence rather than clinging to surface form. This resonates with Tu Weiming's view that the power of *lǐ* lies not in performance, but in the sincerity that animates it. Through *zhì*, the *jūnzǐ* discerns the ethical rhythm beneath convention and responds not with rigidity, but with attuned improvisation.

*Zhì* is what allows the *jūnzǐ* to harmonise the virtues. One may feel *rén*, yet struggle to express it within the structures of *lǐ*; one may hold fast to *xìn*, yet find it in tension with *yì*. *Zhì* weighs these tensions not through fixed rules, but through cultivated discernment—what Lu (2022) calls a wisdom of universality, grounded in the natural tendencies of things and attuned to the flow of the *dào*. It is not passive intellect but an active, reflective clarity, able to read the moral weight of a situation without imposing overly rigid or overly abstract frameworks. Hall and Ames (1987, pp. 55–56) similarly describe *zhì* as aesthetic responsiveness: a capacity to discern the appropriate (*yì*) by reading the unique texture of a moment. The *jūnzǐ*, in their account, acts not with certainty but with grace—like an artist composing within form, not following it mechanically. In this way, *zhì* resists both rigidity and relativism. It does not discard tradition, but interprets it with fidelity to ethical intent; it does not reject ritual, but reanimates it in context. When *rén* feels exhausted, *lǐ* outdated, *yì* politicised, and *xìn* corroded, *zhì* offers not formulae but orientation—a luminous responsiveness that sustains the moral life through attentiveness, not certainty. The wise person is not removed from the world but deeply engaged in it, shaped by years of practice: by listening well, reflecting, making mistakes, and returning to the work of moral action. *Zhì*, then, is not simply a virtue among others; it is a mode of being—an embodied discernment that enables one to live with clarity, responsiveness, and ethical depth.

### 5.2.3 Grounding *Xìn* 信: Integrity and the Moral Weight of Sincerity

Among the Confucian virtues, *xìn* (信—often translated as trustworthiness or sincerity, but better understood as making good on one’s word—holds a place that is quiet, but foundational. It does not dazzle like wisdom, nor does it stir the heart like compassion. Yet it is *xìn* that gives all other virtues their moral weight. Without it, *rén* becomes sentimentality, *yì* rigidity, *lǐ* performance, and *zhì* posturing. *Xìn* is what binds intention to action, word to deed, self to world. It reflects the moral density of a person—the test of the whole moral edifice—and becomes visible not through proclamation, but through consistency. It is to possess an enduring reliability that enables others to depend on us—not merely for function, but for meaning.

In Confucian thought, *xìn* is not a trait of the private self. It is not a solitary virtue one develops in isolation, but a relational presence—something that emerges and becomes meaningful only in the context of human interaction. It is not a quality one possesses alone, but something that exists only within the field of human trust. In this, *xìn* functions as the outward expression of *chéng* (誠), or sincerity. Where *chéng* refers to the inner coherence of the self—one’s alignment of desire, knowledge, and action—*xìn* is the perceptible manifestation of that coherence in shared moral space. One can feel the presence of *xìn*, even before one understands it conceptually. It resides in tone, gesture, bearing; in the space between speaking and being believed.

Confucius is unequivocal about the indispensability of *xìn*: ‘I do not see how a man can be acceptable who is untrustworthy in word?’ (*Analects* 2:22). It is the ground of all relational life. A world without *xìn* may possess power, hierarchy, even ritual, but it will lack moral coherence. Trust is not a luxury—it is the precondition for civilisation. In pedagogy, politics, and friendship alike, the failure of trust unravels meaning. And trust, in the Confucian schema, cannot be demanded; it must be radiated. The *jūnzǐ* does not assert credibility: credibility is emanated through conduct. Her trustworthiness arises not from rhetoric or technique, but from the perceptible coherence of her person. It is this coherence that renders presence pedagogical, not by intention, but by ethical gravity. *Xìn* therefore is not the result of good policy or institutional structure alone. It must be cultivated from the inside out: not a product of rule-following, but of character, because making good one’s word (*xìn*) is deeply rooted in *chéng*—without sincerity of heart, trust cannot flourish. A handshake, a bow, an apology—these gestures, though externally structured by *lǐ*, gain moral traction only when grounded in trustworthy intention. In this way, *xìn* becomes the invisible force that renders *lǐ* meaningful, *yì* believable, and *rén* reliable.

The *jūnzǐ* is, above all, one who can be relied upon. Her trustworthiness is cumulative, not episodic. It is not built by dramatic gestures or public declarations, but in the quiet regularities of conduct. A teacher who does not seek to impress, but whose students instinctively listen—because over time, her words have proven to match her actions—embodies *xìn* without display. Her presence carries moral weight not through authority, but through coherence. This subtle consistency is what gives her presence its weight. She is not trusted because she demands it, nor because she never errs, but because her character reveals a pattern of moral reliability—of returning, again and again, to what is right. This integrity, this faithful return, is what makes trust possible. The image offered by Confucius is instructive: ‘The virtue of the gentleman [*jūnzǐ*] is like wind; the virtue of the small man is like grass. Let the wind blow over the grass and it is sure to bend’ (*Analects* 12.19). The analogy is not about domination, but presence. The wind does not need to command; it moves, and the world responds. So too the morally serious person need not impose, persuade, or defend. They are felt. Their trustworthiness shapes the relational field, not by decree, but by being.

In a time when institutions are often perceived as hollow, and sincerity is diluted by performance, *xìn* remains a radical virtue. It resists spectacle. It refuses efficiency. It asks for patience. One cannot rush trust, and one cannot counterfeit it. The teacher whose words align with their being, the friend who follows through quietly, the elder whose silence holds the room—these are people of *xìn*. Their lives become sites of moral possibility not because they are perfect, but because they are whole.

To cultivate *xìn* is to ground the moral life. It is to ensure that what one promises becomes reality, that what one represents is not a mask but a manifestation. And in doing so, the *jūnzǐ* offers not merely ethical content, but ethical form: not a message, but a presence. *Xìn*, then, is not simply what one says—it is what one *is*, faithfully, over time.

### 5.3 The *Jūnzǐ* as Educator and Moral Guide

If the *jūnzǐ* is the embodiment of cultivated virtue and relational attunement, then her presence carries not only ethical significance but pedagogical power. It is through such moral exemplars that Confucian education unfolds—not as the transfer of knowledge, but as the transformation of character.

### 5.3.1 The Pedagogical Power of Presence

To conceive of teaching as merely the transmission of information is to miss entirely its ethical force. In the Confucian tradition, education is not instrumental but ontological; it concerns the formation of the self through the formative presence of others. The teacher, then, is not merely a deliverer of content, nor a facilitator of outcomes. She is a moral being whose very way of being becomes pedagogical. Her presence is not supplementary to the lesson—it is the lesson. This reflects Xunzi's view that ethical formation depends not on didactic instruction alone but on the visible moral presence of exemplars (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016 chap. 1, 23). The teacher's task is not simply to enforce rules, nor to deliver content efficiently. It is to create a moral atmosphere through the integrity of her presence. The student learns not simply through instruction but through participation in a space where ethical form is lived, where coherence between being and doing is quietly enacted, and where formation arises through rhythm, gesture, and tone.

This conception of the teacher's role as ethically formative and relational offers a significant reorientation of the teacher's role. Within this vision, authority is not imposed, but emerges from conduct. The teacher's gestures—how she listens, how she corrects, how she attends—are not neutral. They are formative acts. Her punctuality, her silence, her gaze—these do not merely supplement the content of education; they constitute it. As Staddon and Standish argue, to reduce teaching to procedural delivery or customer satisfaction is to enact, in their words, 'an abnegation of what the teacher should be about' (Staddon & Standish, 2012, p. 638). Standish (2007) further underscores that education is inherently moral, never value-neutral, and that the teacher's presence is a moral encounter, shaping the student's ethical sensibility through her example and manner of being. For the Confucian tradition a teacher is not a neutral manager, nor a moralising figurehead. She is a participant in the shared work of becoming human. David Carr makes this point with clarity: 'Wider considerations and ideals of personal moral development... are not optional extras for the teacher as they may be for the lawyer or the surgeon' (1993, p. 195). The moral life of the teacher, in this view, is constitutive of her practice. It is not something she brings into the classroom as an added virtue, but the very ground of her effectiveness. The teacher does not model virtue as a performance. She embodies it as a way of being. In this way, her authority becomes ontological—rooted not in credentials, but in the visible coherence between what she is and what she does.

A vision grounded in ethical presence avoids both the authoritarian image of the teacher as master and the portrayal of a wholly morally disengaged facilitator sometimes associated with postmodern relativism. The *jūnzǐ* teacher walks a paradoxical line: she is at once a guide and a companion, a

moral exemplar and a fellow participant in the work of formation. She leads not from above, but from within the shared space of learning. Her presence is authoritative not because it is incontestable, but because it is attentive. As R S Peters puts it, 'The true master must both be an authority and able to teach in such a way that pupils become capable of showing him where he is wrong' (1966, p. 9). This is not infallibility; it is exemplarity. The authority of the teacher emerges through a willingness to be seen, corrected, and shaped by the very practices she seeks to cultivate in her students.

The authority that emerges through exemplarity is always underwritten by humility. The Confucian teacher does not teach from the safety of moral certainty, but from within the laborious path of self-cultivation. Her gestures—no matter how small—carry ethical resonance. The students learn not because they are told what is right, but because they are shown what it feels like to dwell in a space where form carries meaning. This is pedagogy as presence—an art of ethical being that is *always* incomplete, *always* returning to its source, and *always* addressed to the moral unfolding of the other.

It is for this reason that the *jūnzǐ* is such a necessary figure in a pedagogical culture increasingly shaped by proceduralism and market logic. Where education becomes a matter of performance metrics, outcomes, and consumer satisfaction, the *jūnzǐ* recalls us to the deep ethical stakes of teaching. She teaches not from a script, but from a life. She does not require applause. She requires only the ethical seriousness to remain in the difficult work of formation—of herself and of others. Her authority is not proclaimed; it is felt. To teach in this way is not merely to deliver education. It is to become an invitation—an embodied summons to moral life.

### 5.3.2 Teaching as Self-Formation and Ethical Influence

To teach, in the Confucian tradition, is never a neutral act. It is not merely a function within a bureaucratic institution, nor a means of transmitting knowledge. It is a form of moral labour—an unfolding of the self in relation to others, marked by reciprocal influence and shared transformation. There is no teacher who is not also a student, and no student who does not, in some sense, contribute to the teacher's ongoing ethical cultivation. Teaching becomes not an exercise of authority, but a gesture of offering: of presence, of character, of interpretive care. Through such offering, the teacher's *chéng* (誠)—sincerity—becomes perceptible, and her *dé* (德)—moral charisma—takes form. Consider the teacher who, rather than correcting a misreading outright, pauses to listen—attending to the student's intention before offering her own. In that moment, she

is not merely instructing but engaging in mutual formation. Her growth is not incidental to the student's; it is the very soil in which ethical influence takes root.

Confucius' own practice confirms this reciprocity. 'Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals?' he asks in *Analects* 1:1. The verb *xué* (學)—to study—is inseparable from *sī* (思)—to reflect—and both are entwined with *xí* (習)—to practise. As *Analects* 2:15 warns, learning from others without reflecting leads to confusion; reflecting without learning from others leads to danger. Hall and Ames (1987, pp. 43–49) describe *xué* as the appropriation of tradition, and *sī* as its personalisation through thoughtful engagement. Without *xí*, this process remains incomplete. To study is to reflect, and to reflect is to practise—rehearsing one's way into understanding. This triad of learning, reflection, and embodiment grounds Confucian pedagogy. The teacher models this movement not through explanation but through enactment. Her speech gains its moral traction not through rhetorical force, but because her life testifies to a continual struggle for coherence. Her influence lies not in her expertise alone, but in her unfinishedness. In being visibly in the process of becoming, she invites others into that same possibility.

This pedagogical vision seeks to avoid both the performance model of the teacher as charismatic expert and the managerial image of the teacher as detached professional. Jean Brodie, in Muriel Spark's novel, offers a fictional example of the dangers of the former: a teacher whose charisma can mask a deeper appetite to possess her students rather than cultivate their autonomy. Her attempt to fashion them in her own image illustrates the ethical failure of pedagogical self-aggrandisement. The *jūnzǐ* does not perform virtue for others to copy; she cultivates it within herself in such a way that it becomes perceptible, imitable, and potentially contagious. Her teaching arises not from mastery but from ethical struggle. In this sense, teaching is not the delivery of a polished self, but the offering of a self under formation—a self that is attentive, searching, and grounded in care. To teach with ethical force is to be seen while one is still becoming. The vulnerability of this position is not a weakness, but a source of credibility. From this stance, the teacher models an ethical life not through command, but through beauty. Her aim is not merely to inform, but to inspire—a commitment to self-cultivation. She teaches not from perfection, but from the integrity with which she inhabits her roles; her lessons arise from how she lives. In this way, she becomes not just a guide, but a horizon-maker—revealing what it can mean to live attentively and graciously in the world.

Confucius held this balance of self-cultivation and influence with care. The *jūnzǐ* does not teach to elevate herself, but because she is animated by the moral life—offering what she values because

she cannot help but do so. Her influence is not an act of persuasion or assertion, but the quiet resonance of a life lived with presence and care. Influence is not the goal, but the effect. Such a conception of teaching ultimately resists the commodification of education by shifting the focus from the transmission of knowledge to the formation of persons—on both sides of the relationship. The teacher does not shape students as a sculptor shapes stone, but as a gardener tends growth: through presence, responsiveness, and mutual becoming. In this shared process, she is formed as well. Each lesson reflects, each encounter tests, each silence invites. The Confucian educator is not a figure of certainty, but of constancy—one who renders the pursuit of wisdom credible, beautiful, and shared.

### 5.3.3 Shame, Humility, and the Reflective Teacher

To speak of the teacher as a moral exemplar is not to imagine her as flawless. The Confucian *jūnzǐ* is not a figure of moral finality but of continual formation. Her authority rests not in perfection, but in ethical seriousness—a seriousness marked by the willingness to be humbled, corrected, and changed. Teaching, thus, becomes both an ethical and a spiritual practice, situated not in the performance of mastery but in a lived engagement with moral vulnerability. This process unfolds most deeply in the spaces of shame and humility, and for the teacher, it is never a solitary task. Ethical formation is carried out in the presence of others and within the web of human relationships, giving pedagogical life its profoundly relational character.

In the Confucian tradition, shame (*chǐ*, 耻) is understood not merely as an emotional response to public failure, but as a cultivated moral disposition—a form of virtue integral to ethical life. Bongrae Seok observes that shame in this context functions as ‘a self-critical and self-transformative process’ (2015, p. 22), an active orientation toward self-improvement that supports the ongoing work of moral cultivation. This is especially relevant to the ethical posture of the teacher, whose role depends not only on competence, but on ethical presence and sincerity. Seok distinguishes between external shame—rooted in reputation or appearance—and internal shame, or *internal chǐ*, which arises from a felt discrepancy between one’s actions and one’s ethical ideals (ibid. p. 31). It is the latter that concerns the reflective teacher: not the fear of exposure, but the discomfort of falling short of what she demands of herself.

Aristotle’s account of shame in the *Nicomachean Ethics* offers a useful point of contrast. He famously holds that shame is not a virtue in the strict sense, but a quasi-virtue, appropriate to the young and still in formation. Aristotle writes: ‘In fact, shame is not a mark of a decent man at all,

since it is a consequence of base actions.’ And again: ‘Shame is felt for voluntary actions, and no decent man will ever voluntarily do what is base’ (*NE* 1128B10-35, cited in Cua, 2003, p. 151). Yet he allows that shame has educational value, particularly for those who are not yet virtuous but who aspire to be so. As Antonio Cua explains, Aristotle does not consider shame a virtue, but rather an emotion appropriate to youth, useful in moral formation insofar as it reflects a concern for honour and disrepute (*ibid.*). What Confucius affirms, however, Aristotle limits: for the former, shame remains an essential moral orientation even for the mature individual. The Confucian teacher does not graduate from shame; she deepens her attunement to it. And unlike Aristotle’s emphasis on developing a self-sufficient moral character, Confucian thought maintains that ethical life is always conducted in relationship—with others, with roles, with ritual.

This moral embeddedness is sharpened by what Mencius describes as ‘the shame of shamelessness’ (*Mencius* 7A6), a meta-level sensibility that reflects not a reaction to specific failings, but a deeper vigilance against ethical complacency. As Bongrae Seok (2015, pp. 35–36) explains, Confucian shame is not merely a reaction to moral failure but a self-critical disposition that fosters continuous moral development. It reflects a proactive vigilance—an internalised moral attentiveness that guards against ethical complacency by keeping one’s ideals ever-present. As Cua notes, the experience of shame is relationally shaped: it arises not from anonymous or faceless observers, but from those whom we regard as ‘significant others’—individuals whose ethical standing we respect and whose opinions matter to our sense of self and aspiration (2003, pp. 153–154). For the teacher, these significant others might include students, colleagues, or mentors. In this light, shame becomes a form of aspiration—a directional force that draws the practitioner toward her better self and invites her to inhabit her professional role more ethically.

Yet shame alone cannot define the moral presence of the teacher. In Confucian pedagogy, it must be held in productive tension with humility. The *jūnzǐ* does not teach from a platform of superiority but approaches her vocation with an openness to correction. Her humility is neither rhetorical nor self-effacing; it is expressed in her willingness to listen, to be wrong, and to change. Sungmoon Kim’s account of Confucian selfhood reinforces this view: ethical life, he argues, unfolds not through autonomous decision-making, as in liberal moral individualism, but through embedded, relational transformation modelled on familial ties (2010, pp. 483–484). Humility thus becomes the condition for relational responsiveness—essential not only to moral life, but to pedagogical presence. As Confucius remarks, ‘the gentleman is ashamed when his words outstrip his deeds’ (*Analects* 14.27), and when public failure occurs, the teacher must not retreat into defensiveness. In *Analects*

19.21, errors are likened to an eclipse: publicly visible, but also publicly redeemable through sincere reform. Here, vulnerability is not a weakness to be hidden, but a form of credibility.

### 5.3.4 The *Jūnzǐ* in a Spiritually Bankrupt Educational Culture

The contemporary educational landscape is increasingly described by some commentators as marked by spiritual poverty. What was once for many a vocation of formation—the slow work of helping others become more fully human—is now often framed in the language of efficiency, performance, and output. Education is frequently presented as a tool for economic growth, a system for producing human capital rather than cultivating persons. As Tony Blair, the former UK Prime Minister, put it, ‘Education is the best economic policy we have’ (1998, in Martin, 2003, p. 567), a view that has gained broad policy traction. Richard Hatcher (2008, p. 665) notes that this shift has made competitiveness the master narrative of policy. Classrooms can, in such framings, resemble marketplaces: students as consumers, teachers as service providers, and knowledge as a commodity. As Cannadine (2017) warns, this technocratic vision risks ignoring the human and societal dimensions of our challenges. In this context, the figure of the *jūnzǐ* offers one of its most urgent critiques. The Confucian tradition presents an alternative: a vision of education as moral cultivation rooted in presence, relation, and character. Pedagogy, in this frame, is not merely instructional; it is ontological. It concerns the quality of presence, the attunement to the particularity of the other, and the ability to sustain attention over time.

The *jūnzǐ* teaches not by asserting, but by inhabiting a form of life through consistency, sincerity, and ethical grace. This contrasts sharply with a depersonalised education system in which the teacher is expected to be affectively neutral, procedurally compliant, and instrumentally efficient. In such a setting, to speak of moral seriousness is to risk accusations of ideological overreach. Yet it is precisely this depersonalisation that reveals the necessity of the *jūnzǐ*’s presence. The Confucian teacher disrupts the logic of performance. She reminds the classroom that education is not a neutral process but a moral one. Each pedagogical gesture bears ethical significance—not because of the outcome it produces, but because of the world it presupposes. To cultivate the moral self is to take responsibility for this presence—not only of the student, but of the teacher herself. Teaching is thus reimagined not as delivery, but as accompaniment. As Charlene Tan (2017) observes, the Confucian model challenges the very foundations of performance-driven education by insisting that teaching is not the transfer of skills, but the co-cultivation of ethical life. In a classroom shaped by

the *Xuéjì* (*On Teaching and Learning*)<sup>69</sup>—, the teacher’s authority arises not from outcomes, but from a shared journey rooted in trust, discernment, and moral aspiration.

This stance is increasingly difficult to sustain in a culture saturated with neoliberal assumptions. As Raewyn Connell (2013, p. 104) observes, neoliberalism reframes education as a form of ‘human capital formation’—an individual investment in productivity, stripped of its broader social and ethical functions. Under this regime, schools are reshaped as firms, students as clients, and teachers as technicians delivering standardised outcomes. What disappears is the question of moral purpose: What kind of person is this education forming? What kind of society is it sustaining? Tan (2017) warns that such questions are increasingly sidelined in systems that measure success by output, not by ethical presence. She writes that in such a framework, education becomes detached from its moral roots, displacing values such as *rén* (consummate conduct), *lǐ* (normative conduct), and relational care. Confucian pedagogy offers not only a critique of this displacement but a practical alternative—one that restores ethical formation to the heart of educational life.

The eclipse of moral presence in education—a central concern of Confucian pedagogy—has been forcefully diagnosed by Nigel Tubbs. He argues that teaching has been ‘stripped of its deeper purpose—its guiding *telos* and moral dignity’ (2005, p. 62). What is lost, in this vision, is not merely the content of education but the spiritual posture of the teacher: her ethical attunement, her existential investment, her vocation. The loss is not merely philosophical. It is existential. The teacher’s role has been emptied of moral resonance and reduced to procedural compliance. Her ethical life, once central to the vocation of teaching, is now marginalised as a matter of private belief. Tubbs insists that this loss is not accidental. It is the consequence of an institutional forgetting—of what it means to teach, to form, to be present. Against this forgetting, the *jūnzǐ* stands as a counter-image: not a nostalgic figure, but a moral prototype for renewal.<sup>70</sup> This is not intended to romanticise the past, nor to idealise Confucianism uncritically; rather, the *jūnzǐ* points toward a different possibility for the teacher’s life. She offers a vision of ethical coherence in an age of fragmentation. She suggests that presence is not a soft virtue, but a spiritual necessity. Her

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<sup>69</sup> The *Xuéjì* is one of the 49 chapters of the *Lǐjì* (禮記, Book of Rites), compiled during the Han dynasty. While traditionally linked to Confucius, it is now understood as a collective work shaped by generations of educators, likely within institutions such as the Imperial Academy. It is the earliest known Chinese text devoted specifically to education, offering reflections on moral cultivation, the role of the teacher, and the timing and method of instruction. The *Xuéjì* is unique in classical pedagogy—not a single author’s vision, but a composite reflection of sustained practice, preserved through ritualised institutions and oral tradition.

<sup>70</sup> Nigel Tubbs, *Philosophy of the Teacher* (2005), develops a vision of teaching as a vocation defined by the tension between mastery and servanthood, authority and freedom—a struggle he frames as central to the philosophical life of the teacher.

influence arises not from technique, but from her perceptible coherence—her willingness to dwell within the formative demands of the vocation itself.

In a spiritually bankrupt educational culture, such coherence is itself a form of resistance. It resists the reduction of the teacher to a role. It resists the fragmentation of selfhood that occurs when professional identity is severed from moral vocation. It resists the temptation to treat students as data points or as market actors. And it does so not by protesting loudly, but by embodying an alternative. The *jūnzǐ* is not an activist in the conventional sense. She does not confront the system directly. She lives differently within it. Her presence becomes a quiet form of critique—not ideological, but ontological.

Echoing the sage-king Shun, who ‘held himself in a respectful posture and faced due south’ (*Analects* 15.5)<sup>71</sup>, the *jūnzǐ* exerts influence not through force, but through moral presence and quiet composure. This reveals a different kind of power—one rooted not in dominance, but in attunement. In such stillness, in such reverence, lies the teacher’s greatest strength. She may be invisible to policy-makers. She may be undervalued by systems obsessed with quantification. But to her students—those who encounter her presence, who feel its rhythm, its gravity, its care—she becomes unforgettable. In this, she embodies the true vocation of the educator: not to deliver content, but to invite the other into a shared pursuit of moral seriousness.

### 5.3.5 Ontological Pedagogy and the Formation of the Moral Self

The work of cultivating moral character—of becoming ethically luminous—demands a fundamental rethinking of what it means to teach, and what it means to learn. In Confucian thought, education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge or the internalisation of values; it is the transformation of being. To teach is to engage in ontological work: to support the formation of the self-in-becoming through relation, ritual, attention, and example. The person does not first exist as a stable entity who then acquires moral insight. Rather, the self is constituted through ethical cultivation—formed in and through the process of learning how to care, to judge, to act, and to be with others. This understanding of the self is fundamentally relational. The *xīn* (心), or heart–mind, is not a private organ of inner reflection but a moral faculty oriented toward the world. It is through relational practices—listening, responding, mourning, celebrating, attending—that the self becomes capable

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<sup>71</sup> In Confucian tradition, ‘facing south’ symbolises the ruler’s moral authority and cosmic alignment. As Hall and Ames explain, Confucius describes the sage-king Shun as governing through *wu-wei*—non-coercive presence—by simply holding himself respectfully and facing south (1987, p. 168).

of discernment. One does not cultivate oneself in isolation. The Confucian self is not autonomous but responsive; not fixed but emergent. It is through repeated engagement with the world, through the rhythms of ritual and the responsiveness of moral encounter, that the ethical self comes into being.

To teach, in this framework, is not only to participate in the becoming of the other, but also to continue one's own becoming. The teacher is not outside or beyond the process of formation. She is a participant in it. The *jūnzǐ* is not conceived here as a master in the Western sense of an epistemic authority who transmits knowledge from a position of remove. She is a person of moral seriousness who has committed herself to the work of becoming human, and who lives this commitment in her relationships, speech, practices, and pedagogical gestures. Her authority does not derive from coercion or formal status, but from the coherence of her way of being.<sup>72</sup>

The teacher's ethical presence is not defined by perfection, but by humility—a willingness to be shaped, corrected, and deepened through encounters with others. As David Carr (1993, p. 195) reminds us, the moral life of the teacher is not an optional extra, as it might be for a lawyer or surgeon, but integral to the practice of teaching itself.<sup>73</sup> This has implications for how we understand pedagogy. Teaching cannot be reduced to strategies, techniques, or even good intentions. Pedagogy, in the Confucian sense, is not instrumental but ontological. It concerns the quality of presence, the attunement to the particularity of the other, and the willingness to sustain attention over time. The teacher's gestures, tone, and way of moving through the world are not neutral. They are formative. The *jūnzǐ* teaches not by asserting, but by inhabiting a form of life. She enacts her values in ways that are legible to others—not didactically, but through consistency, sincerity, and ethical grace.

The above aligns closely with the *Xuéjī*<sup>74</sup>, which affirms that only the morally serious person (*jūnzǐ*) is truly fit to teach, and that a good teacher 'must lead students forward through reasoning and inspiration,' not 'drag' them along. They should encourage rather than restrain, and 'open minds' rather than supply 'fixed answers' (*Xuéjī* 12). This pedagogical vision resists dominant models of

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<sup>72</sup> This resonates with Nigel Tubbs, who argues that teaching arises not from knowledge alone but from the teacher's lived experience of disorientation and ethical difficulty—what might be called a process of being undone and reoriented. See *Philosophy of the Teacher* (2005), Chapter 3.

<sup>73</sup> Carr's claim that personal moral development is essential to teaching aligns closely with the Confucian conception of ontological authority: that the teacher's ethical being, not merely her professional technique, shapes the moral space of the classroom.

<sup>74</sup> References to the *Xuéjī* is that of (2017) Di & Hunter translation.

education that treat the classroom as a site of information delivery or skill acquisition. It resists the depersonalisation of teaching and the reduction of learning to measurable outcomes. As the *Xuéji* also cautions, when teachers merely recite content without cultivating understanding, ‘students suffer the pains of trying without realizing the benefits of learning,’ and ultimately abandon any interest in study once their obligations end (*Xuéji* 9).

Staddon and Standish (2012, p. 635) warn that attempts to quantify education through ‘objective’ metrics often obscure the value-laden nature of educational judgment, leading to an overemphasis on procedures at the expense of curricular substance.<sup>75</sup> Robert Zemsky (1993) likewise argued that the incursion of market logic into higher education reshaped its core relationships—positioning teachers as service providers and students as consumers. This early warning was later expanded into a fuller critique of how universities, under market pressures, increasingly abandoned their civic and ethical missions in favour of consumer responsiveness.<sup>76</sup> Empirical studies suggest that students who adopt a consumer mindset often perform less well academically, indicating that this logic undermines the very conditions of learning.<sup>77</sup>

Against this backdrop, Confucian pedagogy calls for a renewed sense of vocation—one in which the teacher recognises that her life, not merely her methods, is pedagogical. The classroom is not a neutral space but a moral one, shaped by the teacher’s way of being and responsive to the ethical possibilities disclosed in each encounter. To cultivate the moral self is to take responsibility for one’s presence. In a culture dominated by procedural metrics and consumer expectations, this responsibility is both countercultural and essential. As Nussbaum (2010) and Murdoch (1970), have argued in broader philosophical contexts, modern education often prizes technical brilliance while neglecting moral formation. Institutions may celebrate procedural skill but fail to cultivate the disciplined attention to others that real ethical life demands. Against this drift, the Confucian tradition offers a deeper alternative: excellence lies not in technical mastery, but in the slow formation of presence, character, and relational care. This diagnosis finds contemporary support:

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<sup>75</sup> Staddon and Standish (2012, p. 635) argue that attempts to measure education through objective metrics risk concealing the inherently normative dimensions of teaching and curriculum design. They suggest that this procedural focus sidelines ethical and epistemic judgement, reducing education to the management of outcomes

<sup>76</sup> See his co-authored volume *Remaking the American University* (Zemsky *et al.*, 2005), especially the Introduction, where the authors examine how market logics have redefined the roles of teachers and students and compromised the ethical purpose of higher education.

<sup>77</sup> Bunce, Baird, and Jones’ (2016) study found that students who viewed themselves primarily as consumers performed significantly less well academically, suggesting that consumer identity can undermine motivation and engagement.

Connell (2013) observes that marketisation displaces ethical purpose with economic rationality, narrowing what education is imagined to be.

To teach, then, is not simply to deliver content but to engage in formation—of both student and teacher.<sup>78</sup> Against the logic that casts students as customers and teachers as service providers, the Confucian educator recognises that her ethical life cannot be outsourced or reduced to outcomes. The *jūnzǐ* does not teach from certainty but from within the shared space of becoming. She does not replicate herself but accompanies others as they grow into their own ethical lives. This is not passive work—it demands judgment, patience, and sincerity. Above all, it requires seeing self-cultivation not as a task to finish, but as a path to walk—again and again, with others.

## 5.4 The Curriculum of the Heart: Confucian Pedagogy

### 5.4.1 Education as Moral Formation, Not Instruction

Confucian education is not reducible to instruction. It is not merely a system of delivering facts or training the intellect in techniques of analysis. Rather, it is a mode of moral formation—a shaping of the person through relational life, ritual participation, aesthetic cultivation, and ethical responsibility. The Confucian teacher does not assume that knowledge is neutral, or that its transmission can be separated from the character of the one who teaches it. To learn is to be transformed, and to teach is to invite another into a shared process of self-cultivation. The goal is not mastery of information but the formation of character within a field of ethical significance. This vision arises from a philosophical anthropology that views human beings not as rational calculators, but as relational and affective creatures, formed over time through practice and presence. Education, in this view, is not preparation for life. It is life: the medium through which the moral imagination is cultivated, and through which the student learns how to dwell with others in a manner that is fitting, reverent, and responsive. As Paul Standish (2007) argues, the disenchantment of education is not merely the loss of spiritual or cultural richness; it represents the moral cost of reducing learning to calculative, instrumental reason. The Confucian curriculum of the heart, by contrast, re-enchants learning as a form of moral becoming—restoring to education its role as a site of ethical and relational formation. Education is not concerned primarily with the acquisition of

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<sup>78</sup> *Xueji* 3, reminds us: 'It is only in learning that we realize our inadequacies, and it is only in teaching that we realize our limitations and perplexity... Teaching and learning complement each other... Teaching and learning are two halves of a whole that inform each other.'

competencies, but with the formation of the self. To educate is not merely to teach something, but to form someone. This formation is not incidental; it is the very aim of Confucian pedagogy.

In this respect, the Confucian tradition resists the modern dichotomy between knowledge and values. As Xunzi argues in chapters 1 and 23, knowledge must serve moral cultivation, not mere technical skill. Confucianism does not assume that the intellect may be trained apart from the cultivation of virtue, nor that education can be abstracted from moral life. The classical curriculum—encompassing poetry, music, history, and ritual—is not assembled for the sake of imparting useful skills, but for shaping the inner life. These disciplines teach not only *what* to know, but *how* to feel, *how* to see, and *how* to move in the world with refinement and grace. They form the sensibilities through which ethical responsiveness becomes possible. The purpose of Confucian education is not to produce efficient workers, but to nurture the moral and spiritual potential of the person. The teacher, therefore, is not merely a transmitter of cultural forms. She is a participant in a tradition of ethical formation, whose vocation is to model, to cultivate, and to invite others into a shared process of becoming.

In the Confucian tradition, the role of repetition, embodiment, and imitation in education cannot be overstated. The student learns not only by listening, but by performing—through bowing, reciting, reflecting, and repeating. These are not acts of passive indoctrination, but of ethical attunement. Through bodily and aesthetic practice, the student is drawn into a rhythm of life that precedes conscious understanding and eventually shapes it. Learning, in this sense, is not merely cognitive. It is aesthetic and moral: it forms not only what one knows, but how one carries what one knows—in speech, in gesture, in silence, and in responsive action. This is why the Confucian curriculum places such emphasis on the arts—not to cultivate refinement for its own sake, but because beauty itself becomes a mode of moral access. The rhythm of a poem, the cadence of music, the symmetry of ritual: all serve to train the heart-mind (*xīn*, 心) in the perception of ethical order. The student learns not simply what to think, but how to feel in ways that are ethically charged. This cultivated sensibility is not reducible to sentimentality. It is a disciplined capacity to respond to the world with depth, discernment, and reverence.

The Confucian curriculum, grounded in ritual, repetition, and aesthetic attunement, offers a counterpoint to the imperatives of acceleration, instrumentalisation, and standardisation that dominate some strands of contemporary educational discourse. It demands time, attention, and a reverent patience, forming its subjects through immersion rather than information transfer. Moral character, like musical or poetic excellence, cannot be rushed. It unfolds through repeated

participation in practices that slowly reorient desire and sharpen perception. The *jūnzǐ*, as educator, therefore does not deliver information in order to manage outcomes; she invites participation in a form of life. Her pedagogical task is not to control results but to cultivate the conditions under which ethical life may emerge. Education, in this vision, is not the management of minds but the slow and attentive formation of selves in the pursuit of what is worthy.

## 5.4.2 Pedagogical Foundations and the Realisation of Moral Learning

The Confucian tradition offers not only a vision of what it means to teach and to be taught, but also a detailed account of the rhythms and stages by which the moral life is cultivated. Two foundational texts in this regard—the *Dà Xué* (*The Great Learning*) and the *Xuéjì* (*On Teaching and Learning*)—anchor this pedagogical vision within a broader civilisational ethic. The *Dà Xué* outlines an interwoven arc of self-cultivation and sociopolitical transformation, while the *Xuéjì* offers reflections on method, disposition, and moral atmosphere in educational practice. Together, they provide a coherent account of what it means to educate the human being not only for skill or understanding but for ethical life.

In the opening lines of the *Dà Xué*, the foundational text of Confucian moral pedagogy, we read: ‘The Way of learning to be great (or adult education)<sup>79</sup> consists in manifesting the clear character, loving the people, and abiding in the highest good.’ This triad of *míng dé* (明德), *qīn mín* (親民), and *zhǐ yú zhì shàn* (止於至善) offers a vision of education that is both personal and political, affective and aspirational. The order of the triad is significant: one cannot love the people rightly unless one has clarified one’s own character, and one cannot abide in the highest good unless one’s love is rightly oriented. These are not sequential steps, but mutually reinforcing aims. Moral vision (*míng dé*) must be enacted in social care (*qīn mín*), and such care must be sustained by a commitment to what is highest, most fitting, and most good (*zhì shàn*). The moral cultivation expressed in this triad is not an isolated process but an integrated journey of becoming—one where personal development directly impacts societal flourishing.

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<sup>79</sup> Quote from The Four Books, *The Great Learning* 大學, translated by Wing-tsit Chan, found at: <https://fourbooks.org/sourcebook/daxue/text> Wing-sit Chan reminds us that, the Chinese term *Dàxué* (大學) can be translated literally as ‘learning for adults.’ Unlike the early education of children, which focused on manners and everyday conduct, *Dàxué* refers to a more advanced form of learning oriented toward moral cultivation and the ordering of society. It is, in this sense, the education appropriate to the morally serious person—the *jūnzǐ* or ‘noble man’—or, understood more broadly, the education of the ‘great’ individual in both ethical and civic terms.

At the heart of the *Dà Xué* is the sequence known as the Eight Steps of Cultivation: beginning with the investigation of things (*gégù* 格物), followed by the extension of knowledge (*zhìzhī* 致知), the making-sincere of intention (*chéngyì* 誠意), the rectification of the heart (*zhèngxīn* 正心), the cultivation of the self (*xiūshēn* 修身), the regulation of the family (*qíjiā* 齊家), the governance of the state (*zhìguó* 治國), and, finally, the pacification of the world (*píng tiānxià* 平天下). These steps collectively express how the inward cultivation of the self is foundational to the outward harmony of family, community, and society (W. Chan, 1969, p. 84).<sup>80</sup> Importantly, the Eight Steps are not linear, nor are they a checklist of discrete tasks. Rather, they represent an interwoven arc in which each stage informs and shapes the next, creating a dynamic progression of ethical deepening.<sup>81</sup>

The process begins with *gégù*—the investigation of things—which highlights the epistemic dimension of moral life. Moral cultivation does not begin with abstract ideals or theoretical knowledge; it begins with attentiveness to the world—a disciplined inquiry into the principles (*lǐ* 理) that govern both the physical world and the ethical order. This investigation is not limited to the external world but also extends inward, encouraging self-reflection and an examination of the moral patterns that reside within the heart-mind (*xīn*). As Wang Yangming would later assert, to investigate is to clarify the moral order within oneself—knowledge, in this sense, is inseparable from action. To know the good is to be called into its embodiment. Thus, the step of *zhìzhī* (the extension of knowledge) is not simply about the accumulation of facts but about deepening moral awareness, sharpening the ability to discern and act rightly. It is this extension of knowledge that prepares the self for *chéngyì*—the making-sincere of intention, where one's moral will is harmonised with one's thoughts and actions. Sincerity, in this context, requires an integrated heart—a mind and will brought into ethical alignment.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> The eight steps outlined emphasise the cultivation of a virtuous character as the ultimate goal, rather than treating the management of personal conduct or external affairs as ends in themselves.

<sup>81</sup> The intention of these steps cannot have been a linear progression of cognitive and moral development whereby one has to accomplish each stage completely in order to move to the next as in the case of Lawrence Kohlberg's six-stage theory of moral development (Li, 2022, p.21). Because one need not have perfect knowledge in order to teach someone or be perfect in one's cultivation in order to cultivate others.

<sup>82</sup> Wang Yangming rejected Zhu Xi's interpretation of *gégù* as the study of external things, arguing instead that moral investigation must begin within the self (See Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (1969, pp. 661–667). Tu Weiming has also written extensively on the Great Learning as a vision of moral self-transcendence rooted in relational ontology. His reading aligns closely with Wang Yangming's reinterpretation of *gégù* and *zhì zhī* as inward acts of ethical awakening rather than external investigation. See Tu Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (esp. ch.3 1989).

This sequence of cultivation continues with the rectification of the heart (*zhèngxīn*), where thought and feeling are brought into ethical harmony. The act of rectification is not a mere intellectual adjustment, but a transformation of inner dispositions that enables one to act with sincerity and moral clarity. This inner cultivation then extends outward to the self (*xiūshēn*), where the cultivation of the individual becomes visible in conduct, role, and relational presence. Moral vision (*míng dé*) is not an abstract ideal but is realised through embodied practice, as one's internal clarity of heart and mind manifests in their interactions with others.

The final stages of the Eight Steps—regulating the family (*qíjiā*), governing the state (*zhìguó*), and bringing peace to the world (*píng tiānxià*)—demonstrate the interconnectedness of personal and societal transformation. These stages do not represent a separate realm of activity but show how personal cultivation and societal flourishing are mutually implicated. Tu Weiming's (2024) work underscores this idea, emphasising that the flourishing of society is closely linked to the inner work of personal formation. In Confucian thought, the moral order of the family, the polity, and the world is understood to be sustained not by laws or external structures alone but also by moral example and cultivated virtue. The personal transformation described in the Eight Steps becomes the foundation for a larger, ethical social order. Thus, *míng dé* is realised not only through personal cultivation but through its outward manifestation—in the family, the community, and the world. The Confucian vision of education, in this sense, is not merely about imparting knowledge or skills; it is about the slow and steady formation of the person. Education is therefore conceived here not as preparation for life but as a recursive journey of becoming more fully human. The teacher's task, therefore, is not to merely instruct, but to guide students through this process of ethical becoming, living out the virtues she seeks to cultivate. Through such embodiment and relational presence, the teacher may serve as a model for students, inviting them into the reciprocal process of moral cultivation.

The *Xuéjì* brings the focus of Confucian moral education to the relational fabric of pedagogy, underscoring that the teacher's ethical presence, rather than technical competence alone, is central to transformative learning. 'If teachers serve as guides,' the text observes, 'they promote harmony; if they encourage students, they facilitate growth; if they open minds, they promote thoughtful inquiry' (*Xuéjì* 12). Teaching here is not a mechanical delivery of knowledge but a dialogical and moral encounter between persons. The teacher is called to lead not by coercion but through inspiration—awakening moral discernment, inviting reflection, and modelling the very virtues they seek to cultivate. As Charlene Tan explains, this pedagogical relationship is grounded in mutual trust and attentiveness to student development; critique and evaluation should emerge only after

the student is secure in their aspiration and understanding. ‘The teacher should refrain from evaluating the students’ learning too early in their studying,’ Tan notes, ‘as early and frequent assessments would only create anxiety... and distract them from studying leisurely according to their personal aspirations’ (Tan, 2017, p. 7). This alignment between teacher guidance and student readiness echoes the *Xuéjì*’s warning that novice learners should first listen and absorb before engaging in critique, so as not to ‘transgress the appropriate grade of learning’ (*Xuéjì* 6).

This attentiveness to developmental rhythm extends beyond the individual to the communal aspects of learning. The *Xuéjì* emphasises the importance of *mo* (摩)—peer interaction through mutual observation, discourse, and correction—as one of the four pillars of moral education (*Xuéjì* 10). Learning in isolation, the text warns, produces students who are ‘solitary, uncultured, and limited in knowledge’ (*Xuéjì* 11). In this light, pedagogy is not only relational in the vertical sense (teacher–student), but also horizontal, as students learn through engagement with one another in a moral community. This vision is supported by a broad-based, integrated curriculum that includes ritual, music, poetry, and calligraphy—disciplines that form both intellect and character (*Xuéjì* 5, 8). As Tan (2017) notes, this holistic model of education nurtures not only intellectual development but moral discernment, cultivating individuals capable of contributing to a flourishing and harmonious society.

### 5.4.3 Poetry, Music, Rites, and Documents: The Canon of Humanity

To cultivate the human person, in the Confucian tradition, is to immerse that person in a canon—not merely of texts, but of aesthetic forms, ritual practices, and moral images. Education here is not the mere transference of content, but the slow shaping of sensibility. The classical curriculum is a civilisational project, grounded in the conviction that poetry, music, rites, and historical documents are not inert repositories of culture, but active agents in the formation of ethical life. These elements—what Confucius referred to as the *Six Arts* (*liù yì*, 六藝)—do not merely decorate the moral life: they generate it. Paul Standish’s reflections in *The Disenchantment of Education* offer a resonance with this vision of the *Six Arts*. Standish (2016) critiques modern educational disenchantment, arguing that practices like poetry, music, and ritual do not simply adorn life—they shape it from within. In his view, these arts and practices constitute what he calls the “space of reasons” itself—‘a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what’ (ibid., p. 105). Far from being peripheral to ethical life, they are its foundation, weaving perception, feeling, and judgement into a coherent whole (2016, pp. 100–104).

The *Shījīng* (詩經, *Book of Songs*), for example, is not taught to improve literary technique, but to awaken the heart to resonance. In *Analects* 13.5, Confucius declares, ‘If one does not study the *Shī*, one will have no means to express oneself.’ The poetic canon trains the moral imagination through rhythm, image, and the disciplined evocation of emotion. It teaches the student to feel in patterned ways—to attune the heart to the sufferings and joys of others, to recognise the pathos and beauty of ordinary life. But its value was not only ethical; it was also practical. As *Analects* 20.3 and the *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳, an ancient commentary on the *Chūnqīū*, suggest, the *Odes* served as subtle tools of communication—essential for diplomacy, persuasion, and discerning others’ intentions in a culture where indirectness preserved harmony. Poetry in this context is ethical preparation and social skill. It refines perception, cultivates affective tact, and equips one to participate responsibly in the delicacies of relational life.

Music (*yuè* 樂), in the Confucian tradition, is not aesthetic leisure but ethical education. It is the cultivation of the heart through sound—the harmonisation of emotion, body, and cosmos. As the *Lǐjì* (禮記, *Book of Rites*) attests, music restores alignment between the self and the world, refining desire through form. Confucius praised *yuè* not merely for its beauty but for its power to perfect virtue. In the *Analects* 8.8, he declares that poetry stirs the mind, propriety shapes the character, but it is music that completes the person. The music of *shao*, composed to celebrate Shun’s peaceful accession, was to Confucius both ‘perfectly beautiful and perfectly good’ (*Analects* 3.25). By contrast, *wu* music—though beautiful—lacked ethical serenity, being tied to violent conquest. In Confucian pedagogy, then, music does not entertain; it educates desire. It trains the senses to respond with reverence, not indulgence; it offers form to feeling, so that emotion may become articulate, measured, and morally meaningful. Like *lǐ*, music forms the ground of becoming a *jūnzǐ*—not by repressing passion, but by shaping it toward harmony.

Rites, of course, provide the most extensive structure of this moral-aesthetic formation. As explored in Section 2.3, *lǐ* (禮) organises conduct through pattern, repetition, and reverence. It binds the ethical and the cosmic in visible choreography. But it is in conjunction with poetry and music that *lǐ* becomes fully inhabited. The act of bowing, the pacing of speech, the intervals of silence—each of these is supported and enriched by aesthetic sensibility. The canon therefore operates not only as moral instruction but as a sensorium. It teaches the student to feel rightly, to perceive order in beauty, and to recognise ethical demand in form.

Historical and philosophical documents—the *Shūjīng* (書經 *Book of Documents*), the *Yijing* (易經 *Book of Changes*), and later Confucian texts—complete the canon by providing patterns of judgement, models of governance, and images of virtuous leadership. These texts do not present history as neutral record but as moral narrative. The past becomes a resource for thinking ethically in the present. Confucius himself, though rarely citing principles, often invoked historical figures to illuminate moral qualities: the Duke of Zhou as a paragon of reverence, Yao and Shun as emblems of moral clarity. In this tradition, to study history is to train the self in discernment, memory, and moral continuity.

This canon of humanity is not a closed archive, but a living practice. The Confucian curriculum may be understood as an aesthetic rendering of the moral life. The arts are not auxiliary to virtue. They are its medium. The point is not to produce specialists in classical literature or musical performance, but to form persons who move through the world with rhythm, tone, and measure. The canon educates the senses, disciplines emotion, and refines judgement—not by abstraction, but through lived, repeatable experience. This approach differs markedly from many contemporary models based on information and skill acquisition. The Confucian student is not asked, ‘What do you know?’ but, ‘Who are you becoming through this learning?’ The question is not about retention, but resonance. Can the poem be recited not only with clarity but with feeling? Can the gesture be performed not mechanically but with presence? Can the historical figure be recalled not as data but as moral exemplar? These are the tests of Confucian learning. They are not measured by speed, but by depth. Thus, the canon is not a list of contents, but a field of moral textures. It does not impose a worldview; it invites one into a form of life. And in this form, poetry trains attention, music harmonises affect, ritual disciplines conduct, and history enriches moral vision. Education becomes not a ladder to climb, but a tradition to dwell within. And the *jūnzǐ*, in returning again and again to these forms, does not seek mastery. She seeks refinement.

To retrieve the pedagogical force of the *Six Arts* today is not to mimic their ancient form, but to reinterpret their ethical purpose. Ritual (礼, 禮) becomes the cultivation of civic and relational ethics: the art of acting with reverence, attentiveness, and respect in shared social life. In a world of fragmentation and self-assertion, rituals—whether formal or improvised—train us to recognise the dignity of others, to coordinate action gracefully, and to inhabit social roles with sincerity. Music (yuè, 樂) evolves into a pedagogy of emotional literacy and aesthetic attunement. Its function is not to entertain, but to harmonise inner life—teaching students how to feel with depth, to express with measure, and to respond to the world with a refined sensibility. Calligraphy (*shū*, 書), as the moral discipline of expressive form, finds new expression in writing, visual design, and even digital

communication. In each case, the ethical integrity of one's expression—its balance, coherence, and care—mirrors the quality of one's inner life. Archery (*shè*, 射), once the ritualised practice of bodily control and ethical restraint, finds contemporary equivalents in disciplines that emphasise intentional movement—such as martial arts, dance, or sports practiced as a means of cultivating composure, precision, and responsiveness under pressure. Charioteering (*yù*, 御), once the training in the guidance of powerful forces, now speaks to ethical leadership, environmental stewardship, and technological literacy—fields in which command must be tempered by character, foresight, and moral responsibility. Mathematics (*shù*, 數), far from a neutral tool for quantification, remains a practice of discernment—training the mind to recognise proportion, to think in systems, and to perceive order within complexity. Reimagined in this way, the *Six Arts* remain profoundly relevant—not as technical competencies, but as moral disciplines that shape how a person moves, feels, expresses, and acts in the world. They offer a holistic vision of education in which virtue is cultivated not in abstraction, but through patterned, embodied experience.

#### 5.4.4 Role Imitation, Ritual, and the Cultivation of *Xīn* 心 (Heart–Mind)

At the centre of Confucian moral pedagogy lies not only a vision of the cultivated person, but a particular way in which cultivation occurs—through role, ritual, and the dynamic shaping of *xīn* (心), the heart–mind. This term resists division into modern Western categories of cognition and emotion; it is a unified faculty of ethical perception, responsive judgement, and affective attunement. In Confucianism, *xīn* is not a dispassionate intellect nor a purely sentimental register, but the living core of the moral self, where knowing and feeling are fused in the work of becoming human. To cultivate *xīn* is to train one's ethical responses—to refine how one sees, senses, and inhabits the world in light of one's roles and obligations. It is here, in the depths of felt participation, that moral learning takes root.

That moral education begins not with abstraction, but with imitation, is no accident. In the Confucian tradition, to become moral is to begin by acting as if one were already such. It is to observe how the virtuous conduct themselves and to mirror their gestures—not in the spirit of performance, but in order to feel one's way into form. Ritual (*lǐ*, 禮) provides the structure for this imitation and moral transformation. The teacher bows; the student bows. The elder sits in a particular way; the younger adjusts accordingly. Through repeated performance, the body begins to learn what the mind has not yet grasped. There is no dishonesty in this; only the slow and cumulative work of self-cultivation. As Xunzi clearly articulates, it is through repeated enactment of roles, the habituation into the forms

of *lǐ*, and the refinement of conduct within community that our hearts and minds are reshaped (Xunzi & Hutton, 2016, pp. 248–249).

Paul Standish's reflections in *The Disenchantment of Education* (2016) highlight how shared practices contribute to moral formation. He critiques the modern disenchantment of education, observing 'a late flowering of verificationism in current conceptions of teaching, learning, and above all assessment' (p. 99) which has reduced practices to mechanical procedures. Standish argues that these practices are not merely mechanical but are embedded in the 'space of reasons'—the shared, historically accumulated context of meaning and evaluation. For example, he writes that 'the child washing plastic potatoes is not only copying the activity of its parents but entering into self-conscious practices of representation and participation in community' (ibid., p. 102). Drawing on McDowell's idea of language as 'a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what' (ibid., p. 105). Standish underscores that educational practices carry moral and relational significance. His emphasis on relational and meaning-laden practices resonates with the Confucian understanding that ritual is not hollow formalism—it is the very ground of moral resonance, shaping perception, feeling, and judgement within the relational field of life (Standish, 2016, pp. 100–104).

Roger Ames (2016) describes this pedagogical logic as a mode of role ethics, in which the moral life is not navigated by universal rules *à la* Kantianism or utilitarianism, but by the situated enactment of relational roles. Morality, in this frame, is performative, embodied, and emergent. We do not first acquire an abstract concept of virtue and then apply it to situations. We first play our roles, learning by doing, slowly attuning to what is appropriate (*yi*) through the particularity of each relationship. The child learns not through lecture but through apprenticeship—by watching how a parent listens, how a teacher responds, how a friend offers care. Over time, this imitation gives way to internalisation, and the moral shape of a person begins to take form. The cultivation of heart-mind (*xīn*), then, is not a matter of doctrinal instruction. It is the steady refinement of sensitivity.

As Tu Weiming writes '[s]trictly speaking, one is not taught to be able to feel, will, sense and know; these are innate faculties of the heart and defining characteristics of human nature' (1988, pp. 220–221). But these faculties must be nurtured. The four sprouts of virtue identified by Mencius—compassion, respect, shame, and discernment—do not blossom on their own (VI.8). They are like seeds embedded in the self, whose flourishing depends on care, repetition, and relational nourishment. The moral task is not to impose something external, but to awaken and guide what is already latent within the heart-mind: *xīn*. Such cultivation is recursive. It does not proceed in a

straight line from ignorance to knowledge. It loops back, refines, revisits. One may begin by mimicking the rites without understanding. But as the gestures are repeated, they begin to resonate. The bowed head is no longer empty; it begins to feel like reverence. The offered seat is no longer mere politeness; it begins to feel like care. In this way, the student does not acquire virtue as a set of precepts but lives into it—slowly, relationally, affectively.

The teacher's role in this process is not to explain morality, but to embody it. She becomes the form through which the student gradually learns to inhabit her own. This is not coercion, but ethical availability. The teacher does not instruct the student to be good; she shows what goodness feels like in motion. She does not demand imitation, but invites it through the quiet coherence of her gestures. The student may not yet grasp the meaning of reverence, but she sees it in the way the teacher bows before beginning a lesson. She may not fully understand respect, but hears it in the teacher's tone when she addresses others, or in the pause she gives before responding to a question. It is in this sensory, affective register—in posture, tone, timing—that moral formation begins. The student is not persuaded by argument but moved by presence. Through repetition and attunement, the teacher's actions begin to echo in the student's own body. And it is in this echo that over time character takes root.

For Confucius, the ethical task is *always* a matter of becoming—never complete, never static. It is the cultivation of *xīn* through ritual practice, lived roles, and the careful tending of emotion. It is the labour of responding rightly before one can articulate why. And in this labour, the self is not isolated but always already in relation—being formed in and through the moral field of others. This is the pedagogy of heartmind *xīn*: not a curriculum of ideas, but a curriculum of presence, rhythm, and resonance.

#### 5.4.5 The Curriculum as Aesthetic and Ethical Embodiment

In Confucian education, the ethical life is not simply a matter of intellectual knowledge or moral reasoning; it is a life formed through aesthetic and embodied practices. The Confucian curriculum, far from separating beauty from virtue, integrates the two as complementary facets of human development. In this pedagogical framework, the aesthetic is not a mere adornment to the moral life but its very vehicle and expression. Through rituals, music, calligraphy, and other arts, the student does not only acquire knowledge but cultivates an embodied presence, attuned to the ethical demands of the world.

The *Six Arts*—ritual (*lǐ*, 禮), music (*yuè*, 樂), calligraphy (*shū*, 書), archery (*shè*, 射), charioteering (*yù*, 御), and mathematics (*shù*, 數)—serve as the cornerstone of Confucian learning. These arts are not simply technical skills but methods of cultivating the self. They train the body as well as the mind, developing habits of attention, discipline, and harmony that are essential to the *jūnzǐ*—the ethical exemplar. As Confucius remarked, ‘I set my heart on the Way [*dào*], base myself on virtue, lean upon benevolence for support, and take my recreation in the arts’ (*Analects* 7:6). In this statement, Confucius encapsulates the purpose of Confucian education: the ethical journey begins with direction — making one’s way (*dào*) —, is anchored in moral excellence (*dé*), sustained through consummate conduct (*rén*), and made manifest through the arts. The arts thus become the means through which moral wisdom is both expressed and cultivated.

Each of the *Six Arts* contributes uniquely to moral formation. Ritual cultivates attentiveness to others, grounding virtue in relational sensitivity. Music harmonises emotion, aligning inner states with outer conduct. Calligraphy—perhaps the most emblematic of the arts—functions not merely as visual expression but as moral practice. Because Chinese writing is pictographic and ideographic, rather than alphabetic, the brushstroke becomes an extension of the self: how one writes discloses who one is. As Peimin Ni (1999, p. 19) observes, the thickness or lightness of ink, the structure of a character, the energy of a line—all manifest the moral and emotional condition of the writer. Calligraphy, then, is not only beautiful when technically masterful, but when it expresses moral integrity. This is why, in Confucian thought, aesthetic and ethical value are inseparable: the moral is the highest form of the aesthetic. A cultivated eye can distinguish between the merely elegant and the truly virtuous. Mao Zedong, for example, was a brilliant calligrapher—but brilliance alone is not virtue. His strokes may dazzle, but they do not necessarily edify. For the Confucian, to write well is not enough; one must also *be* well. Without moral depth, the art remains incomplete.

The integration of ethics and aesthetics is critical to Confucian pedagogy. It posits that to be good is not only to act rightly but to do so with grace, elegance, and care. As noted, a teacher who enters the room with attentiveness, arranges the materials with care, and speaks with clarity, does more than impart knowledge—she models moral presence. Such actions are not incidental to teaching; they are themselves pedagogical acts. The manner in which one engages with the world—the attentiveness with which one arranges a lesson, the consideration one gives to each student—becomes a moral act. The Confucian classroom is thus a space where the aesthetic and the ethical are inseparable, where each gesture, no matter how small, carries moral significance.

Furthermore, the Confucian integration of ethics and aesthetics rejects the modern separation of reason and emotion, intellect and affect.<sup>83</sup> In Confucianism, moral perception is cultivated through a sensibility that attends not only to abstract principles but to the quality of one's embodied actions. The moral is seen not as something to be thought about abstractly but something to be felt, expressed, and lived. This is why the Confucian curriculum insists on the practice of the *Six Arts*. They are not merely cultural achievements to be admired; they are moral exercises, shaping the student's character through embodied experience. The *Arts* teach the student not only how to act but how to be. They train the individual to see the world with clarity, to respond with grace, and to inhabit the world with integrity.

Through these practices, Confucian education forms the student into a *jūnzǐ*, a person who responds to the world with insight, care, and poise. The *Six Arts* are not simply disciplines of learning; they are pathways to moral excellence, grounding the student in the virtues of consummate conduct (*rén*), ritual propriety (*lǐ*), appropriateness (*yì*), living wisely (*zhì*), and making good on one's word (*xìn*). As Confucius says, the *jūnzǐ* acts not for appearance's sake, but because morality is the substance of his being, expressed naturally through ritual, modesty, and trust (*Analects* 15.18).

Ultimately, the Confucian curriculum rejects the modern dichotomy between intellect and virtue. It is not enough to be knowledgeable or skilled. The *jūnzǐ* must embody virtue in every aspect of life—from the quality of their speech to the care they take in their actions. The goal of Confucian education is not merely to prepare individuals for societal roles but to form a morally attuned and aesthetically refined person, one whose every gesture, word, and thought reflects a deep commitment to ethical living. Yet the cultivation of virtue through the arts does not guarantee moral consistency. The Confucian path recognises that failure—moments of weakness or lapses in judgment—is not a deviation but part of the process. The ethical life is shaped not by perfection, but by the capacity to begin again. To understand this, we must turn to the role of moral failure—*akrasia*—in the Confucian tradition.

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<sup>83</sup> See Alisdair MacIntyre's (1984) *After Virtue*; Charles Taylor's (1989) *Sources of the Self*; Martha Nussbaum's (2001) *Upheavals of Thought*, for discussions of how Enlightenment thought elevated reason over emotion and separated intellect from affect.

## 5.5 Fragility, Failure, and Ethical Perseverance

### 5.5.1 The Recurrence of Moral Failure (*Akrasia*)

The Confucian tradition situates moral failure not as an aberration from the ethical path but as one of its essential conditions—a sign that virtue emerges through struggle, not through seamless ascent. The ethical life does not unfold in a linear progression; it is shaped by reversals, interruptions, and the ever-recurring necessity of renewal. In this vision, moral failure is not a threat to the project of self-cultivation but an inescapable feature of it. By contrast, Western philosophy has long treated moral failure—*akrasia*—as a riddle that exposes the fragility of reason’s command over action. In Plato’s *Protagoras* (358b–c), Socrates famously denies the very possibility of *akrasia*: to know the better course, in his view, is necessarily to follow it; wrongdoing stems only from ignorance or miscalculation. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book VII), acknowledges the real possibility of weakness of will but frames it as a disorderly conflict within the soul: rational judgment is overwhelmed by appetite, leading to a temporary suspension of better knowledge. In both cases, the problem of *akrasia* is treated as a cognitive or rational defect, an unsettling breakdown between knowing and doing that demands philosophical explanation. Modern accounts such as those discussed by Stroud and Svirsky (2019) continue to reflect this expectation: when an agent like ‘Joseph’ acts against his all-things-considered judgment, it is perceived as a profound failure of rational agency. The coherence of action itself seems at stake.

The philosophical stakes of this divergence become particularly visible in the domain of education, where the formation of character reveals whether moral insight and moral action can truly be divorced. Imagine a student who understands the importance of respectful listening yet frequently interrupts or disregards the rituals of deference. Under an Aristotelian model, such behaviour would signal a conflict between rational judgment and unruly impulse—a failure of appetite to submit to reason’s command. Under a Confucian lens, however, as Joel Kupperman (1981) and Tu Weiming (1988) illuminate, the issue lies deeper: the student’s heart–mind (*xin*, 心) has not yet been harmonised. Respectfulness has not become embodied disposition but remains a fragile ideal still to be connected to spontaneous conduct. Education, therefore, is not merely the impartation of correct principles or the policing of behaviour: it is the painstaking cultivation of sensibility, the tuning of feeling, willing, sensing, and knowing into a unified moral presence. Under this Confucian view, moral failure appears not as a lapse of will or an error of calculation, but as the visible index of an unfinished internal cultivation. Confucius’ admission that the *jūnzǐ* is ashamed of his word outstripping his deed (*Analects* 14.27) is not a demand for impossible perfection but an

acknowledgment of the ethical labour of embodiment. Virtue is dispositional rather than propositional; it emerges not from isolated acts of rational evaluation, but from the slow sedimentation of right feeling and action into character.

The vision of moral failure as a sign of incomplete cultivation finds further depth in Tu Weiming's (1988) reading of Mencius, who envisions moral life beginning with the fragile 'four sprouts'—compassion, shame, respect, and discernment—embedded in human nature. While Western models often emphasise reason's task of restraining unruly desires, Mencius reveals that ethical failure stems from the withering of these nascent sensitivities. Failure arises not merely when appetite overwhelms judgment, but when the heart's responsiveness to the good has grown dull. Consider the child who once instinctively comforted a crying peer, but later learns to look away. Her failure is not a triumph of selfish desire, but the erosion of her capacity to feel. The sprout of compassion has not been nurtured. Cultivation, then, is not suppression but care—the slow, attentive work of sustaining embodied moral perception.

Yet even within Confucian thought, deeper articulations of moral failure emerge, most notably in Wang Yangming's radical unification of knowing and acting. As Lau Hoi Ho (2008) explains, Wang rejects the separation between cognition and volition that defines much of Western moral psychology. For Wang, weakness of will is not a matter of knowledge being overridden by desire, but a sign that authentic moral knowledge has not yet fully penetrated the heart–mind. To know the good is already to be moved toward it; to fail to act rightly is thus to reveal an internal disunity rather than a mere lapse of strength. Overcoming moral failure requires more than intellectual clarity: it demands the refinement of sincerity (*chéng* 誠), the rooting out of selfishness, and the restoration of the heart's natural responsiveness to the moral world.

Moral failure, far from disqualifying the ethical life, becomes in Confucian thought the very engine of moral development: the crucible in which sincerity is tested, challenged, and deepened. As Tu Weiming (1988, pp. 220–223) suggests in his reading of Mencius, self-cultivation is not a steady ascent but a dynamic, rhythmic process: a continual nourishing and protecting of the heart–mind, vulnerable to disturbance, forgetfulness, and failure. Ethical life unfolds through moments of both moral clarity and collapse, and its task lies not in avoiding failure but in returning, again and again, to the work of ethical renewal. To be human, on this understanding, is to live within the tension between one's immediate impulses and one's higher possibilities—and to embrace the slow labour of moral integration. The *jūnzǐ* grows not in spite of failure, but because of it.

### 5.5.2 Shame (*Chǐ* 耻) as Ethical Attunement

If *akrasia* reveals the incompleteness of self-cultivation, shame (*chǐ*, 耻) is the felt response to that incompleteness. It registers the gap between who one is and who one ought to become—not as failure to be condemned, but as a call to deepen one's ethical commitment. Earlier, we considered shame (*chǐ*, 耻) in the context of teaching, where it functions as a source of humility, vigilance, and moral sincerity for the reflective educator. Yet shame occupies an even deeper and more universal role in Confucian moral philosophy. Beyond its pedagogical significance, shame emerges as an essential disposition for the broader project of self-cultivation. It serves not merely as an emotional response to failure, but as an existential *attunement* to the ethical demands of becoming a *jūnzǐ*—an exemplary person.

In Confucian thought, shame is a marker of ethical openness: a readiness to perceive, feel, and respond to one's own moral shortcomings. It is not the shame of public embarrassment, nor simply regret over social impropriety; it is an *inner* alertness to falling short of one's own moral possibilities. As Bongrae Seok (2015) emphasises, Confucian shame functions as a 'self-critical and self-transformative process'—a mode of continual self-surveillance that encourages deeper *alignment* between one's ideals and one's lived reality. Unlike Aristotle, who in the *Nicomachean Ethics* viewed shame as a quasi-virtue appropriate primarily to the morally immature, Confucius treats shame as a lasting and indispensable quality for even the mature individual. The *jūnzǐ* never moves beyond the need for shame; rather, she deepens her sensitivity to it.

Mencius captures this enduring quality when he identifies 'the sense of shame' (*xiūwù zhī xīn*, 羞惡之心) as one of the four foundational 'sprouts' of moral life (*Mencius* 2A6). This shame is not reactive but aspirational: it is the internal compass that resists self-satisfaction and draws the cultivator toward ethical refinement. As Antonio Cua (2003) notes, the experience of shame in Confucian ethics is relationally shaped; it arises through encounters with 'significant others' whose moral standing one respects. Yet it does not require external judgment to be activated. Over time, the internalisation of these standards leads to an autonomous vigilance—an ethical attunement that sustains self-cultivation even in solitude.

To feel shame in the Confucian sense is thus to remain open to the moral demands that arise within and through relation. It is to refuse complacency. It is to remain alive to the gap between what one is and what one ought to become. In this light, shame is inseparable from ethical seriousness: the *jūnzǐ* is distinguished not by the absence of failure, but by her unwillingness to become indifferent

to it. Shame, when rightly cultivated, becomes a form of aspiration—a silent, persistent call toward greater integrity. Moreover, this form of shame operates not through punitive self-reproach but through a productive unease that orients the individual toward correction and growth. As Confucius affirms, the *jūnzǐ* feels shame when his words outstrip his deeds (*Analects* 14.27). Shame thus maintains an ethical tension within the self—a refusal to let one's aspirations ossify into self-congratulation or public performance, such as the ubiquitous: 'I'm so proud of myself.'

In an era increasingly shaped by moral minimalism and the politics of appearance, the Confucian emphasis on shame as an internal, enduring posture of self-cultivation offers a profound alternative. It suggests that the moral life is not a state to be achieved but a field to be continually tended. To live with shame, in this sense, is not to be crushed by failure, but to remain in living relation to the ethical horizon that beckons us onward—even, and especially, when it exposes our incompleteness. In this continual attunement, the slow work of becoming a *jūnzǐ* takes form.

### 5.5.3 Constancy, Moral Struggle, and the Lifelong Becoming of the *Jūnzǐ*

Shame deepens moral awareness, but awareness alone is not enough. The path of self-cultivation demands constancy—an enduring commitment to return, again and again, to the work of becoming. Confucian ethics refuses to conceive of moral life in terms of singular acts or isolated achievements. Instead, it understands ethical formation as a continuous unfolding across the full arc of a life—a recursive effort marked not by perfection but by perseverance. The moral self is not constructed through isolated moments of triumph, but through the quiet endurance of returning to the good again and again despite moments of exhaustion, uncertainty, or lapse. As Confucius teaches, the burden of the *jūnzǐ* is indeed heavy, for he bears the responsibility of embodying *rén* (consummate conduct), a path that ends only in death (*Analects* 8.7). Moral life, in this vision, is not an arrival but an unceasing journey; each step is an act of renewal, each return a deepening of one's commitment to the good. This reconfiguration of moral struggle reframes doubt, fatigue, and failure not as interruptions of the ethical life but as constitutive of it. To struggle inwardly is not to fall away from the path; it is to remain upon it. The *jūnzǐ* is not the one who never errs, but the one who remains steadfast in moral commitment, even amid faltering. Moral excellence lies not in attaining a final state, but in the ongoing renewal of ethical seriousness. As Hall and Ames (1987) argue, the *jūnzǐ* embodies not a completed state of moral virtue, but the continual responsiveness to ethical

demands—an enduring perseverance sustained through the uncertainties and imperfections of human life.<sup>84</sup>

The perseverance of the *jūnzǐ* is not a merely psychological virtue but an ontological commitment—a lived synchronisation of word and deed, aspiration and enactment. Her moral gravity is rendered through consistency over time, a consistency that is neither rigidity nor the absence of tension but an active, responsive fidelity to what is appropriate. In the *Great Learning* (*Dà Xué*), the aim of education is described as the manifestation of luminous virtue *míng dé* (明德), the renewal of the people *qīn mín* (親民), and the abiding in highest goodness *zhǐ yú zhì shàn* (止於至善)—an ideal realised not through singular acts of zeal but through a lifetime of sustained cultivation. Thus, to persist in the Confucian sense is to enact moral life as continual return: a faithful re-embodiment of ethical aspiration through changing circumstances. Each return is not mere repetition, but transformation—a deeper assimilation of the good into the substance of one's being.

This vision is not nostalgic. It does not call for the restoration of a lost moral order but affirms the enduring possibility of ethical life even within a fragmented and disoriented age. The *jūnzǐ* persists not because the world confirms her values but because she has cultivated a form of life resilient enough to carry them forward. Her cultivation is not heroic in the public sense; it is often quiet, unrewarded, and unnoticed. As Confucius suggests in the *Analects*, the *jūnzǐ* is concerned not with public recognition but with being 'worthy of appreciation' (4.14), seeking what is moral rather than what is profitable (4.16). Yet it is precisely in this quiet perseverance that her moral presence becomes profound. She lives not for recognition but for resonance—with the ethical order that transcends both personal ambition and historical circumstance. The Confucian self, accordingly, is neither atomistic nor autonomous in the liberal sense; it is formed through relational roles, sustained through ritual, and deepened through the faithful continuity of moral effort across time. Her authority derives not from the conquest of ethical difficulties but from the refusal to abandon the moral task itself—a fidelity that bears the mark of true strength. As Confucius reminds us, the *jūnzǐ* never forsakes *rén*, 'not even for as long as it takes to eat a meal' (*Analects* 4.5), and remains ever-attuned to what is moral rather than what is expedient (*Analects* 4.16).

In a culture that exalts disruption, novelty, and innovation, the *jūnzǐ* stands as a quiet counterforce. She honours repetition and renewal, affirming that to persist is not to remain static but to move ever

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<sup>84</sup> See Chapter III, Section 4: The Exemplary Person: Chün Tzu.

more deeply within a form of life already rich with moral significance. True success, in this frame, is measured not by external achievement but by the inward task of remaining in formation: of resisting cynicism, of carrying luminous virtue through the uncertainties of the world. It is through this constancy—this resilient, attentive fidelity—that the *jūnzǐ* emerges not merely as a moral exemplar but as a bearer of hope. Through the recursive labour of ethical renewal, she embodies the possibility that human flourishing lies not in transcendence of failure, but in the slow, steadfast return to the good.

## 5.6 Crisis and Continuity: Moral Presence in an Unstable World

According to tradition, Confucius was born into a society where inherited titles no longer guaranteed ethical authority. The nobility of birth had become increasingly divorced from the nobility of character. His vision of the *jūnzǐ* emerged precisely as a counterpoint to this collapse—a reassertion of the idea that leadership must be rooted in moral cultivation rather than entitlement. Today, we witness not a return to inherited aristocracy, but a rise of a different elite: credentialed, technocratic, and bureaucratically legitimised.<sup>85</sup> The challenge, however, remains similar. Titles are conferred, qualifications amassed, but seldom is ethical seriousness the measure of a leader.

In a time of moral uncertainty, *lǐ* functions as both diagnosis and remedy. It reveals where the rhythms of ethical life have been disrupted and offers a path toward reattunement. But such reattunement requires figures capable of carrying *lǐ* not merely as tradition, but as presence—as a way of inhabiting form with sincerity, discernment, and moral gravity. In the current educational and institutional landscape, such figures can seem rare. Leadership is frequently approached as a matter of managerial competence, rhetorical polish, and credentialed legitimacy. What is often missing is ethical resonance—the felt coherence between who one is, what one says, and how one lives.<sup>86</sup>

With the ethical failures of performative meritocracy increasingly visible, the Confucian tradition offers not a nostalgic return to hierarchy, but a critique of moral vacuity disguised as success. The *jūnzǐ* is not against achievement. She is against achievement unmoored from virtue. Where modern

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<sup>85</sup> See Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020), for a broader critique of how credentialed meritocracy severs achievement from moral cultivation, and contributes to the erosion of ethical seriousness in leadership.

<sup>86</sup> On the shift from substantive ethical leadership to models emphasizing managerial skill and credentialed legitimacy, and on the call for a renewed coherence between being, saying, and doing, see Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Boyatzis and McKee (2005).

systems reward strategic compliance and charismatic projection, the Confucian ideal demands constancy, sincerity, and inner attunement. Leadership, in this light, is not the capacity to inspire confidence through image, but the capacity to remain morally serious in the face of complexity. The *jūnzǐ* leads not by domination, but by the weight of her being. Leadership, in Confucian thought, arises not through command or projection, but through the quiet authority of a life cultivated in attunement with *lǐ* and moral seriousness—a dynamic Hall and Ames describe as the harmonisation of social order through personal presence rather than external control (1987 chs. 3 and 5). Ethical leadership, in this frame, is inseparable from self-cultivation. It cannot be manufactured through policy reforms or branding strategies. It must be lived. And it must be recognisable not through title or status, but through the quiet authority of conduct. In contrast to the modern cult of expertise, the Confucian vision insists that wisdom is not reducible to information, and that moral clarity cannot be credentialed.<sup>87</sup> What matters is whether one's presence engenders trust, whether one's words carry the resonance of integrity, and whether one's actions sustain the moral field in which others may also flourish.

The pedagogical import of *zhì*—living wisely—lies in its refusal to separate discernment from moral struggle. It is not the capacity to know in abstraction, but the ability to perceive what is appropriate through attunement. A society that fails to recognise this mode of wisdom will continue to elevate those who may be intelligent but lack wisdom, articulate but insincere, credentialed but unformed. The erosion of ethical leadership is not simply the fault of individuals; it is also the symptom of a broader forgetfulness—a confusion between knowing and being, between skill and wisdom, between the expert and the exemplar.

Confucian ethics does not presume a world of clarity or control. Rather, it begins from the acknowledgment that moral life is often ambiguous, threaded with fragility and the recurrence of failure. This fragility is not a fault, but the very condition of ethical life. To live ethically, in this frame, is to live without guarantees. Confucian thinkers do not offer immunity from the recurrence of moral failure or the unpredictability of social life; on the contrary, they dwell within its tensions. The *jūnzǐ* is not a figure of stoic detachment or perfect clarity. She is a person committed to the path of cultivation even when direction is obscure and resonance is thin. Moral life, for Confucius, unfolds not in stable systems but in unstable worlds. As Hall and Ames (1987) observe, the Confucian model of selfhood privileges continuous cultivation over any notion of fixed completion, constancy

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<sup>87</sup> On the risk of reducing education to performance and measurable outcomes, and the corresponding call to recover education as the formation of ethical subjectivity, see Gert Biesta (2013), *Beautiful Risk of Education*.

over certainty, anchoring ethical life in the humble, ongoing renewal of moral commitment rather than in the illusion of final achievement. The *Analects* acknowledges this condition in multiple ways. Confucius remarks, ‘The gentleman is easy of mind, while the small man is always full of anxiety’ (*Analects* 7.37), suggesting an inner tranquility that persists even through hardship. This composure does not arise from denying difficulty, but from remaining within it—attuned, responsive, unresolved. To live ethically is not to rise above fragility but to remain faithful within it. This fragility becomes particularly acute in periods of social disorder or moral breakdown—when rituals lose cultural traction, when words cease to mean what they once did, when institutions fracture. In such moments, the moral person is exposed not only to external danger but also to internal disorientation. One no longer knows what is fitting. One no longer feels the rhythm. And yet the work of discernment continues.

To live within such ethical uncertainty requires a distinctive posture: not certainty, but seriousness; not mastery, but attentiveness. This is not a passive condition but a practised stance: to remain within the moral field even when it offers no clear path, no emotional affirmation, no public reward. Confucian ethics thus demands a kind of courage—not the heroism of decisive action, but the quiet endurance of continued presence. It is the courage to remain: to bow when no one is watching, to speak rightly when no one agrees, to stay in relation when one is tempted to withdraw. It is a courage that does not triumph, but sustains.

The idea of staying in tension without resolution is echoed in Tu Weiming’s account of Confucian selfhood emerging as a lifelong project of continuous moral striving, always unfinished and requiring constant renewal (1978). The ethical self is not a possession but a task, marked not by coherence alone but by its capacity to persist through fragmentation. Such perseverance is not rooted in willpower alone; it is nourished by ritual, community, and the slow gravity of habituated form. When internal orientation falters, the external rhythms of *lǐ* can carry the practitioner. The bow may feel empty, but its performance can still hold space for the return of sincerity. This is a performative continuity of form—a way of remaining morally available even when affective resonance fails. This ethic resists both moralism and despair. It acknowledges that the *jūnzǐ* will stumble, that clarity will lapse, that confusion will visit even the most serious practitioner. But it insists that these are not signs of failure; they are signs that the ethical life is being lived. The greatest ethical failure is not misjudgment, but *withdrawal*. To live ethically, then, is to remain present—to continue responding, even when one’s confidence has frayed. It is to return, again and again, to the work of discernment. Not because it guarantees success, but because it is the only way of being that does justice to the depth of our obligations.

In a world of collapse, spectacle, and distraction, such presence is radical. It refuses both cynicism and performance. It remains in the difficulty—not to resolve it, but to dwell within it attentively. And in this dwelling, a kind of moral possibility is sustained: not certainty, not purity, but seriousness, grace, and care.

## 5.7 Conclusion: Recovering Ethical Presence

This chapter has traced the contours of Confucian ethical pedagogy, exploring how it offers a moral and educational alternative to certain ethical paradigms that dominate contemporary discourse. Central to this vision is the figure of the *jūnzǐ*, not as an unattainable ideal, but as a living exemplar of what it means to lead a life of moral depth and integrity. The *jūnzǐ* embodies a moral presence that challenges both personal and institutional forms of ethical complacency. In a world increasingly dominated by efficiency, performance, and credentialism, the *jūnzǐ* asks us to return to a deeper question: what kind of person we might strive to become.

The recovery of ethical presence is not merely an individual task but a civilisational one. It is a response to the erosion of moral seriousness that has characterised much of modern education and leadership. The Confucian tradition offers not simply an abstract set of ideals but a lived, embodied way of being—one that is relational, rhythmic, and formed through ritual, moral struggle, and continuous cultivation. The *jūnzǐ*'s example invites us to recover a vision of education that is not confined to instruction or the acquisition of skills, but grounded in the slow, formative work of character and virtue. This formation is not a solitary journey: ethical life emerges not through transmission but through presence—through shared moral inquiry, mutual recognition, and co-agency. Standish's reflections in *The Disenchantment of Education* (2016) support this conclusion. He critiques the modern disenchantment of education, noting 'a late flowering of verificationism in current conceptions of teaching, learning, and above all assessment' (p. 99). Re-enchantment, for Standish, is not about nostalgia but about 'questions of meaning and value, and of the ways these pervade our lives and world' (ibid., p. 100). He illustrates this through the example of 'the child washing plastic potatoes,' who 'is not only copying the activity of its parents but entering into self-conscious practices of representation and participation in community' (ibid., pp. 101–102). Drawing on McDowell's idea of language as 'a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what' (ibid., p. 105) to show how practices carry moral and relational significance, Standish's emphasis on relational formation resonates with the Confucian vision that ethical life is not imposed by the teacher but co-created through sincere, attentive engagement. The student is not a passive recipient of virtue, but a participant in its unfolding. The Confucian teacher invites

ethical life not by imposition, but by example—inhabiting a form of life that calls the other into formation. Ethical presence is thus not the property of the teacher alone, but the shared atmosphere of a relationship grounded in attentiveness and sincerity.

As we face the challenges of the twenty-first century, the Confucian ethical tradition provides a compass for recovering moral seriousness in a world often adrift. The *jūnzǐ*, as both moral exemplar and pedagogical force, reminds us that success must be measured not by external achievement, but by internal cultivation and relational integrity. Ethical leadership, in this frame, is inseparable from self-cultivation: it cannot be manufactured through reforms or credentials, but must be lived through ongoing responsiveness to the ethical demands of one's time and place. This is a lifelong task. The path of the *jūnzǐ* is one of continual becoming, marked by constant renewal and attentive persistence rather than final arrival. In this process, shame is not a paralysing burden, but a vital moral signal—a felt awareness of one's shortcomings that calls the individual back to sincerity and the path of cultivation. Fragility, confusion, and moral tension are not deviations from the ethical life; they are its very precondition.

To live ethically, then, is not to master uncertainty, but to remain within it—to dwell attentively in the difficulty, sustaining seriousness, grace, and care when guarantees are absent. In this dwelling, fragility becomes not a threat to ethical life, but its very medium—a quiet but radical preservation of the possibility of becoming human well.

## CHAPTER 6: Confucianism: Moral Conflict Across Spheres

This chapter examines how Confucian ethics can illuminate and navigate contemporary moral conflict by turning to three case studies, each situated at a different scale of relational complexity. These cases unfold in ascending order—from the familial to the institutional to the geopolitical—allowing for a progressively deepened exploration of Confucian moral virtues such as *xiào* (family reverence), *rén* (consummate conduct—ethical responsiveness in action), *yì* (context-sensitive discernment), and *lǐ* (ritual propriety).

We begin with a domestic dilemma involving filial obligation, where the Confucian conception of the relational self offers a meaningful alternative to liberal models of autonomy and moral debt. The case of Priya illustrates how moral identity is shaped through roles and affective bonds, rather than abstract duties or voluntary commitments. We then move to the public sphere in the context of the Parkfield school protests, where liberal frameworks of inclusion and procedural fairness reveal their fragility in the face of deep ethical pluralism. Here, Confucian ethics offers not only critique but constructive insight—proposing a model of civic engagement grounded in moral cultivation and ritualised attentiveness. Finally, we turn to the case of Kanaky–La Nouvelle-Calédonie, where the moral grammar of liberal sovereignty encounters its limits in the face of colonial history and Indigenous cosmology. Through a Confucian lens, the Kanak struggle for self-determination becomes not merely a political demand, but a call for relational justice rooted in historical memory and asymmetrical responsibility.

Taken together, these case studies trace a Confucian ethical formation—from intimacy to institution to civilisational order—demonstrating that Confucian relational ethics offers not just a vocabulary, but a cultivated disposition for engaging with moral tension without domination or erasure.

### 6.1 Case Study 1: Filial Reverence

#### 6.1.1 Introduction

In examining the moral dilemma posed in this case study, it is vital to foreground the conception of self not as an autonomous agent acting in isolation, but as constituted through networks of interdependent relationships. This marks a notable divergence between some liberal accounts of personhood and the Confucian conception of the relational self. Confucian philosophy, as discussed in chapter 4, places the family centrally as the foundational space of moral formation. Unlike certain liberal views, which may emphasise the individual as an isolated bearer of rights and

duties, the Confucian self is defined by relational roles embedded in ethical significance. Thus, the family is not merely private but the crucible in which morality is cultivated through daily rituals, emotional bonds, and intergenerational interactions. It is within these familial contexts that virtues such as *xiào* (孝), *rén* (仁), *yì* (義), and *lǐ* (禮) are initially activated and gradually internalised.

The following case study should therefore be seen not as an abstract thought experiment but as a practical moral reflection engaging with contemporary familial realities shaped by demographic ageing, social fragmentation, and increasing geographic dispersion. As highlighted in chapter 4, in the West, despite individualistic tendencies, filial responsibility laws remain in over half of U.S. states (L. Yu, 2019), and in England, suggesting enduring intuitions toward intergenerational obligation. In Confucian societies such as China and Singapore, filial duty is legally encoded, reflecting an understanding that familial care is foundational to moral order. Yet such codifications, while important, cannot replace the cultivated moral responsiveness that the Confucian virtue of *xiào* (孝) demands. Rosemont and Ames (2009) argue that translating *xiào* as ‘filial piety’ inadequately captures its dynamic moral texture. *Xiào* denotes a reverential responsiveness toward those who have nurtured one’s life—not a transactional debt but a moral recognition of foundational care.

The case of Priya highlights the ethical significance of relational embeddedness, especially at potential points of rupture. Though an imagined scenario, it realistically encapsulates the moral tensions arising when personal ambition conflicts with familial obligations. Given the increasing frequency of transnational family dispersals, such dilemmas are practically significant, exemplified by the over 1.1 million British nationals residing in Australia as of June 2023 (Australian Department of Home Affairs)<sup>88</sup>. Priya’s dilemma—whether to relocate to Hawai’i for career advancement—thus becomes a lens through which to examine how relational responsibilities shape moral decision-making. From a Confucian perspective, Priya’s decision is neither a simple utilitarian balancing act nor a purely deontological obedience to parental wishes. Rather, Confucian ethics invites a holistic moral analysis that recognises affective bonds, reciprocal interdependencies, and the shifting nature of familial roles. Priya’s situation necessitates assessing her obligations through the relational virtues of *xiào* and *rén*, offering a distinct alternative to liberal conceptions of autonomy and moral duty.

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<sup>88</sup> Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australia’s Population by Country of Birth*:  
<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/country-profiles/profiles/united-kingdom#>

## 6.1.2 The Case of Priya: Filial Reverence and the Relational Self

### 6.1.2.1 Background and Moral Stakes

Imagine Priya, a 40-year-old British Sociology lecturer employed at the University of Huddersfield, living near her parents in Oldham, who are both aged 72.<sup>89</sup> Priya is married to John, a computer programmer working in Manchester, where his own parents reside. They have two young children and lead a balanced life of work, family, and leisure. When Priya applies impulsively for an Associate Professorship in Sociology at the University of Hawai'i and subsequently receives an offer, she and John are captivated by the professional and lifestyle opportunities. Upon sharing this news with her parents, their reactions are mixed. They genuinely celebrate her professional success but simultaneously confront the reality of losing regular, intimate contact with Priya and their grandchildren. Although her parents are currently secure and healthy, their age makes future needs and vulnerabilities a realistic concern. Permanently relocating would potentially sever the everyday familial interactions vital to their shared lives, threatening the continuity of relational intimacy and intergenerational bonding.

Priya's decision, then, is not merely a personal or professional matter. It raises significant ethical questions concerning familial obligations. This is not an isolated case but reflects broader migration trends.<sup>90</sup> Priya's dilemma encapsulates a contemporary moral tension: the balance between personal opportunity and intergenerational responsibility. Her case invites reflection on filial obligation, gratitude, and identity—not only through liberal frameworks of autonomy, but also relational ethical traditions like Confucianism. This analysis evaluates Priya's choice through two lenses: first, gratitude toward her parents; second, a Confucian understanding of relational obligation. Importantly, I will not consider mere procreation as sufficient grounds for filial obligation. As Seneca argues in *On Benefits*, a child might be born for reasons unrelated to a genuine intention to confer life—such as lineage preservation or accidental conception. Parental obligations arise from continued care and nurturing. Likewise, friendship is excluded from this evaluation, as it is neither necessary for nor defining of the parent-child bond.

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<sup>89</sup> While Priya is used here as a concrete example, the ethical dynamics at stake are not gender-specific. The argument applies equally to sons or any offspring navigating the moral claims of familial care. The focus is on *xiào* as a relational virtue, not on gendered expectations.

<sup>90</sup> According to the UN, in 2024 the number of international migrants worldwide stood at 304 million, a figure that has nearly doubled since 1990. See United Nations (2024). *International Migrant Stock 2024: Key facts and figures*. UN DESA/POP/2024/DC/NO. 13.

Before assessing Priya's options, it is essential to reflect on the unique character of the parent-child relationship. Unlike friendships, which can end, this bond is irrevocable. As Haldane (2006, p. 585), notes, the relationship is 'inalienable and cannot be annihilated,' even when strained. Further, the identities of parent and child are deeply entwined. Aristotle observes, 'Parents love their children as being a part of themselves, and children their parents as having originating from them' (VIII.2, 1161b17 Aristotle & Ross, 1989, p. 211). This bond extends beyond biology, encompassing the formative role of caregiving. It often involves an unconditional love that resists reduction to mere reciprocity. Such love makes the relationship ethically distinct from contractual or debt-based ties, positioning it as a foundational moral connection rather than a negotiated one.

#### 6.1.2.2 *Gratitude and the Limits of Liberal Obligation*

Can we argue, on the grounds of gratitude, that Priya owes it to her parents to stay? According to Seneca, a debt of gratitude arises only if benefits are conferred for the child's wellbeing, not with any expectation of recompense—'because otherwise it ceaseth to be a benefit, and becometh a debt' (Seneca, Bk. 1, ch.2, in Blustein, 1982, p. 49). Cicero similarly maintains that only benefits given 'deliberately, eagerly and generously' qualify as true gifts (Cicero, *On Moral Obligation*, Bk. 1, ch. 15, 1982, p. 48). However, Cicero provides little guidance on what specific parental acts should elicit a child's gratitude, or whether such gratitude can ever be fully discharged—a silence that, as Cline observes, reflects Cicero's greater concern with public rather than familial ethics (2015, p. 111). Seneca goes further than Cicero by insisting that not even the act of giving life is sufficient grounds for gratitude if it stems from self-interest or mixed motives. For gratitude to be genuinely warranted, parents must provide sustained, intentional care grounded in concern for the child's wellbeing. He even allows that a child might repay or surpass such benefits—for instance, by saving a parent's life or rescuing them from hardship (Seneca, Bk. 3, ch. 37, in Blustein, 1982, p. 49). The key question, then, is whether Priya's parents conferred such benefits, whether they did so in the right spirit, and whether she has already reciprocated. If Priya received food, shelter, education, emotional support, and other typical forms of parental care up to the point of graduation, Seneca would likely view these as legitimate grounds for gratitude—provided they were offered with genuine concern for her wellbeing rather than from expectation or obligation.

Others, such as Claudia Card, question whether one can talk of duty to repay for things that were neither for sale nor loan but, in fact, provided *gratis* (1988, p. 115). Priya might agree with Card, arguing that what her parents provided was simply part of the natural process of raising children, and as she never asked to be born, there is no basis for a debt. This position finds further support in Jeffrey Blustein's account, which distinguishes between duties of indebtedness and duties of gratitude. According to Blustein, 'duties of gratitude are owed only to those who have helped or

benefited us freely, without thought of personal gain,' whereas duties of indebtedness involve some form of expectation or calculable return (1982, p. 177). He contends that no duty of indebtedness arises unless the benefit was optional and accepted—criteria which early parental care rarely meets, as 'young children cannot exercise genuine choice with respect to the benefits of early care' (ibid., p. 183). Most parental actions are not optional but morally required, and therefore 'do not create indebtedness on the part of the children' (ibid., p. 182). If Priya's upbringing remained within the scope of those parental duties—what Blustein calls actions 'demanded by children's claim rights'—then, by this view, she owes nothing beyond what any decent parent is already obligated to provide (ibid.).

However, this liberal, quasi-contractual framing is not without its problems. What might count as 'over and above' standard parenting is normatively complex and difficult to measure. As Chenyang Li points out, 'as soon as one starts drawing the line between what belongs and what does not belong to parental duty, one is treating the family as a group of self-interested strangers (1997, p. 217). How does one quantify love or emotional support? How much is 'enough,' and how much exceeds duty? No parent keeps a record of sacrifices rendered. This uncertainty reveals the limitations of a transactional view. The liberal emphasis on autonomy and cost-benefit analysis does not reflect how most people experience familial relationships. Parental love is rarely conditional; rather, it is often freely given and without the expectation of return. The parent-child relationship, grounded in unconditional love, is fundamentally non-contractual, and this feature alone challenges the adequacy of the liberal account.

Priya might also invoke the argument that she did not ask to be born, which carries some weight in contemporary societies where parenting is more a matter of choice than necessity. Today, people actively choose to become parents, typically without expectation of reciprocation. Thus, she may feel justified in claiming no obligation to care for her parents simply because they raised her. Still, this line of reasoning risks overlooking a deeper truth. To argue that one did not ask to be born is to question the very fabric of human existence. Like all living beings, humans procreate, and most parents—biological or adoptive—choose to raise children. This generative role is a defining feature of our shared humanity. Nonetheless, let us assume that Priya does feel a debt of gratitude for the love, care, education, and support she received. If so, what form should that gratitude take? Her parents are materially comfortable and in good health, so she need not provide immediate financial or physical care. Yet they are aging, and it is not unreasonable to anticipate that their needs may increase over the next five to ten years. Priya will be unlikely to return soon, if at all. Should this anticipated future dependency factor into her decision?

Arguably, asking Priya to sacrifice a major life opportunity now for an uncertain future need is unreasonable. She might reasonably conclude that the likelihood of needing to care for her parents at a distance is insufficient grounds to refuse the offer. She could mitigate the separation by inviting them to visit annually, covering their travel expenses, and maintaining regular contact through digital means. But gratitude is not only about future care. There is also the matter of emotional presence and continuity. Moving to Hawai'i would deprive her parents of regular contact with her and their grandchildren—relationships that contribute to their emotional wellbeing and sense of identity. It might similarly affect her and her children, as familial relationships are not easily replicated. While digital tools can maintain a connection, they do not substitute for the intimacy of shared daily life. This may appear to offer a 'middle way,' preserving some degree of relational continuity, yet from a Confucian perspective such measures cannot fully substitute for the sustained, embodied intimacy that proximity enables. At her parents' advanced age, distance risks eroding the daily, unspoken exchanges through which *xiào* is cultivated, thereby impoverishing the moral and emotional lives of all concerned.

In conclusion, even if Priya adopts a liberal stance and denies any contractual debt, she cannot escape the ethical pull of her relational ties. Her gratitude, if it exists, is not merely about settling a debt but acknowledging a profound human bond. Liberal conceptualisations focused on transactional notions of debt and autonomy struggle to capture this depth. Priya's choice, then, must consider not only her personal flourishing but also the moral significance of sustained familial presence. Can one flourish fully while allowing the bonds that shaped one's life to wither? That is the question she must answer.

### 6.1.2.3 *The Confucian Response: Xiào, Rén, and Relational Identity*

The Confucian response to Priya's dilemma differs from liberal conceptualisations of personhood by foregrounding relational embeddedness as essential to identity and moral action. Central to this perspective are the virtues of *xiào* (孝), best understood as family reverence rather than mere filial obedience, and *rén* (仁), denoting consummate conduct expressed as relational moral responsiveness. In a Confucian moral framework, Priya's decision is not simply about balancing conflicting interests or obeying parental wishes. Rather, it involves recognising that her very identity is constituted through relational roles and responsibilities, particularly those toward her parents.

From the Confucian viewpoint, moral cultivation (*xiūshēn* 修身) occurs primarily within familial relationships. *Xiào*, in this context, is not transactional or based on obligations stemming from

benefits received, but reflects an ongoing, attentive responsiveness toward parents rooted in respect for their formative role. ‘The Classic of Family Reverence’ (*Xiaojing*) emphasises this virtue as foundational, highlighting a cultivated attitude toward the nurturing care one receives from parents. As the *Analects* 2.7 clarify, providing physical support alone is insufficient; reverence (*jing* 敬) is crucial. Thus, for Priya, relocating to Hawai‘i would represent not just a practical inconvenience but potentially a disruption in her moral self-cultivation. At her parents’ advanced age, their needs—emotional and psychological—become morally significant, marking a crucial phase where parental care transitions into reciprocal nurturing by the child. In this framing, such care is not viewed as a burdensome duty but as a natural culmination of the familial relationship, integral to Priya’s ethical development.

Yet *xiào* does not stand alone. For Confucians, the cultivation of reverence within the family is the root from which *rén*—concern for others more generally—grows. Mencius famously taught that compassion begins with the heart’s natural response to one’s kin and extends outward to wider circles of relation. In Priya’s case, her responsiveness to her parents is both an enactment of *xiào* and an expression of *rén*: by caring for those who gave her life, she embodies the relational moral orientation that grounds her capacity to act humanely toward others. In this way, the family becomes the training ground of *rén*, ensuring that the reverence nurtured within filial bonds radiates outward as broader ethical concern.

Confucianism therefore does not frame Priya’s choice as a sacrifice of personal flourishing. Instead, fulfilling relational responsibilities to her aging parents enhances her own moral integrity and constitutes genuine human flourishing. Priya’s parents, reflecting true Confucian sensibility, would not explicitly demand she stay, recognising that filial reverence must come freely from moral awareness rather than compulsion. Nonetheless, Priya’s cultivated responsiveness—shaped by *xiào* and extended through *rén*—would lead her to recognise the implicit relational obligation, affirming the ethical centrality of maintaining familial bonds at this stage of their lives.

In essence, Priya’s moral identity, according to Confucian ethics, inherently includes her relationship with her parents. Prioritising professional ambition over familial presence could risk fracturing not only her parents’ well-being but also her moral coherence and self-cultivation. *Xiào* and *rén* thereby offer a robust relational framework for evaluating Priya’s dilemma, emphasising relational integrity and familial continuity as vital to ethical personhood.

#### 6.1.2.4 *Yi and the Particularities of Context*

The Confucian analysis of Priya's dilemma extends further through the virtue of *yi* (義), representing appropriateness or moral discernment. *Yi* requires context-sensitive judgment, emphasising the particularities of Priya's relational and situational context rather than universal moral prescriptions. This situational awareness underscores the importance of roles, relationships, and life phases in moral decisions.

Priya's scenario, free from immediate crisis or severe hardship, nonetheless embodies significant ethical tension. Her parents, though presently healthy, are approaching an age where their emotional and practical needs are likely to intensify. The decision to relocate thus acquires moral gravity precisely because of its timing and potential permanency, significantly reducing opportunities for regular familial contact. Confucian ethics highlights this period of her parents' lives as morally critical, emphasising that intergenerational presence constitutes essential relational nourishment and emotional well-being for both Priya and her family.

Confucian morality is neither rigid nor universally prohibitive of relocation or pursuit of personal ambitions. However, the virtue of *yi* necessitates Priya's careful consideration of relational consequences and the appropriateness of actions within her familial context. Had Priya been younger or her parents more robustly independent, relocating might present fewer ethical concerns. But given current circumstances—her parents' advancing age, Priya's own family dynamics, and the anticipated permanence of the move—*yi* would suggest that moving to Hawai'i would constitute an inappropriate disruption to her familial responsibilities and relational harmony.

Additionally, Confucian ethics integrates emotional and moral considerations. The potential emotional loss experienced by Priya's parents is not dismissed as mere sentimentality; rather, it is ethically significant, integral to the family's moral health and cohesion. Digital or infrequent interactions cannot fully compensate for the loss of sustained, embodied relational intimacy. Thus, from the standpoint of *yi*, Priya's choice is a profound ethical reflection on the value of relational embeddedness, family continuity, and the situational appropriateness of her actions.

#### 6.1.2.5 *Objection and Modification: A More Compelling Case?*

An important objection might arise regarding Priya's dilemma: would the Confucian ethical analysis hold if Priya's reasons for relocating were more morally compelling, such as taking up humanitarian work? While Confucianism emphasises familial roles, it does not dismiss broader ethical

obligations. The virtue of *rén* extends moral concern beyond the family through progressively broader circles. Nevertheless, Confucian ethics tends to prioritise obligations according to relational proximity and affective embeddedness.

Even in a scenario involving significant altruistic motives, the Confucian framework would require careful consideration of Priya's specific familial context. Priya's responsibilities toward her elderly parents, given their current age and emotional dependence, hold substantial moral weight. Abstract duties to humanity, while important, do not automatically override particular, situated familial obligations. Confucian ethics thus encourages proportionality in assessing competing moral claims, emphasising that genuine moral imperatives must be compelling enough to justify disrupting vital familial bonds.

Confucianism does not rigidly oppose moral innovation or risk-taking, but it calls for attentiveness to relational consequences. Were Priya's parents younger, healthier, or her relocation temporary, the ethical balance might shift. But in the present context—marked by pronounced emotional needs, anticipated dependency, and a permanent move—the Confucian judgment remains firm. The obligation toward her parents is not transactional but relational, reflecting a cultivated moral sensitivity to their specific circumstances and vulnerabilities. Therefore, even with more morally compelling reasons, the Confucian evaluation would tend to remain consistent. Priya's ethical labour is to remain deeply attentive to the relational fabric of her familial bonds, discerning carefully whether external moral imperatives genuinely justify the disruption of these bonds. This discernment, informed by *rén*, *xiào*, and *yì*, forms the ethical core of Confucian relational analysis.

#### 6.1.2.6 *Concluding Reflections on Personhood and Autonomy*

The imagined case of Priya reveals not only the moral relevance of familial bonds but also how our conception of personhood influences ethical decision-making. In many liberal traditions, the person is typically framed as an autonomous agent—free to pursue self-fulfilment, bound only by voluntarily accepted duties. Within this frame, Priya's choice might be assessed primarily through the lens of personal ambition and individual rights, with familial obligations considered contingent on past benefits or current dependencies.

However, the Confucian view offers a fundamentally different ontological and ethical orientation. Personhood is understood as relational, constituted through enduring roles and reciprocal care, especially within the family. One is not first a free agent and then a daughter; one is always already a daughter, embedded in a network of care that makes personhood possible. The Confucian virtue

of *xiào* is thus not an imposed duty or a repayment, but an expression of cultivated attentiveness to those foundational relationships. As David Hall and Roger Ames (1998, p. 23) articulate, the Confucian self is best understood as ‘a focal point within a field of roles and relationships,’ rather than as an atomistic, autonomous subject. Ethical development, from this perspective, is not achieved in isolation, but through the ongoing negotiation of obligations across familial, social, and political contexts. From this standpoint, Priya’s decision is not just a choice between career and caregiving. It reflects a deeper question of who she understands herself to be. A liberal reading might emphasise her autonomy, justifying departure if her parents are not in material need. But a Confucian reading sees her flourishing as inseparable from theirs. Her parents’ quiet support and reluctance to impose a demand do not negate their emotional needs or the moral claim their relationship holds. *Xiào* involves precisely this kind of sensitivity to unspoken obligations—recognising when presence, not duty, is what the moment morally demands.

Critics may argue that such a view risks restricting freedom or inhibiting progress. Yet Confucian ethics suggests that freedom can emerge not from detachment but from deep relational awareness and commitment. By beginning with the role of child—not daughter or son, but child—we foreground a widely shared ethical position shaped by care, gratitude, and attentiveness. Moral maturity lies in discerning how best to honour the ties that shape us, not in seeking to escape them. This is not necessarily conservative constraint but a form of ethical clarity. Priya, in choosing to remain, could be seen as realising her autonomy within the relational structures that sustain her. Her decision would thus affirm both her parents’ worth and her own moral development. The Confucian framework reframes the dilemma not simply as a conflict between competing goods, but as an opportunity to act in ways that deepen one’s humanity through the relational virtues that define and enrich our lives.

## 6.2 Case Study 2: Inclusion that Excludes: A Confucian View of the Parkfield Protests

The preceding case explored the moral stakes of familial intimacy and the formative role of relational embeddedness in shaping ethical discernment. But relational ethics is no less vital in the public sphere, where competing values frequently collide without shared moral grammar. The next case study shifts from the personal to the civic—examining the protests at Parkfield Community School as a site of pluralist tension. Here, the failure of procedural liberalism to accommodate ethical difference exposes the need for cultivated moral capacities and affective resonance—virtues central to the Confucian tradition.

The protests at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham in 2019 are frequently cited as a flashpoint in the ongoing contestation over the limits of pluralism, the role of religious difference in civic life, and the ethical reach of state education. The introduction of the *No Outsiders* programme, designed to foster inclusion through age-appropriate discussion of equality issues including LGBTQ+ identities, provoked sustained resistance from Muslim parents who understood the curriculum not as neutral pedagogy, but as a disruption of their moral responsibilities and religious commitments. As Abeera Khan (2021) argues, this resistance should not be reductively cast as mere homophobia; she suggests it can be understood in the context of liberalism’s racialised and securitising logics, where Muslim dissent has been framed as a threat to national values and thus subjected to disciplinary state responses.

The Parkfield conflict therefore exemplifies the limitations of liberal proceduralism—particularly its presumption that civic disagreement can be resolved through appeals to rights, consultation, and reasoned deliberation. Drawing on Khan’s analysis, it becomes evident that dissenting voices were reframed through securitising and pathologising discourses that rendered them unintelligible within the liberal imaginary. As she shows, the offer of consultation came only after normative consensus—on inclusion, British values, and deradicalisation—had already been presupposed, foreclosing the possibility of genuine moral engagement.

Against this backdrop, I argue that Confucian relational ethics may offer a more adequate framework for interpreting the Parkfield conflict. Rather than grounding pluralism in procedural neutrality or abstract equality, Confucianism emphasises cultivated relational practices—such as ritual propriety (*li*), sincerity (*chéng*), and making good one’s word (*xīn*)—as preconditions for coexistence across difference. Extending Khan’s critique into this moral-philosophical register, and

drawing on Nora Hämäläinen's (2021) account of moral renegotiation, I reframe the Parkfield protests as a site where liberalism's affective and relational deficits became visible, and where Confucian moral anthropology may offer a more durable account of ethical cohabitation beyond consensus.

## 6.2.1 Liberal Framing and Its Breakdown at Parkfield

### 6.2.1.1 *The Liberal Frame of Inclusion*

The *No Outsiders* programme at Parkfield Community School was introduced as a model of progressive pedagogy, aligning itself explicitly with the statutory obligations of the Equality Act 2010 and the broader ideological framework of 'British values'. Its aims—teaching children mutual respect, equality, and inclusion—were presented not as politically or morally contestable, but as normative givens within a liberal democratic order. Through this framing, the programme was situated as a vehicle for civic development, a means of socialising children into pluralist values through age-appropriate discussions of identity, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion. Yet, as Khan (2021, pp. 134–137) argues, the invocation of these civic ideals obscures the extent to which 'British values' operate within a securitising discourse that positions dissent as civic failure. The protests did not simply arise as a spontaneous cultural backlash, but were rendered legible through an already-structured moral field in which disagreement with liberal inclusion was framed as irrational or dangerous.

The parents' resistance was quickly positioned outside the bounds of moral legitimacy. Their objections were not treated as conscientious or dialogical, but instead recoded as signs of intolerance, backwardness, or even extremism. Khan shows how official and media discourses mobilised liberal inclusion as a disciplinary tool, reframing dissent through securitising logics that cast Muslim families as threats to civic cohesion. In this context, Muslim parents were interpellated not as participants in a civic conversation, but as subjects requiring correction and oversight. Many emphasised that they were not homophobic, voicing concerns instead about age-appropriateness and the undermining of parental moral authority—yet such distinctions were largely disregarded. The state's language of tolerance, as Khan highlights, did not extend to their evaluative frameworks.

This asymmetry was reinforced by liberalism's authority to define what counts as moral or civic speech. The *No Outsiders* programme was presented as ideologically neutral—a straightforward reflection of legal equality and social cohesion—but this neutrality arguably masked a substantive normative project. Although Khan does not explicitly frame her critique in terms of religious or

familial moral systems, her analysis demonstrates how liberal inclusion discursively constructs Muslim cultural and religious difference as a deficiency to be corrected. In this securitised context, programmes like *No Outsiders* operate not as neutral civic education, but as civilising interventions, particularly when applied to communities already racialised as culturally incompatible with British values (Khan, 2021, pp. 139–140). Objections to the programme were not engaged as part of a pluralist moral discourse but managed as impediments to an already-assumed consensus. In this way, the liberal response foreclosed the very conditions of disagreement it purported to protect.

#### 6.2.1.2 *Structural Failures of Procedural Liberalism*

The liberal response at Parkfield cannot be understood solely as a case of policy failure or administrative oversight. It reveals a deeper structural dynamic within liberal governance—one that presumes moral disagreement can be resolved through reasoned consensus, provided procedures are transparent and actors sufficiently rational. This logic, central to Rawlsian public reason, holds that citizens must translate their comprehensive doctrines—such as religious worldviews—into secular terms accessible to all. While Abeera Khan (2021) does not engage Rawlsian liberalism directly, her analysis of the *No Outsiders* protests highlights the discursive asymmetries embedded in such frameworks. She shows that what counts as legitimate participation in civic dialogue is already shaped by liberalism’s normative assumptions. Thus, when Muslim parents expressed concerns over the curriculum, their objections were not treated as legitimate moral claims but were instead, in Khan’s terms, rendered legible only through ‘the elisions around securitisation in the discursive formation of the protests’ (ibid., p. 139), and positioned as coming from ‘segments of particular faiths who are determined to use our schools to promote beliefs and practices that are an anathema to British values’ (Spielman, quoted in ibid.)<sup>91</sup> In this frame, British liberalism engaged in what Khan calls ‘the creation of unfree others’ (ibid.). Their exclusion from the conversation was not due to a refusal to participate, but because the discursive registers in which they spoke were rendered unintelligible within the liberal frame.

As Khan documents, many parents attempted to voice their concerns using the very language of inclusion, mutual respect, and child welfare promoted by the programme itself. Yet these efforts were consistently reframed through the logic of securitisation, whereby Muslim dissent was rendered suspect and folded into frameworks of pre-criminal risk (ibid., pp. 138–140). This dynamic exposes the fragility of liberalism’s procedural ideals. It presumes conditions of epistemic and

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<sup>91</sup> Amanda Spielman was the former Chief Inspector of Ofsted—the UK government’s independent body for inspecting education, children’s services, and skills.

affective equality even where structural inequality persists. It imagines a level playing field of deliberative agency while disregarding the historical exclusions and securitising discourses that determine which voices are intelligible and which are not. As Khan makes clear, Muslim parents were not only excluded from contributing to curriculum development; they were framed as subjects of concern rather than moral interlocutors. Their capacity to speak as moral agents was undermined before any real conversation began.

What the Parkfield case then reveals is a profound disjuncture between liberalism's self-understanding and some of its affective and epistemic operations. It claims to welcome moral diversity, but this openness is sometimes extended only on terms that render certain moral vocabularies unspeakable. It professes openness to contestation, yet can cast dissent that resists its normative grammar as politically illegible or civically suspect. In this light, the liberal project at Parkfield did not merely fail to include—it appeared to fail to listen. And this failure was not incidental, but seems to reflect a structural limitation: a political and moral order that may struggle to accommodate disagreement from sources it does not recognise as credible.

## 6.2.2 Hämäläinen's Model of Moral Renegotiation

### 6.2.2.1 *Ethical Richness and Methodological Strengths*

Following on Khan's critique of liberalism's structural exclusions—particularly its failure to recognise dissenting moral voices—this section turns to Nora Hämäläinen, whose work offers a constructive philosophical framework for navigating moral disagreement. Rather than defending liberal proceduralism or retreating into relativism, Hämäläinen (2021) develops a model of moral renegotiation grounded in lived experience, affect, and relationality. She resists the notion of moral change as a linear march toward consensus, instead framing it as a layered, emotionally charged process shaped by temporality, vulnerability, and moral attunement (2021, pp. 554–556). This approach is vividly illustrated in her analysis of the Parkfield school protests. Rejecting simplistic portrayals of the protestors as irrational or bigoted, Hämäläinen locates the conflict within what Paul Rabinow terms 'the contemporary'—a moral present marked by overlapping, dissonant socio-temporal trajectories. She likens these to a chord rather than a note, underscoring the need to move beyond binary oppositions (ibid., p. 558). Moral disagreement, in this view, is not a clash of fixed ideologies but a convergence of intersecting, often incommensurate timelines.

A distinctive strength of Hämäläinen's model is its emphasis on discursive vulnerability. Moral transformation is not merely the product of rational adjudication but a process of affective and relational exposure. It calls for humility—a recognition of the provisional nature of one's moral

standpoint—and a responsiveness to the moral claims of others (ibid., 2021, pp. 554–555). Ethical life, she argues, is not a matter of asserting fixed principles, but of becoming—always situated, always contested. This is especially pertinent in multicultural societies where conflicting moral grammars persist. Hämäläinen contends that resistance to LGBTQ+ inclusion may not stem from ignorance or prejudice, but from the lived disorientation caused by rapid social change. As she explains, moral transformations in Western liberal societies—especially around gender, sexuality, and family—have been unevenly experienced (ibid., 2021, p. 552). The transition from traditional procreative models of marriage to what Giddens (1992, cited in Hämäläinen, 2021, p. 556) calls the ‘pure relationship,’ focused on emotional and sexual fulfilment, has left many communities destabilised. For those shaped by migration, economic marginalisation, and cultural upheaval, these changes challenge deeply rooted understandings of moral order. Recognising this, Hämäläinen cautions against framing the issue as a clash between progressive and regressive values. Instead, she emphasises the mutual vulnerability of both protestors and LGBTQ+ advocates. Each occupies a position of marginalisation, and both, she argues, can offer insight into the ethical tensions of contemporary life (2021, pp. 558–560). Her model aims not to adjudicate right and wrong but to create space for a shared moral present—an evolving terrain shaped by overlapping experiences and contestations.

Nevertheless, her model remains entangled with some of the liberal assumptions it seeks to move beyond—particularly the primacy of rights discourse. While she recognises the complexity of the Parkfield case, she still casts both Muslim parents and LGBTQ+ individuals as ‘independent holders of rights’ under shared legal frameworks (ibid., 2021, p. 561). This rights-based framing can inadvertently reproduce the binary divisions her model otherwise resists. Her vision of ethical remediation, though more nuanced than liberal proceduralism, is still influenced by the legal grammar of liberalism. Yet her call for humility and moral responsiveness retains significant value. For Hämäläinen, moral cohabitation does not require agreement but depends on sustained relational engagement and openness to the other (ibid., 2021, p. 556). This resonates with alternative traditions, such as Confucian relational personhood, which reject adversarial individualism in favour of interconnected moral responsibility. Though not Hämäläinen’s focus, such perspectives might deepen her project by emphasising the relational work needed to sustain ethical life.

In sum, Hämäläinen offers a compelling alternative to procedural rationalism. Her model foregrounds the emotional, temporal, and relational complexity of ethical life, enabling negotiation without consensus. It challenges binary thinking, centres moral vulnerability, and recognises

dissent as a lived response to dislocation. Yet, as the Parkfield case illustrates, her model's success ultimately depends on conditions that may not always be present—particularly in structurally unequal contexts where recognition itself can be contested.

#### *6.2.2.2 Where Hämäläinen's Model Falls Short in the Parkfield Case*

Despite the strengths of Hämäläinen's model, its application to the Parkfield protests reveals significant limitations. Her framework depends on the ideal of discursive vulnerability—a mutual openness to ethical transformation through engagement with others. But such vulnerability presumes a field of mutual recognition where all parties are regarded as credible moral agents. As Khan (2021, p. 133) demonstrates, this was not the case at Parkfield. The Muslim parents' objections to LGBTQ+-inclusive education were not approached as morally grounded concerns, but reframed through securitising narratives—as signs of intolerance or extremism. Their dissent was not interpreted as part of a plural moral present, but as a threat to civic order. This denied them the moral status Hämäläinen's model presupposes. Institutions demanded openness from the parents while offering none in return. The asymmetry is stark: one group was asked to enter renegotiation from a position of discursive disadvantage. This dynamic exposes a deeper flaw in Hämäläinen's otherwise rich ethical vision. Her call for humility, responsiveness, and relational attunement assumes conditions—such as mutual trust and affective safety—that cannot be taken for granted. As she herself notes, many parents were socially and economically marginalised, isolated from progressive religious discourse that might mediate between their tradition and liberal norms (2021, p. 559). Lacking this relational infrastructure, meaningful ethical renegotiation became effectively impossible.

From a Confucian perspective, the failure at Parkfield was not simply a failure of dialogue, but of relational cultivation. Confucian ethics holds that moral life depends on properly nurtured relationships, sustained through the trust born of fulfilled commitments (*xin*), sincerity (*chéng*), and ritual propriety (*lǐ*). Without these, moral encounters collapse into misrecognition. Ethical engagement cannot begin from abstract equality; it requires the lived labour of building relationships. The Parkfield conflict can be read as illustrating the inadequacy of liberal rights frameworks that treat moral agents as autonomous individuals, rather than as interdependent beings. Further, while Hämäläinen resists liberal teleologies, she appears at times bound by them. Though she warns against portraying dissenters as morally backward, she still sometimes frames moral norms around gender and sexuality as if they represent a natural endpoint of progress. This risks casting dissenting communities as lagging behind—a view that can undermine her pluralistic

aspirations (2021, p. 557). Such tension becomes acute in her treatment of parental resistance. Hämäläinen concedes that some parents may wish to shield their children from what they view as morally disorienting content (ibid., p. 561). Yet under the liberal framework, such resistance is typically deemed unviable, as children are seen as rights-holders subject to anti-discrimination laws. The result is a standoff between two competing claims—religious freedom and freedom from discrimination—with no mechanism for mediation beyond legal arbitration.

A Confucian relational ethics would approach this differently. Rather than adjudicating between rights, it would ask how to cultivate a shared ethical space rooted in mutual care and relational responsiveness. As Chenyang Li (2014, p. 386) observes, Confucian harmony (*hé*) does not demand uniformity, but seeks balance through moral appropriateness (*yì*) and attentiveness to context. Even amid disagreement, a sincere effort to understand the other can lay the groundwork for coexistence. Protestors, under such a framework, need not abandon deeply held beliefs but would be called to relate to others with *rén*—that is, consummate conduct grounded in relational care. Hämäläinen’s model, while conceptually rich, underestimates the structural and relational labour needed for the ethical cohabitation it envisions. The Parkfield case suggests that discursive vulnerability cannot be imposed or expected where recognition is structurally denied. As Confucian thought reminds us, ethical openness must be grounded in cultivated responsibility. Without conditions of trust and reciprocity, the demand for renegotiation risks becoming a one-sided burden on those least empowered to bear it. A truly pluralistic ethics must begin not with the expectation of mutual openness, but with the work of relational repair. Only through this labour can moral transformation become genuinely possible for all parties involved.

## 6.2.3 Confucian Ethical Response

### 6.2.3.1 Key Confucian Concepts (*Chéng, Xìn, Lǐ, Rén, Xīn*)

The Parkfield protests call for an ethical framework capable of recognising not only divergent values, but also the relational and affective conditions that make disagreement sustainable. Confucian ethics provides such a framework, not by offering competing norms, but by shifting attention from moral content to moral cultivation. Its core concepts—*chéng* (sincerity), *xìn* (making good on one’s word), *lǐ* (ritual propriety), *rén* (consummate conduct), and *xīn* (heart-mind)—name not fixed virtues but dynamic capacities developed through embodied relational practice. Unlike liberal moral theories that presuppose the agent as already rational, autonomous, and discursively available, Confucian thought insists that moral agency is formed over time, through the slow accretion of relational competence and ethical sensitivity.

In the context of the Parkfield protests, these concepts illuminate the structural and affective breakdowns that liberal discourse failed to acknowledge. *Chéng* is not simply honesty or inner coherence; it is the creative integration of moral intention and relational conduct—an ongoing process of becoming whole with others through lived sincerity. Where institutional actors proclaimed a commitment to inclusion, but failed to respond to parents' concerns with openness or respect, that commitment appeared insincere—rhetorically asserted but not relationally enacted. Without *chéng*, moral claims ring hollow, and ethical authority dissolves. *Xìn*, as the outward expression of *chéng*, refers to the credibility earned through making good on one's word. In the absence of meaningful consultation or genuine responsiveness, the school's authority figures were not perceived as *xìn*—as reliably fulfilling their commitments; their actions were not received as credible or attuned.

Ritual propriety (*lǐ*), too, was conspicuously lacking. Confucianism does not view ritual as decorative or archaic; it is the grammar of ethical life. It structures how one speaks, listens, corrects, and attends. In deeply plural contexts, *lǐ* enables moral difference to be expressed without rupture, precisely because it channels affect and disagreement through recognised forms. Parkfield lacked such forms. Parents were not addressed through rituals of engagement that marked their concerns as serious, nor were they offered structured opportunities to articulate dissent within a frame of mutual regard. The result was relational breakdown, not because values differed, but because no forms were in place to carry difference without collapse.

*Rén*, the animating ideal of Confucian moral life, is best understood not as mere benevolence, but as consummate conduct: a cultivated, relational disposition to respond to others with seriousness, attentiveness, and moral regard. As Tu Wei-ming emphasises, *rén* is not a fixed trait but an ongoing, lived practice of self-transformation through human relationships—a process that requires continual responsiveness to the moral claims of others (1972, pp. 190–196). Its presence at Parkfield was minimal. Parents' affective concerns—about confusion, fear, or the erosion of moral authority—were often treated as irrational residues rather than as expressions of relational care. Their moral seriousness was not seen; their speech did not register as *rén*-responsive. Underlying all of these capacities is the heart-mind, *xīn*—the site where affect, cognition, and volition converge. In contrast to liberal accounts that separate reason from emotion, Confucianism understands moral discernment as a function of an attuned *xīn*, capable of recognising ethical salience and responding with appropriateness. As Tu Wei-ming observes, drawing on Mencius, moral responsiveness requires 'not only the awareness of an other but also the experience of mutual dependence'; it is a

process of ‘self-transformation’ oriented toward ‘authentic relationship’ (ibid., p. 194). Yet the Parkfield conflict was governed by institutional rationality, not heart-mind attunement. Decisions were made in the name of equality and inclusion, but without felt engagement with the moral grammar of those affected.

These Confucian virtues (*chéng, xìn, lǐ, rén, xīn*) have already been discussed in previous chapters in theoretical detail. Their relevance here lies not in their novelty but in their diagnostic clarity. They help to reveal the relational vacuity of the liberal response at Parkfield—not necessarily as a failure of principle, but as a failure of cultivation. The state appeared to presume inclusion could be legislated. Confucianism suggests that inclusion must be lived, and that its living depends on cultivated capacities that cannot be summoned on demand but must be developed through ethical participation. The Parkfield protests did not simply resist a curriculum; they also highlighted a system that seemed unprepared to meet moral disagreement with cultivated presence.

#### *6.2.3.2 Beyond Proceduralism: Why Moral Capacities Must Be Cultivated*

Liberal political theory often presumes that moral agents are generally in possession of the affective and epistemic capacities required for civic dialogue. Procedural fairness, transparency, and equal participation are sometimes imagined to follow naturally from institutional arrangements designed to safeguard rights and reason. Yet as the Parkfield protests demonstrate, the mere provision of procedure does not necessarily ensure moral reciprocity. As Khan (2021) reveals, Muslim parents did not experience inclusion as recognition, but as imposition; consultation was offered only after dissent was pathologised, and engagement occurred under the shadow of securitisation. Liberalism, in this instance, demanded that moral agents speak in a vocabulary that had already deemed their commitments problematic. The presumption of equal standing was not matched by the conditions that would make such standing possible.

From a Confucian perspective, this disjunction is not incidental—it can be seen as symptomatic of a deeper misunderstanding about the formation of moral agency. Capacities such as attentiveness, humility, trust, and responsiveness are not given; they must be cultivated. As Tu Wei-ming notes, the ‘heart/mind’ is not an innate rational faculty but the locus of moral discernment—developed through embodied practice and affective cultivation, not abstract reasoning (2002, pp. 4, 14). Without this cultivation, liberal appeals to inclusion risk becoming formalistic and ungrounded—procedural guarantees that lack the relational infrastructure to carry them. Moral agents are not simply rational calculators of interest; they are persons whose ability to dwell with difference depends on the slow, recursive work of ethical formation. This insight is not merely theoretical. In

the Parkfield context, the absence of cultivated moral capacities was arguably palpable. Institutional actors assumed that inclusion could be enacted through curricular design and public statements. But for the protesting parents, whose moral frameworks were shaped by religious commitments and familial responsibility, such gestures lacked credibility. There was no *xìn*, no *chéng*, no *lǐ* to hold disagreement in place. As a result, ethical dissent was sometimes received not as serious objection but as a threat. The relational field was already strained, and without the requisite cultivation, no amount of procedural rectitude could readily repair it.

Confucianism does not offer a fixed mechanism for negotiation; it offers a vision of moral development. It begins not with the structure of institutions but with the formation of the person. The liberal imaginary often tends to neglect this dimension, treating character as a private concern and procedure as the site of justice. But Parkfield suggests that moral failure can occur even when procedures are followed—if the agents involved have not been formed in the virtues that render disagreement bearable. The point is not to abandon proceduralism, but to recognise its dependency on conditions it cannot itself generate.

#### 6.2.3.3 Harmony-with-Difference (*Hé* 和 vs. *Tóng* 同)

Confucian ethics provides a compelling alternative to the liberal tendency to conflate coexistence with consensus. The distinction between *hé* (和)—relational harmony—and *tóng* (同)—uniformity or sameness—clarifies what was at stake in the Parkfield protests. Harmony in the Confucian tradition is not predicated on agreement, but on the cultivated capacity to dwell with difference. As both the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Analects* emphasise, *hé* requires the modulation of diverse moral elements, not their reduction to a shared doctrinal baseline. ‘The gentleman is harmonious but not uniform (*tong*). The little man is uniform but not harmonious (*Analects* 13:23, quoted in Angle, 2010, p. 63). Harmony is not achieved through flattening difference but through proportioned relationality: ‘If water were added to water, who could make a meal of it?’ (*Zuo Zhuan* in *ibid.* 2010). In this view, difference is not an obstacle to ethical life but its condition. As Yan Ying explains, harmony involves ‘mingling various elements into a composite unity,’ in which ‘each element contributes positively... by realizing its own potential’ (Li & Düring, 2022, p. 23).<sup>92</sup> Like ingredients in a well-balanced broth, each voice must retain its distinctiveness while contributing to the shared whole. This model of *hé*

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<sup>92</sup> Yan Ying (also known as Yan Zi, d. c. 500 BCE) was a respected statesman and moral advisor in the state of Qi during the Spring and Autumn period. Though not formally a Confucian philosopher, his views—especially his distinction between *hé* (harmony) and *tóng* (uniformity)—were frequently cited in early Confucian texts such as the *Zuo Zhuan*, and later praised for exemplifying core Confucian values of ethical discernment and relational attunement.

emphasises heterogeneity, mutual enhancement, and cooperative transformation—not uniformity or consensus. Indeed, Yan Ying explicitly distinguished *hé* from *tóng*, warning that coerced agreement—like ‘adding water to water’—undermines genuine harmony by suppressing difference (ibid., p. 24).

In contrast, the liberal framing of the Parkfield conflict appeared to operate according to the logic of *tóng*. Inclusion was presented not as coexistence with moral divergence, but as the affirmation of a particular moral horizon—one in which acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities was treated as non-negotiable, and dissenting perspectives were often interpreted as failures of civic development. As Khan (2021) states, parental objections were not understood as alternative ethical claims, but as evidence of cultural backwardness or latent extremism. The call to tolerance became paradoxical: Muslim parents were expected to affirm pluralism, even as their own evaluative framework was excluded from moral regard. The result was not harmony but disconnection. *Tóng* demands sameness; it cannot accommodate the ethical integrity of those who dissent from dominant norms. At Parkfield, liberalism’s invocation of pluralism could be seen as masking a demand for convergence. What was offered was not *hé*—a shared space of relational negotiation—but a disciplinary regime in which only certain forms of moral speech were audible. Parents who objected to the programme’s moral assumptions were not received as interlocutors but as problems to be managed. Their efforts to express their concern within the register of parental duty and religious care were frequently dismissed as expressions of intolerance. The discursive space had already been secured by liberal norms that determined in advance what forms of difference could be tolerated. Where liberalism may view disagreement as a threat to civic order, a Confucian lens suggests that it was the suppression of difference—*tóng* masquerading as *hé*—that undermined the very conditions of relational coexistence.

Confucianism, on the other hand, offers a vision of plural life in which harmony is achieved not by eliminating moral conflict but by cultivating the dispositions required to sustain it. *Yi* (義), or appropriateness, names the capacity to discern what is fitting in a given relational context. It is not rule-bound but responsive, enabling the agent to modulate disagreement with discernment and care. In plural societies, where competing goods cannot always be reconciled by rational consensus alone, *yi* becomes the ethical capacity that makes cohabitation possible. It allows disagreement to be expressed without domination, and relational bonds to be maintained without moral compromise.

The Parkfield protests did not simply fail because disagreement occurred, but because no shared practice existed through which that disagreement could be carried. Liberalism's insistence on norm conformity in the name of inclusion foreclosed the possibility of *hé*. A Confucian orientation would have recognised that harmony is not given by law or policy, but enacted through attuned moral conduct—through the willingness to remain in relation across difference without demanding its erasure.

#### 6.2.3.4 *Ritualised Engagement and the Role of Exemplars*

At the heart of Confucian ethics lies the conviction that moral life depends not solely on abstract principles or formal procedures, but on relational forms enacted through ritual and exemplarity. In situations of moral rupture—such as the Parkfield protests—what is most urgently required is not the imposition of consensus but the cultivation of ethical presence capable of sustaining disagreement without fracture. Ritual propriety (*lǐ*) functions as the mode through which this presence is made manifest. It structures conduct in ways that express moral regard, enabling even contested encounters to remain ethically legible. As I interpret Tu Wei-ming's argument, ritual is not mere formality but the condition for the ethical visibility of persons (1972, pp. 194–200). That is, it is through ritualised forms of conduct that moral intentions become socially intelligible—where sincerity, respect, or dissent can be seen, heard, and responded to as ethically meaningful. In the Parkfield case, no such ritual infrastructure existed. Engagements between parents and school officials were marked not by *lǐ* but by adversarial logic, defensive rationality, and institutional distrust. The absence of structured forms—shared meals, formalised dialogue, embodied gestures of respect—likely contributed to moral disagreement being reduced to discursive contestation. Without *lǐ*, the affective intensity of the protests found no ethical channel, and parents' concerns were often absorbed into securitising frameworks. Their objections were frequently treated not as morally serious claims but as disruptions to civic order. The relational forms that might have allowed for dissent without alienation were not in place in any sustained or recognisable way.

In Confucian thought, the *jūnzǐ*, exemplary person, plays a crucial role in restoring relational equilibrium. The *jūnzǐ* does not resolve disagreement by enforcing rules but by embodying the virtues—*chéng*, *xìn*, *lǐ*—that render disagreement inhabitable. The exemplary person exerts ethical influence not through argument but through presence: 'The virtue of the gentleman is like wind; the virtue of the small man is like grass. Let the wind blow over the grass and it is sure to bend. (*Analects* 12.19). This presence creates moral resonance, not by eliminating conflict but by carrying it with sincerity and care. The absence of such figures at Parkfield was evident. No interlocutor

emerged who could speak across the divide with the credibility required to command trust. Institutional actors appealed to principles, but did not enact moral attentiveness; parents expressed moral distress, but lacked the support of figures recognised as bridges across moral worlds. Confucian ethics does not view such absence as incidental but as indicative of a degree of moral fragmentation. Without exemplars, the work of relational repair is significantly hindered. It is through the cultivated disposition of the *jūnzǐ* that ethical cohabitation becomes possible—not by resolving difference, but by bearing it with moral seriousness.

Ritual and exemplarity together do not eliminate moral conflict, but they allow it to unfold within a framework of recognition. At Parkfield, the failure was not simply one of policy but of ethical imagination: there were few, if any, shared forms to mediate difference, and no widely recognised figures to sustain relation. From a Confucian perspective, this can be understood as a shortfall not only of inclusion, but of cultivation.

#### 6.2.4 Conclusion: Coexistence Beyond Consensus

The Parkfield School protests can be seen as illustrating the limits of liberal proceduralism not only as a consequence of poor implementation, but arguably as a function of its conceptual architecture. Appeals to equality, inclusion, and tolerance sometimes masked an asymmetrical moral field in which dissenting voices were tolerated only insofar as they conformed to predetermined norms. As Khan (2021) argues, Muslim parents were not engaged as moral interlocutors but were often framed as civic problems, their evaluative claims refracted through securitising logics that rendered them suspect. Liberalism, in this instance, appears to have fallen short not because it lacked ideals, but because it lacked the relational and affective resources to realise them.

Hämäläinen's (2021) account of moral renegotiation offers a richer understanding of ethical life by foregrounding affect, temporality, and the fragility of moral transformation. Yet, as the Parkfield conflict shows, discursive vulnerability and ethical openness cannot be assumed. They are not given by institutional design but require cultivation. Where moral agents are structurally misrecognised, the dialogical space is likely to collapse. Even the most ethically sensitive liberal frameworks may struggle in the absence of relational reciprocity and moral trust. It is here that Confucian relational ethics offers a potential corrective. Rather than presuming the conditions of moral engagement, Confucianism insists on their cultivation. The virtues of sincerity (*chéng*), making good one's word (*xìn*), ritual propriety (*lǐ*), consummate conduct (*rén*), and heart-mind (*xīn*) name the affective and relational capacities that can help render disagreement endurable and

cohabitation sustainable. At Parkfield, their absence arguably marked the failure of moral co-presence. Confucianism reframes coexistence not as consensus, but as ongoing ethical practice—an attunement to difference, a commitment to moral regard, and a refusal to reduce disagreement to pathology.

The challenge is not to eliminate moral difference, but to bear it with seriousness. Confucian ethics encourages us to remain in relation where liberalism might withdraw—holding space for disagreement without abandoning the moral presence of the other.

### 6.3 Case Study 3: Relational Justice and Sovereignty in Kanaky

While the Parkfield case illustrated Confucian ethics in the context of civic pluralism, the final case study scales this inquiry to the geopolitical. If Parkfield highlighted instances where liberal frameworks have struggled to sustain moral disagreement within institutions, Kanaky–La Nouvelle-Calédonie brings into focus how such difficulties can be connected to colonial histories and metaphysical misrecognition. The question here is not just how we live together across values, but whether the liberal political order is able to engage with radically different ontologies of land, identity, and justice.

#### 6.3.1 Historical and Ethical Background

The ethical density of Kanaky–La Nouvelle-Calédonie (KNC) lies not merely in its complex geopolitical architecture, but in the profound entanglement of historical injustice, disrupted cosmologies, and divergent moral ontologies. Unlike some other high-profile settler colonial contexts, where the discursive terrain has been saturated by competing ideological interests and global media partisanship, KNC remains comparatively under-theorised in Anglophone philosophical literature. The decision to privilege this case over more dominant examples, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or the Troubles in Northern Ireland, emerges not from a lack of ethical urgency in those sites, but from the practical impossibility of conducting reasoned, non-polemical philosophical inquiry within them. The Confucian tradition demands a space of affective resonance and interpretive care—one wherein its relational and ritual-based ethics can be explored without being collapsed into polarising binaries. KNC, by contrast, offers a terrain wherein the competing claims of Indigenous sovereignty and settler presence can be considered through the moral grammar of the Confucian *jūnzǐ*, the cultivated person, whose ethical horizon is shaped not by procedural liberalism but by relational attunement, historical memory, and moral cultivation.

Understanding the ethical stakes of KNC requires attention to its demographic and political architecture. The Kanak claim to self-determination is inseparable from their ontological relationship to the land—a relationship that is not merely territorial or juridical, but cosmological and ancestral. As the Indigenous people of KNC, the Kanak understand their identity through a relational ontology in which land is not property but person, not resource but ancestor. The French colonisation of the territory in 1853 initiated a systematic project of dispossession, assimilation, and demographic engineering, whose legacy persists in the current socio-political structure. As of 2022, the population of KNC was approximately 269,220, with Kanaks comprising 39.1%, Europeans (primarily French settlers) 27.1%, and the remainder made up of Pacific Islanders, Asians, and others. The concentration of Kanaks in the Northern Province and the Loyalty Islands, and of

Europeans in the South, has produced a geographic and political polarisation that maps directly onto socio-economic inequalities. While KNC boasts one of the highest standards of living in the Pacific<sup>93</sup>, this relative prosperity is structurally sustained by French subsidies and a narrow economic dependence on nickel exports (J. Connell, 2021, p. 147).<sup>94</sup>

The trajectory of colonisation in KNC involved not only the expropriation of land and resources but also a profound metaphysical disruption. Framed under the guise of the *mission civilisatrice*, French colonialism pursued the so-called ‘civilising’ of the native savage by erasing indigenous identities and imposing French Republican and Christian values (Bullard, 2000, cited in Korson, 2018). This ideological project was enforced through legal mechanisms such as the *Code de l’indigénat*, which institutionalised the numerical subordination of the Kanak population and enabled the systematic exploitation of their mineral wealth—particularly nickel—as well as other natural resources. In parallel, their most fertile and desirable agricultural and pastoral lands were appropriated for settler use, while Kanak communities were forcibly relocated to reservations. The cumulative result of these processes was the dispossession of 90% of the main island’s territory from the Kanak (Chappell, 2013, cited in Korson, 2018).

This dispossession was not merely a matter of land; it was a rupture in the relational and ritual fabric through which Kanak identity was constituted. In Melanesian cosmology, land is understood as lifeworld and obligation—not as commodity or alienable asset. Like many Indigenous cultures, the Kanak existence is inseparable from land—‘their life, their spirit, their existence... [W]hatever happens to their land touches [them] profoundly’ (Peang-Meth, 2002, quoted in Rumley, 2006, p. 237). As Bonnemaïson notes, their ‘cultural identity is a geographic identity’ rooted in memories and values attached to place (1984, p. 117). This deep tie is recognised in Article 1 of the Nouméa Accord, which states: ‘The Kanak identity founded on a particular tie to the land...’, and reaffirmed in the Kanak Indigenous People’s declaration of 23 August 2002, asserting rights over the space and natural heritage of Kanaky. The violence of colonisation, therefore, extended beyond law and policy: it constituted a form of ontological destabilisation. The transportation of convicts, the importation of labourers, and the incentivisation of European settlement through measures such as the 1972 Messmer directive (to *whiten* the population of KNC ‘*faire du blanc*’) were not incidental features of French policy, but deliberate strategies of demographic manipulation aimed at minoritising the Kanak and eroding the moral legitimacy of their sovereignty and independence

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<sup>93</sup> In 2022 KNC had a GDP per capita of US\$35,745.2 (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/new-caledonia>)

<sup>94</sup> KNC has about a tenth of world reserves.

claims (Leblic, 2022, p. 124).<sup>95</sup> The recent vote in the *French National Assembly* (14 May 2024) to extend voting rights to newer French residents continues this pattern of settler entrenchment under the guise of republican universality, provoking condemnation from UN experts on Indigenous rights.

Resistance to this protracted legacy of colonial imposition has been continuous, multifaceted, and morally grounded. From the revolts of 1878, 1917, and 1967, to the armed struggles of the 1980s, the Kanak have consistently affirmed their ethical agency and political subjectivity. The Matignon Accords (1988) and the Nouméa Accord (1998) represent efforts to recalibrate the asymmetries of power through institutional reform and symbolic recognition. Yet, as scholars have noted, these agreements have failed to disrupt the concentration of wealth and influence in the South, nor have they meaningfully alleviated the structural disadvantages disproportionately borne by Kanak communities. The rhetoric of a ‘common destiny’ invoked by the Nouméa Accord presupposes a political and moral horizon grounded in mutual recognition and relational equality. However, the enduring inequities in education, employment, and political voice—coupled with the manipulation of referenda under morally compromised conditions—cast doubt on the viability of that destiny under present arrangements.

The task, then, is not merely to evaluate the procedural validity of existing structures, but to interrogate the moral imagination that underwrites them. What vision of personhood, community, and justice do these structures presume? What alternative ethical grammars might be brought to bear on the question of sovereignty and cohabitation in KNC? In this context, the Confucian conception of the *jūnzǐ*—as a person cultivated through ritual, relationality, and sustained moral effort—offers a compelling counter-image to some strands of the abstract individualism of liberal political thought. It is through the *jūnzǐ*’s attunement to asymmetry, affect, and context that a different kind of political reasoning becomes possible—one rooted not in the logic of balance, but in the labour of ethical repair.

## 6.3.2 Philosophical Perspectives on Personhood and Self-Determination

### 6.3.2.1 *The Liberal Personhood Perspective*

From within many strands of the moral framework of liberal personhood, the human subject is conceived as a rational, autonomous agent—morally equal to all others by virtue of shared

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<sup>95</sup> See Isabelle Leblic (1993), *Les Kanak face au développement. La voie étroite*, the book provides a detailed analysis of French demographic and development policies in New Caledonia from 1981 to 1993.

humanity and endowed with certain inalienable rights. This understanding of the individual underpins liberal democratic institutions, legal systems, and economic structures, all of which prioritise liberty, equality, and procedural justice. In the context of Kanaky-La Nouvelle-Calédonie (KNC), the settler-colonial European—here represented hypothetically by Isabelle Lafleur, an actual French loyalist politician—might evaluate the Kanak claim to independence through precisely this lens. Isabelle’s opposition, grounded in liberal principles, would aim to demonstrate fairness and impartiality. Yet in doing so, it would also reveal potential conceptual and moral limitations of liberal personhood when confronted with the structural realities of settler-colonial injustice. Drawing on key liberal theories—contractarianism, deontology, utilitarianism, and Rawlsian justice as fairness—Isabelle might argue that her stance emerges not from personal or colonial interest, but from a principled commitment to justice. Each of these frameworks assumes a moral subject conceived as an individuated, rights-bearing agent, situated within a normative order that aspires to impartiality. In her view, opposition to Kanak independence could be consistent with an egalitarian ethos that respects the rights and freedoms of all New Caledonian citizens, not only the Kanak.

From a contractarian perspective, Isabelle could highlight the formal recognition of the Kanak as a ‘people’ in the French Constitution—a status not afforded to other regional identities such as the Bretons, Corsicans, or Occitans. This recognition, along with the institutional reforms introduced by the Nouméa Accord—most notably the creation of the *Customary Senate*, which requires administrative and political bodies to respect Kanak customs in matters affecting Kanak identity (Kowasch et al., 2022, p. 12)<sup>96</sup>—may be seen as honouring a mutual agreement. Together, these measures acknowledge Kanak cultural specificity while embedding it within the broader framework of the Republic. Isabelle might interpret this arrangement as a form of contractual equilibrium: a deliberate attempt to maintain national unity without erasing cultural difference.

To strengthen this argument, Isabelle might cite statistical evidence as proof that liberal justice is not merely aspirational but already underway. Between 1989 and 2014, the proportion of people in KNC without diplomas fell sharply, from 71% to 27%, while university graduation rates rose from 4% to 21% (Gorohouna & Ris, 2017, p. 237). Although these figures are not disaggregated by ethnicity, the improvements likely include Kanak populations as beneficiaries. From this vantage, liberal institutions appear to be functioning progressively: redistributive policies and educational

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<sup>96</sup> It has to be noted though that the Customary Senate’s power is restricted to the role of a non-binding consultative body to the national government.

reforms suggest that the difference principle, in a Rawlsian sense, is being honoured—inequalities are acceptable insofar as they benefit the least advantaged. Yet such a reading obscures enduring structural disparities that place the Kanak at a consistent disadvantage. While the overall graduation figures suggest progress, the lived realities for Kanak communities remain starkly unequal. For instance, Kanaks—who make up less than half the population—constitute a staggering 80% of the prison population (Lin, 2020). This statistic underscores the depth of systemic marginalisation that persists despite formal inclusion. As Berman (2001) notes, the extent and distribution of power and poverty has barely shifted in the three decades since the Matignon Accords, which were intended to usher in economic, social, and political reform toward a ‘common destiny’ and ‘full emancipation.’ Wealth continues to concentrate in the South, where Europeans predominantly reside, while poverty, unemployment, and lower educational outcomes persist in the North, the islands, and the disadvantaged northern suburbs of Nouméa where many Kanaks live (J. Connell, 2021, p. 148).<sup>97</sup>

Turning to utilitarian reasoning, Isabelle might assert that continued integration with France promotes the greatest good for the greatest number. KNC enjoys a relatively high standard of living compared to neighbouring Pacific nations such as Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, a fact that could be framed as evidence of the material benefits of association with France. Even if her position aligns with personal or national interest, it might still be presented as morally sound insofar as it secures broader welfare and prevents the potential economic instability that independence could bring.

Similarly, from a deontological standpoint, Isabelle could maintain that her position respects Kanak dignity while protecting the conditions necessary for self-determination. The preservation of union, she might argue, does not preclude the Kanak from pursuing their own conception of the good. Rather, it secures the rights of all citizens equally. In this view, her position could be considered universalisable—one that any rational actor, deliberating under fair conditions, might also adopt in favour of liberty, stability, and inclusive governance.

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<sup>97</sup> Kanaks are four times less likely than non-Kanaks to pass the baccalaureate, one-third as likely to attain a university education (Gorohouna & Ris, 2017, p. 238). This is on the assumption the vast majority of Europeans inhabit on the South Province and the Kanaks on North Province and Loyalty Islands. They earn, on average, 32% less than their non-Kanak counterparts with equivalent qualifications in the Northern Province (Cottureau-Reiss, 2010). These facts suggest that, despite formal mechanisms of inclusion, the underlying power structures that maintain inequality remain largely intact. From this perspective, justice has not been achieved, but deferred under the appearance of liberal progress. See also Severine Blaise (2017) who finds that efforts to reduce inequality for the Kanak people after the 1998 Noumea Accord have had limited success, mainly due to weak reforms and a lack of shared development goals.

As a Rawlsian, Isabelle might frame her justification through the twin pillars of justice as fairness: equal basic liberties for all, and the permissibility of inequality only when it benefits the least advantaged. She might argue that the existing institutional structure of KNC—democratic participation, formal equality before the law, and affirmative policy mechanisms—fulfils, or at least approximates, these principles. The statistical indicators of educational and economic uplift could be presented as evidence that the liberal framework, though imperfect, is both functional and reformable. Independence, in this narrative, would appear unnecessary or even destabilising—an interruption of a system already oriented toward just outcomes.

However, these lines of reasoning reveal a deeper conceptual problem. Liberal personhood often assumes a level playing field: it begins from a principle of formal equality and often neglects the historical sedimentation of inequality in settler-colonial contexts. The liberal subject is an abstract, decontextualised rights-holder; but the Kanak experience of injustice is not abstract—it is historical, embodied, and collective. The liberal model's focus on individual rights and procedural fairness can fail to grapple with the structural conditions that shape, and constrain, what liberal citizenship even means in a context where colonial violence has never been redressed. This limitation becomes especially visible in the appeal to democracy. Isabelle might argue that the Kanak have been given ample opportunity to express their will through referendums—four in total—all rejecting independence. The most recent, in 2021, resulted in a decisive vote against secession. But this outcome is complicated by the context of a Kanak boycott, prompted by disproportionate COVID-19 impacts and the French state's refusal to postpone the vote.<sup>98</sup> From Isabelle's perspective, democratic procedure has been respected; for her, legitimacy derives from majoritarian rule. Yet this view assumes neutrality in the conditions under which consent is given—or withheld. It ignores how demography has been manipulated over time to minoritise the Kanak within their own land, and how recent legislative proposals to expand the franchise to newer French settlers further erode the principle of free, prior, and informed consent. In such a context, liberal democracy risks becoming not an instrument of justice, but a mechanism for entrenching colonial dominance.

The liberal person, for all her good faith and principled deliberation, may not fully grasp the depth of Kanak dispossession. She sees equality where systemic hierarchy persists, and progress where historical trauma remains unaddressed. She may acknowledge the injustices of the past but insists

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<sup>98</sup> Covid resulted in the independence parties boycotting the elections resulting in a voter turnout of 43.87%. Legally, the referendum took place and there was a result against independence. However, the result lacks moral legitimacy not only because of the low turnout, when compared to 81.01% (2018) and 85.69% (2020) (Kowasch et al., 2022, p. 11), but also because of the non-participation of most of the Kana

they must now be bracketed in favour of present procedure and future integration. For the Kanak, however, the present is not a rupture with the past—it is its continuation. Liberalism’s language of inclusion sometimes fails to recognise the relational, land-based, and historical identity through which Kanak political claims are made. Here, the possible limits of liberal personhood become starkly apparent. Its conceptual architecture may struggle to accommodate a subject shaped by ancestral land, communal memory, and collective struggle. It imagines the self as detached, substitutable, and morally equal in abstraction, but it does not easily account for the way power, history, and belonging shape actual human lives. For this reason, the Kanak claim to independence arguably cannot be resolved within liberal paradigms. It requires a different moral ontology—one that foregrounds relationality, context, and historical responsiveness. It is to this alternative vision, grounded in Confucian relational personhood, that we now turn.

#### 6.3.2.2 *Confucian Relational Personhood and Kanak Independence*

The Confucian vision of the moral life arises from a fundamentally relational understanding of personhood—one in which the self is not an isolated bearer of rights but a node in a web of ritual, responsibility, and responsive care. This thesis has already examined how Confucian ethics resists liberal individualism, offering instead a model of the self as constituted through ongoing processes of moral cultivation and embodied relationality. It is within this framework that we now consider the question of Kanak independence.

#### 6.3.3 *Confucian Political Ethics in Context*

Central to the Confucian vision is the figure of the *jūnzǐ*—not a sovereign individual acting from abstract principles, but a self shaped by attunement to role, context, and moral rhythm. The *jūnzǐ* does not impose order but enacts it, not through command, but through constancy in virtue. In this ethical paradigm, the *telos* of action is not fairness in the procedural sense, but *hé*—relational harmony achieved through just and fitting relationships. Crucially, *hé* does not flatten difference but orchestrates it. It is the harmony of polyphony, not unison. This ontological and moral vision differs significantly from many dominant political imaginaries that frame postcolonial struggles like that of Kanaky–La Nouvelle-Calédonie. In much liberal democratic theory, justice is often treated as the fair arbitration of competing individual claims—each claim presumed to carry equal moral weight by virtue of shared legal status. Confucian ethics refuses this abstraction. It insists that moral judgment must be rooted in relational context, historical memory, and cultivated responsiveness.

The Kanak people do not appear within this framework as one interest group among many, but as those who bear the first relationship to the land, its stories, and its sacred ordering. Their status is

not derivative of rights conferred by the state, but arises from a deeper cosmological embeddedness—what a Confucian lens might see as a kind of ancestral *zhōng* 忠, a fidelity not only to role but to origin. To overlook this, to treat settler and Indigenous claims as symmetrical, is not to be neutral—it is to enact a form of moral erasure. Thus, when viewed through the Confucian paradigm of relational personhood, the political question of Kanak independence is transformed. It is no longer a matter of weighing preferences in a ballot box, but of discerning the moral proportions embedded in a complex history. The cultivation of relational harmony does not begin with legal compromise but with the restoration of moral clarity: who has borne what, who is owed what, and what form of co-existence could honour those asymmetries without perpetuating domination. This vision, already elaborated in earlier chapters, now reveals its full moral force when brought into contact with concrete historical injustice—an injustice that demands an ethical response, not just a political one.

At the heart of this vision is *rén*, often glossed as 'humaneness' or 'benevolence', but more precisely, consummate conduct: a capacious affective responsiveness to the moral reality of others. It is not an instinct but an achievement: a sensibility cultivated through ritual (*lǐ*), reflection, and role-fulfilment. *Rén* is the moral heart that animates the Confucian vision of relational life. From this sensibility, the demands of *yì* (appropriateness) emerge. But *yì*, unlike many forms of deontological duty, is always shaped by the background presence of *rén*. It is what one ought to do, given what one has come to feel. Hence, *shù* 恕 (putting oneself in the other's shoes) and *zhōng* 忠 (doing one's utmost) function not as constraints on action but as conditions of its moral intelligibility. *Yì* must pass through the affective filter of *rén*, be shaped by the imaginative identification of *shù*, and be directed by the positional loyalty of *zhōng*.

The realisation of these virtues demands more than inner conviction. It is *zhì* (living wisely) and *quán* (discretion or moral weighing) that give them shape within the complexity of ethical life. *Zhì* enables the *jūnzǐ* to navigate plural, sometimes conflicting values with clarity and discernment. It is not reducible to cleverness or efficiency, but names the cultivated ability to perceive and realise what is morally salient in a given context. *Quán*, in turn, is the virtue of calibrated moral adjustment. It recognises that fidelity to the good may require flexibility—that rigid adherence to norms can betray the very values they intend to uphold. In this sense, *quán* can be read as directly challenging more legalistic or rule-bound paradigms of justice, offering instead a sensitivity to ethical proportion and context.

But wisdom and discretion must be sustained through form. These affective and cognitive orientations are rendered durable through *lǐ* (ritual propriety), which functions both as a technology of self-formation and as the public grammar of moral life. *Lǐ* makes virtue visible, repeatable, and shareable. It binds the private cultivation of sensibility to the shared structures of social meaning, giving stability to roles and coherence to ethical aspiration. Without *chéng* (sincerity), however, ritual decays into performance. *Chéng* is the inner consistency of will and action—the quality that ensures moral expression is not manipulation. And sustaining both requires *xìn*—the lived commitment that holds time open, allowing ethical life to endure beyond isolated acts. Without *xìn*, the ritual breaks, the word is hollow, and the architecture of moral community collapses.

Taken together, these interwoven virtues offer more than a portrait of the good person. They trace the lineaments of a Confucian political ethics: one that is anti-foundational in the liberal sense, yet deeply principled; one that resists abstraction, yet demands a heightened moral attunement. In this vision, justice is not a procedural equilibrium of interests, but the orchestration of asymmetrical responsibilities, historical wounds, and cosmological truths. It is to this normative horizon that the application to Kanaky–La Nouvelle-Calédonie now turns.

To apply the Confucian moral framework to the situation in Kanaky-La Nouvelle-Calédonie (KNC) is to shift from procedural neutrality to a vision of justice as relational repair. It requires questioning the assumption of moral symmetry between Kanak and settler claims and attending instead to the lived asymmetries that have shaped the colonial and postcolonial experience. Within a Confucian idiom, the legitimacy of a political order cannot be established through democratic arithmetic or legal inclusion alone. It must be rooted in *rén*: an affective responsiveness to the suffering and moral standing of others. The Kanak people, as bearers of ancestral memory and spiritual primacy in the land, occupy a place that cannot be adequately represented within frameworks that are primarily predicated on individual rights and universal suffrage. Their claim is not one of preference but of firstness, and to fail to respond to it with *rén* is to dwell in moral blindness.

*Rén*, however, does not operate as mere sentiment. It demands action, structured by reciprocal sensitivity (*shù* 恕) and doing one's utmost (*zhōng* 忠). A settler community animated by these virtues would not assert equal status by virtue of legal citizenship alone. It would instead ask what is owed, given one's position in history, and what justice requires, given the particular harms and obligations embedded in that history. *Shù* would involve an imaginative entering into Kanak historical consciousness—to feel, from within, the rupture of land loss, cultural erosion, and political marginalisation. *Zhōng* would entail a refusal to make equivalence the standard of justice,

recognising instead the unique duties that arise from being the beneficiary of dispossession. From this sensibility, *yì*, moral appropriateness, becomes intelligible.

The Confucian *jūnzǐ* does not adjudicate between claims by appealing to neutrality but by discerning what is fitting, given the moral landscape. In KNC, *yì* does not support a binary referendum between union and independence as if both were morally equal outcomes. Rather, *yì* sees that only one of these outcomes can restore moral proportion. It does not require rejecting the presence of settlers, but it does require recognising that Kanak sovereignty is the ethical baseline from which any legitimate political future must be negotiated. Justice here is not sameness but the calibrated differentiation of roles, authority, and recognition. This calibration is not reducible to formulae. It requires *zhì* (living wisely) and *quán* (contextual judgment). *Zhì* enables the *jūnzǐ* to grasp the concrete implications of moral truths: to understand, for instance, that settler insecurity must be acknowledged without becoming the basis for structural veto. *Quán* sharpens this insight into moral discretion. It guides the crafting of institutions that do not simply mirror established liberal structures but embody the historical truth and cosmological priority of Kanak life. A truly Confucian resolution might take the form of asymmetrical federalism, differentiated citizenship, or dual-sovereignty arrangements—not because these mimic existing models, but because they express the moral balance that *zhì* and *quán* would demand.

None of this can occur without ritual (*lǐ*). As the thesis insists, *lǐ* is not a symbolic accessory but ethical infrastructure. Without public forms that honour Kanak sovereignty—in education, law, ceremony, and urban design—even the most generous legal frameworks will ring hollow. The absence of *lǐ* is not a neutral omission; it is a form of ontological violence, erasing the presence of the first people from the civic imagination. The restoration of *lǐ* would not simply decorate power with indigenous motifs but would relocate political authority within a Kanak ethical world. But even the most well-structured *lǐ* will fail without *chéng* (sincerity). The colonial state's past betrayals have rendered moral trust fragile. Only a demonstrable alignment between word and deed, intention and policy, can signal a turn toward ethical repair. Settler discourse must move beyond performative gestures of inclusivity to acts of relinquishment, humility, and sustained attention. It must cultivate *xìn*—not as administrative reliability, but as the lived credibility earned through making good on one's word: a moral presence that honours past agreements and approaches future negotiations with relational integrity.

What emerges, then, from the Confucian analysis is not a technical solution but a moral reorientation. The future of KNC cannot be decided solely through ballots and legal reforms. It must

be approached as an ethical task: to become a community capable of sustaining asymmetrical responsibility without resentment, of recognising difference without hierarchy, and of instituting forms of governance that express reverence, memory, and shared becoming. This is the horizon of relational justice toward which Confucian ethics calls us.

#### 6.3.4 Relational Justice and the Architecture of a Shared Future

Given that the *jūnzǐ* must respond not only to interpersonal but to historical and structural forms of harm, the moral question facing Kanaky-La Nouvelle-Calédonie (KNC) is not simply how to resolve a political conflict but how to cultivate a polity capable of sustaining asymmetrical responsibility and enduring difference. This requires the institutionalisation of relational justice: a normative framework grounded not in procedural neutrality or generalised ideals of universal inclusion, but in the affective, historical, and cosmological realities of life together. Relational justice does not begin by asking what rights each party can claim, but what roles they must inhabit, what rituals they must perform, and what virtues they must cultivate to become co-authors of a just world.

The Confucian vision of justice, as developed in the preceding section, resists the binary logic of independence versus integration. It instead demands that political arrangements express the moral priority of those most embedded in the land's cosmological order, while offering a path for others to inhabit their presence ethically. The concept of a 'common destiny', articulated in the Nouméa Accord, provides a potential point of entry. Yet for Confucian ethics, destiny must be ritually enacted and morally sustained; it cannot be realised through the abstraction of republican sameness. Just as a filial child must first honour her own familial obligations before extending benevolence universally, so too must the polity honour the moral primacy of the Kanak before aspiring to civic equality.

This principle of differentiated responsibility demands institutional expression. A Confucian polity would not seek balance through demographic symmetry, but through the orchestration of roles that reflect moral differentiation. For instance, a bicameral legislature that ensures Kanak representation as a matter of ritual propriety—not simply electoral equity—would reflect the logic of *lǐ*. This is not tokenism, but the material recognition of Kanak firstness, institutionalised through deliberative form. Moreover, the moral legitimacy of such an arrangement would arise not from numerical consensus alone, but from the cultivation of *xìn* (making good one's word) and *chéng* (sincerity) in the institutional process. Settler participation, to be legitimate, must be grounded in an ethic of *shù* and *zhōng*—reciprocal sensitivity and positional loyalty—not in the assertion of equivalence.

Relational justice, on this account, requires more than procedural reforms. It necessitates a transformation of the affective dispositions that structure civic life. The Kanak demand for sovereignty is not merely a legal or economic claim; it is a call for recognition of their cosmological centrality and moral authorship. A polity grounded in Confucian ethics would respond by cultivating *rén* in its citizens—an affective responsiveness to the histories and responsibilities that define one's place. This would require a pedagogical project as much as a political one: the teaching of rituals, the telling of indigenous histories, the public enactment of care and reverence. The role of *quán* and *zhì* in this transformation cannot be overstated. Institutions must be designed not as rigid containers of normative doctrine, but as responsive mechanisms shaped by ethical discretion. The *jūnzǐ* legislator or public servant must possess the wisdom to know when principle must yield to circumstance, when equity demands asymmetry, and when harmony requires the endurance of unresolved tension. *Quán* allows for moral improvisation; it ensures that justice remains alive to the textures of political life.

A Confucian vision of the future for KNC does not seek reconciliation through forgetting or integration through dilution. It calls instead for a polity where difference is not erased but orchestrated, where sovereignty is not singular but interdependent, and where justice is not a distributive equation but a relational achievement. Such a polity would not erase the scars of colonisation, but would offer forms of moral healing through sincere recognition, ritually enacted reverence, and the slow cultivation of trust. From this moral vantage, the Confucian *jūnzǐ* becomes not simply a moral exemplar but an architect of civic form. She builds not through the assertion of rights or the defence of interests, but through the cultivation of relational bonds, the enactment of ritual, and the labour of becoming worthy of shared political life. The future, then, is not found in the adjudication of sovereignties, but in the ethical work of becoming a people who can bear history together—with reverence, discernment, and grace.

### 6.3.5 Conclusion: Cultivating Harmony Beyond the Liberal Horizon

The foregoing analysis has shown that Confucian relational ethics offers a distinct vision of justice—one rooted not in procedural equality or liberal neutrality, but in historical responsiveness, affective attunement, and the cultivation of asymmetrical responsibility. This concluding section reflects on the ethical horizon such a vision opens for a polity like Kanaky-La Nouvelle-Calédonie (KNC), fractured by colonial violence and yet seeking a future grounded in mutual flourishing. In such contexts, where the moral wound is not merely institutional but cosmological, Confucian ethics

provides a framework for moral repair that moves beyond distributive formulae and adversarial logic. It calls for a civic transformation that is both inward and collective, both ritual and structural.

The ethical stakes of KNC cannot be adequately grasped through the conceptual lexicon of liberal individualism. As I have argued, liberalism's procedural mechanisms and abstract conceptions of personhood fail to account for the specificity of colonial harm, relational disintegration, and moral dislocation. By positing the individual as the basic unit of moral analysis—autonomous, rational, and decontextualised—liberal thought can obscure the lived realities of those whose identities are constituted through ancestral ties, cosmological worlds, and collective memory. The promise of equality before the law may falter when confronted with the ontological violence and structural asymmetries that define the settler–indigenous relation in KNC. Justice here is not a matter of inclusion or uplift alone; it is the reconstitution of moral community on relational grounds.

In contrast, the Confucian framework articulated throughout the thesis provides a conception of ethical life that is historically grounded, relationally sustained, and affectively charged. The *jūnzǐ* does not navigate the world by asserting rights or applying rules, but by cultivating herself in relation to the demands of role, history, and circumstance. Through the five constant virtues—*rén* (consummate conduct), *yì* (appropriateness), *lǐ* (ritual propriety), *zhì* (living wisely), and *xìn* (making good one's word)—she becomes capable of sustaining complexity without simplification, difference without domination. These virtues are not ideals to be asserted but dispositions to be cultivated, emerging through ritual, reflection, and responsiveness to the world as it is.

A Confucian vision of political community does not resolve sovereignty by adjudicating between fixed positions, but by reimagining belonging as a relational achievement. It calls for a civic architecture that institutionalises *lǐ* through the public recognition of Kanak primacy, fosters *chéng* through consistent moral sincerity, and secures *xìn* across generations. The *jūnzǐ*, as political architect, must design not merely systems and laws, but rituals, forms of address, and practices of care that make justice visible in daily life. The future cannot be built on abstract harmony alone; it must be realised through *quán*—contextual discretion—and *zhì*—living wisely—in navigating the dynamic interplay of historical harm, contemporary cohabitation, and cosmological difference. What emerges from this vision is not a procedural solution, but a civic ethos: one that transforms justice from a distribution of entitlements into the cultivation of shared moral space. As the Kanak struggle has consistently shown, its demand is not only juridical but existential—a call to be recognised as co-constitutive of the polity, as first among equals, as the ethical origin from which a legitimate future might radiate.

The depth of the demand becomes unmistakable in the voices of those shaped by the conflict, whose testimonies expose the lived asymmetries that abstract frameworks obscure. Roch Wamytan, President of the FLNKS (*Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak Socialiste*), articulates the relational imbalance that defines the Kanak condition:

For over thirty years now we have agreed to share this right to self-determination that belongs to us, the colonized people. Others are not colonized, they are part of the history of colonization, but we were really colonized by a people—that is—the French people (quoted in Korson, 2018, p. 569).

In contrast, Isabelle Lafleur (2014) expresses a settler identification with the French republican ideal:

I am deeply French. My culture is French. And I live in a part of France. So in New Caledonia, Caledonians are like Bretons in Brittany and Corsicans in Corsica. They are in a part of France. And I am in a part of France [...] Well that's what being Caledonian is (quoted in Korson, 2018, p. 563).

These voices do not merely represent opposing positions; they illuminate the ethical fracture at the heart of the postcolonial polity—a fracture the Confucian *jūnzǐ* must learn not to resolve, but to hold, with discernment, ritual precision, and a sustained commitment to asymmetrical responsibility.

The work of Confucian justice, then, is not the balancing of claims but the cultivation of a people capable of sustaining political life with moral clarity and relational depth. Both Kanak and European *jūnzǐ* must move beyond the binaries of coloniser and colonised, majority and minority, secession and union. Their task is to enact new ethical forms of cohabitation grounded in ritual seriousness, reverent memory, and shared transformation. They do not negate the weight of their respective histories; rather, they transfigure those histories through the sustained labour of becoming more fully human—together. This vision finds one of its clearest articulations in the words of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the Kanak leader and visionary, captures the Confucian spirit of forward-looking sovereignty:

The return to tradition is a myth; [...] no people has ever achieved it. The search for identity, the model, for me, it is in front of you, never behind. It is a permanent reformulation. [...] our identity is ahead of us (Leblic translation, Leblic, 2022, p. 113)

For Tjibaou, sovereignty is not isolation but the moral capacity to negotiate interdependence with agency and dignity: 'It is sovereignty that gives us the right and the power to negotiate interdependencies' (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 109).

## 6.4 Conclusion: From Ritual to Justice, From Relation to Repair

Across these three case studies, Confucian ethics has emerged not simply as a moral tradition, but as a framework for ethical attunement in contexts where liberal models falter. Each case—familial, civic, and geopolitical—has revealed a different dimension of moral conflict, and in each, Confucian thought has redirected attention from rights and procedure to roles, relationships, and cultivated responsiveness.

In the domestic dilemma of Priya, we saw how filial reverence (*xiào*) and consummate conduct (*rén*) reposition the self not as purely autonomous chooser, but as relational being—embedded in affective bonds that shape moral judgment. The Parkfield conflict highlighted the fragility of certain forms of liberal proceduralism, where inclusion risked becoming exclusion in the absence of sincerity (*chéng*), the credibility of fulfilled commitment (*xìn*), and ritual propriety (*lǐ*). Finally, in Kanaky–La Nouvelle-Calédonie, the Kanak struggle for sovereignty brought Confucian relational justice into confrontation with colonial structures and some of the abstractions present in liberal thought. Here, virtues such as *zhì* (living wisely), *quán* (discretion), and *zhōng* (doing one's utmost) offered a model of ethical repair grounded in asymmetry and historical memory.

Taken together, these cases form more than a sequence—they articulate a Confucian ethical unfolding. They show that flourishing is not a matter of securing individual rights alone, but of becoming the kind of person who can inhabit complex relationships with seriousness, discernment, and care. Moral life, in this vision, is not sustained by agreement but by cultivated presence: the ability to remain in relation even when harmony is difficult, and consensus impossible. Whether in the quiet tension of familial obligation, the turbulence of civic pluralism, or the enduring injuries of colonial rule, these cases demonstrate that moral conflict cannot be resolved by abstract principle alone. It is relational presence—sustained through ritual, discernment, and attentiveness—that enables ethical clarity. Confucian ethics does not avoid moral complexity; it inhabits it. It does not seek consensus at the expense of particularity, but insists that moral life is forged through integrity and relation.

In a world increasingly fractured by cultural dislocation and institutional distrust, the Confucian vision offers a quiet but radical claim: that we become most human not by standing apart, but by standing with—and that justice begins not with impartial rules, but with the rituals that bind us to one another. In the final chapter, we return to this vision in full, drawing together its philosophical and political implications for how we might think—and live—otherwise.

## CHAPTER 7: Confucianism Today: Tradition, Change, Relevance

### 7.1 Restatement of the Central Thesis

Having explored the application of Confucian ethics to real-world moral dilemmas in Chapter 6—through case studies on LGBTQ+ rights and religious pluralism, intergenerational obligations, and settler-colonial justice—this final chapter returns to the broader philosophical significance of the Confucian ethical project. The preceding analyses demonstrated that Confucian values such as *rén* (consummate conduct), *lǐ* (ritual propriety), and *xìn* (making good one's word) offer more than abstract ideals; they constitute a practical moral grammar capable of navigating the tensions of pluralistic, morally fragmented societies. In drawing together the thesis' theoretical and practical threads, the aim of this chapter is to synthesise these insights and consider how the Confucian figure of the *jūnzǐ*—no longer an antiquarian relic but as a dynamic model of relational selfhood—might inform contemporary ethical life.

The contemporary world finds itself mired in a profound ethical crisis, one not merely of political institutions or economic structures, but of the very conceptions of moral life that undergird human flourishing. As discussed in Chapter 1, despite remarkable advances in science, technology, and governance, societies across the globe are increasingly characterised by moral fragmentation, civic disengagement, and the hollowing out of ethical seriousness. Figures such as Martha Nussbaum (2010) and Iris Murdoch (1970) have diagnosed this crisis as a failure not merely of systems but of moral vision: a widespread erosion of the capacity for sustained ethical attention to others and to the common good. In this context, the need for a renewed, dynamic model of ethical life has become both urgent and inescapable. Against this backdrop, the thesis proposes the Confucian figure of the *jūnzǐ* as a transformative model for contemporary ethical life. Far from being an antiquarian ideal, the *jūnzǐ* emerges as a living symbol of relationally grounded moral cultivation: a figure who embodies the possibility of human flourishing through ceaseless striving, ritual-embedded responsiveness, and the refinement of moral perception. As discussed in Chapter 2's exploration of the historical context of Confucius' thought, the *jūnzǐ* was originally articulated in response to profound social disintegration, offering an alternative to the corrupt aristocracy and militaristic pragmatism of the late Zhou dynasty. In reinterpreting this figure for contemporary times, the thesis seeks neither to revive ancient forms uncritically nor to engage in nostalgic idealisation, but to retrieve the deeper ethical insights that remain vitally relevant for addressing modern moral dislocations.

A further contribution of the thesis lies in its modest but generative use of comparative philosophical resources. In particular, it draws selectively on Wittgenstein's evocative notion of 'forms of life' to shed light on the ethical significance of Confucian ritual. While Wittgenstein's remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* are not explicitly ethical, his suggestion that 'to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life' (§19), and that 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (§43), has been interpreted by scholars such as Moyal-Sharrock (2015, p. 4) and Standish (2025, pp. 19–20) as underscoring the deeply contextual nature of human understanding (Wittgenstein, 1953). This thesis does not offer an extensive engagement with Wittgenstein's philosophy, but draws on these ideas in a heuristic spirit to suggest how Confucian *lǐ* might be viewed as a kind of moral grammar shaped by—and shaping—a form of life. This insight resonates with the Confucian conception of *lǐ* not as etiquette, but as the aesthetic and relational structure of moral cultivation—a point developed by thinkers such as Fingarette (1972/1998), Tu Weiming (1972), Ames and Rosemont (1999), and Chenyang Li (2007). Rather than positioning Wittgenstein as a theoretical foundation, the thesis treats him as a suggestive interlocutor whose remarks help clarify how rituals shape moral perception, social roles, and the cultivation of *rén* (consummate conduct). By aligning these insights, the thesis challenges ethical models that reduce virtue to procedural compliance or rhetorical display, and instead foregrounds the formative, aesthetic, and situated dimensions of moral life.

Moreover, the Confucian conception of personhood offers a compelling alternative to many atomistic models prevalent in modern Western moral and political thought. As developed in Chapter 3 and articulated by thinkers such as Tu Weiming (1985; 2024), the Confucian self is a 'centre of relationships'—or in Roger Ames' (1999, p. 191), terms, a 'focus-field': a relational centre shaped by, and shaping, its social context. It is not an autonomous monad, but a dynamically constituted being whose identity and moral capacities emerge through relational and ritual engagement. This differs from influential strands within the liberal tradition—exemplified by Kantian autonomy and Rawlsian proceduralism—which often imagine the moral agent as fundamentally self-sufficient and abstractable from particular relationships. Confucianism, by contrast, holds that moral agency is not innate but achieved—cultivated through sustained participation in relational and ritual forms of life.

Building on this relational vision of the self, the *jūnzǐ* becomes not merely a paragon of virtue but a processual ideal: an emblem of ceaseless ethical striving rooted in the fabric of human relationships. As explored through the *Analects* (2.4), Confucius portrays the moral journey as a lifelong endeavour, marked by stages of learning, self-discipline, and deepening attunement to the

demands of relational life. The *jūnzǐ* does not achieve moral excellence through abstract reasoning alone but through the embodied practices of care, ritual propriety, and moral responsiveness. Ethical life, from this perspective, is not an isolated project of self-perfection, but a continuous participation in the communal forms of life that cultivate and sustain humane flourishing (*rén*). The relevance of this vision for contemporary ethical life becomes all the more apparent when contrasted with modern attempts to revive moral seriousness through character education and virtue ethics. As I will discuss in 7.4.3, character education programmes often reduce moral cultivation to the inculcation of discrete virtues, treated as individual competencies to be acquired through instruction and reinforcement. Similarly, modern virtue ethics, despite its turn away from deontological and utilitarian abstractions, frequently frames virtue as an internal disposition cultivated largely in isolation. Both approaches, as Tu Weiming (1985; 2024), Roger Ames (2011) and David Wong (2004) might suggest, risk neglecting the relational, embodied, and communal dimensions that are indispensable for genuine moral formation.

The Confucian alternative insists that ethical life is relationally constituted and ritually mediated. Virtue is not a private possession but emerges through the ongoing work of attuning oneself to the shifting demands of human and cosmic relationships. As Murdoch (1970) argues, moral vision arises not from abstract reasoning but from sustained attention to others—an attention Confucianism grounds in ritualised forms of life. Yet to remain ethically vital, Confucian relational ethics must be critically reinterpreted. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 and foregrounded here, issues such as gender hierarchy, political asymmetry, and graded love require renewed reflection. Revitalising Confucian ethics thus entails disentangling its dynamic relational core from its historically contingent forms. As Tu Wei-ming (1972, p. 197) writes, *li* is ‘a movement of self-transformation, the dialectical path through which man becomes more human’—not a static code but a living practice of ethical becoming. This thesis envisions a critical Confucianism that preserves its insights into moral cultivation while remaining open to reimagining *li* in light of contemporary demands for equality, pluralism, and justice.

Thus to sum up, the central thesis affirms that the Confucian figure of the *jūnzǐ* offers a powerful and timely model for ethical life: one grounded in relational ontology, animated by ritual practice, and sustained through the ceaseless labour of becoming fully human. In an era marked by fragmentation, alienation, and moral cynicism, the Confucian vision does not prescribe rigid doctrines or utopian blueprints; rather, it offers a dynamic, living tradition of ethical striving — an invitation to reimagine moral life as a process of relational attunement, ritual cultivation, and enduring human becoming.

## 7.2 Synthesis of Main Findings

The philosophical inquiry pursued throughout this thesis has demonstrated that Confucian relational ethics, when critically reinterpreted and carefully situated within contemporary moral discourse, offers a coherent, dynamic, and profoundly relevant vision of ethical life. By tracing the emergence, articulation, and implications of Confucian ethical thought, the thesis has elucidated how a tradition often perceived as culturally specific and historically remote can instead be understood as an enduring, living resource for addressing the moral dislocations of modernity. As explored in Chapter 2, the figure of the *jūnzǐ* emerged in a period of profound social and moral collapse, offering a vision of nobility redefined not by hereditary status but by cultivated character and relational responsiveness. Confucius' revitalisation of ritual, as Fingarette (1972/1998, p. 9), argues, reveals *lǐ* not as empty formalism but as a spiritual choreography through which individuals become attuned to others and enact moral meaning in concert. Tu Weiming (1972) deepens this insight by portraying *lǐ* as a dynamic process of self-transcendence through self-realisation—where one becomes fully human through participatory harmony with an ever-evolving network of relationships. In this light, rituals are formative rather than restrictive: they cultivate sensibility, sustain communal life, and generate the lived texture of ethical experience.

Chapter 3 developed the contrast between Confucian relational personhood and dominant Western models of autonomous agency. While not naming Rawls directly, it critiques liberal and Kantian frameworks that posit a moral subject defined by rational abstraction from concrete relationships. In contrast, as Tu Weiming (1985; 2024) articulates, the Confucian self is a 'centre of relationships,' whose identity and moral capacities emerge through sustained participation in familial, social, and civic roles. Personhood, on this account, is not innate but achieved through ritual, responsibility, and relational self-cultivation.

The thesis has also drawn, albeit cautiously, on Wittgenstein's notion of 'forms of life,' introduced briefly in Chapter 1 (Wittgenstein, 1953, §§19, 23)—to illuminate aspects of Confucian ritual practice. Although Wittgenstein's work is not systematically developed within the thesis, his reflections on how meaning arises from participation in communal practices provide a useful conceptual backdrop. Rituals, understood analogously to *language-games*—that is, patterned uses of words and actions whose meaning depends on shared practices—in Wittgenstein's schema (Wittgenstein, 1953, §23), can be seen as socially embedded activities that shape perception, responsiveness, and ethical orientation from within, rather than imposing moral norms externally.

The analogy is necessarily tentative, given the distinct purposes and contexts of Wittgenstein's investigations; nevertheless, it underscores the relational and embodied dimensions of Confucian moral cultivation. This thesis also engages with Kohlberg's moral cognitivism, character education, and virtue ethics movements—approaches that are critically examined in section 7.4.3 in light of Confucian relational ethics. Despite their shared commitment to moral renewal, these models often fall into a kind of proceduralism, treating moral development as the cultivation of internal competencies in abstraction from the social practices and relationships that actually constitute moral life.

Confucian moral development is best understood not as the acquisition of isolated, internal traits but as a relational and contextual process shaped by one's embeddedness in social practices and interpersonal responsiveness. Drawing on classical texts and contemporary psychological research, David Wong argues that moral capacities emerge through sustained participation in networks of care, ritual, and guided cultivation. This relational model contrasts with procedural or stage-based theories of moral education, which often assume a universal, individualistic subject progressing through abstract, internal competencies (2004, pp. 421–426). From a Confucian perspective, this distinction is critical: moral agency is not simply located within the individual, but co-authored through concrete, embodied participation in ethical forms of life—a theme explored further in section 7.4.3.

The synthesis of these findings thus offers a vision of ethical life that is relationally embedded, ritually mediated, and dynamically unfolding. Ethical agency is not an isolated exercise of reason or will but a continuous process of self-cultivation within a web of relationships and practices. Virtue, in this vision, is not a possession but an ongoing achievement, realised through sustained ethical attention, responsiveness, and attunement to the demands of particular relational contexts. As Murdoch (1970, p. 55) argues, moral development requires an effort of vision — an overcoming of selfish fantasy towards a more just and loving attention to reality — and it is precisely this effort that Confucian ritual practices are designed to cultivate.

Furthermore, the thesis acknowledges the tensions and challenges within the Confucian tradition itself. As Chapter 4 demonstrates—and as the critical reflections that follow will further explore—issues such as hierarchy, gender roles, and cultural particularism require serious philosophical engagement. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 4, the Confucian tradition has shown capacity for self-renewal through historical reinterpretation, especially during the Song dynasty (Rosenlee, 2023). The commitment to ethical cultivation through responsive, relational participation offers resources

for rearticulating Confucian values in ways that remain credible and vital in contemporary pluralistic societies.

In synthesising these findings, the thesis ultimately affirms that Confucian relational ethics provides a profound and potentially valuable alternative to predominantly atomistic and procedural models that have shaped much of contemporary moral and political thought. By situating moral agency within a dynamic process of relational formation and ritual participation, Confucianism offers a vision of ethical life capable of addressing some of the deepest sources of alienation and fragmentation in the modern world. It invites neither a retreat into nostalgic traditionalism nor a rejection of modern ideals of equality and justice, but a creative and critical retrieval of the relational foundations of human flourishing.

### 7.3 Contributions of the Thesis

The contributions of this thesis lie not merely in historical interpretation, but in rearticulating Confucian relational ethics as a philosophically robust and contextually responsive framework—one capable of addressing contemporary concerns in moral philosophy and education. Through sustained dialogue with ethical theory, moral psychology, and educational discourse, the thesis advances insights into moral cultivation, personhood, and relational life—insights urgently needed in an era marked by moral fragmentation and procedural abstraction.

Confucius' vision of moral development is neither teleological perfectionism nor static exemplarity. It is instead a lifelong process of attunement—shaped through ritual (*Analects* 6.27), tested in failure (9.25), and deepened through perseverance (2.4, 6.20), where the cultivation of virtue emerges through sustained relational and ethical engagement rather than the attainment of an ideal form.<sup>99</sup> The *jūnzǐ* does not embody completed virtue but exemplifies the ongoing moral labour of *becoming*. This dynamic vision offers a contrast to many influential Western models, particularly those which tend to locate virtue in the possession of discrete traits or internalised competencies. By contrast, the thesis proposes that virtue is a dispositional orientation cultivated through social roles, ritual practice, and moral responsiveness (Hall & Ames, 1987; Wei-ming, 1988). This leads to a second contribution: a critical relational anthropology that reframes personhood not as an autonomous moral core, but as a centre of relational responsiveness. Drawing on Tu Weiming's

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<sup>99</sup> For representative passages, see *Analects* 2.4 which portrays moral life as an evolving trajectory rather than a fixed goal; 6.27 on the anchoring role of ritual; 9.25 on moral responsiveness through correcting one's mistakes; and 6.20 on the transformative depth of joyful learning.

claim that the Confucian self is a 'centre of relationships' (1985; 2024), Chapter 3 articulates a model of personhood that differs significantly from some Kantian and Rawlsian visions of the moral subject. While much of liberal moral theory emphasises a procedural, autonomous agent capable of abstract deliberation, Confucianism situates the moral agent within dynamic networks of responsibility, role, and ritual. Here, the self is not pre-given but gradually formed through embodied ethical cultivation in social and familial life. In doing so, the thesis extends the critique of atomistic liberalism while resisting the nostalgia of cultural essentialism.

A further philosophical insight offered by the thesis lies in its interpretive use of Wittgenstein's later reflections—particularly his notion of 'forms of life'—as a conceptual aid for understanding Confucian ritual (Wittgenstein, 1953/1997, §§ 19, 43).<sup>100</sup> While Wittgenstein's remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* are not explicitly ethical, scholars such as Moyal-Sharrock (2015, p. 4) and Standish (2025, pp. 19–20) have interpreted them as highlighting the cultural and practical embeddedness of understanding.<sup>101</sup> In this light, rituals may be understood—by analogy with grammar—as patterned forms of life that help orient ethical perception and responsiveness. Confucian *lǐ*, like Wittgenstein's idea of grammar, is not reducible to etiquette or external form, but may be seen as a normative field in which moral meaning is enacted, negotiated, and sustained (Li, 2007; Tu, 1972).<sup>102</sup> This interpretive framework challenges dominant ethical models that reduce virtue to procedural compliance or rhetorical performance. As Chapter 5 explores, contemporary approaches to moral and civic education—while often seeking to restore ethical seriousness—frequently rely on behavioural metrics, proceduralism, and performative models of leadership. Confucian ethics resists this technocratic reduction, grounding moral seriousness in the cultivation of *dé* (moral charisma): an attuned and embodied responsiveness to the ethical demands of relational life. This vision of leadership prioritises moral presence over performance, and relational judgment over scripted conduct (Hall & Ames, 1987; Tu, 2024).

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<sup>100</sup> This engagement should be read as a heuristic parallel rather than a systematic comparison: Wittgenstein's insights serve here as conceptual tools for reimagining ritual as a form of ethical grammar, not as a direct analogue to Confucian thought.

<sup>101</sup> Both Tu Weiming and Chenyang Li emphasise that language and practice are embedded in cultural contexts, reinforcing the relevance of Wittgenstein's concept of 'forms of life.'

<sup>102</sup> Tu Weiming (1972) presents *lǐ* as a dynamic process of self-cultivation that harmonises inner virtue with outward practice. Ames and Hall (1987) describe *lǐ* as a kind of social grammar: a normative framework that shapes and expresses the individual's place and role within the network of familial and social relationships, a point cited by Chenyang Li (2007, p. 317). Li further develops this by describing *lǐ* as a cultural grammar through which *rén* (humaneness) is cultivated and expressed (2007, p. 311).

In advancing this account, the thesis also responds to a familiar objection: that Confucianism is too culturally particular or historically remote to speak to contemporary ethical life. Such claims often fail to acknowledge the cultural and historical situatedness of all moral traditions. As Wittgenstein suggests, our forms of reasoning and judgment are inseparable from the forms of life in which they are embedded (Wittgenstein, 1953/1997, §19). Confucianism, far from being static, has evolved through centuries of engagement with Buddhism and Daoism (Chan, 1969;<sup>103</sup> Fung & Bodde, 2017<sup>104</sup>) and, more recently, with Western philosophy and institutions (Tu, 1991; Yu-lan & Bodde, 2017).<sup>105</sup> Like Christian liturgy or Western civic ritual, Confucian *lǐ* functions not as archaic pageantry, but as a dynamic grammar of ethical life. Rituals, in this view, are not rigid routines but responsive forms—cultural structures through which perception is trained, virtue is cultivated, and social order is sustained. Figures such as Tu Weiming (1972) and Chenyang Li (2007) have described *lǐ* as the cultural grammar through which *rén* (consummate conduct) is expressed and developed. That Western societies continue to enact rituals—academic processions, courtroom procedures, national commemorations, religious services, and even the familiar rhythms of weddings, funerals, and sporting ceremonies—underscores the universality of such practices and supports the interpretive insight that ethical reasoning, like language, is always already shaped by the life-worlds in which it unfolds

Recognising the cultural specificity of all traditions reframes Confucianism not as an exception, but as an exemplar of ethical embeddedness. This reframing underscores the thesis's final contribution: a defence of Confucian ethics not merely as a historically interesting system but as a living tradition capable of confronting modern moral disorientation. It offers an account of selfhood attuned to interdependence, an ethic grounded in practice rather than abstraction, and a model of

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<sup>103</sup> In *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (1969), Wing-tsit Chan provides a detailed account of how Confucianism has evolved over time, particularly through its interaction with Buddhism and Daoism. He characterises Neo-Confucianism as a philosophy of immanence and emphasises its ethical and political continuity, even as it incorporated metaphysical elements from other traditions. He also documents how figures like Cheng Hao initially engaged with Buddhist ideas but ultimately rejected them, as seen in Cheng's critique that 'Buddhists are all devoted to their own selfishness' (p. 542). Chan further highlights the reformist role of K'ang Yu-wei, noting his portrayal of Confucius as an 'uncrowned king' (p. 723), and records Fung Yu-lan's retrospective criticism of his own earlier work for being overly influenced by Daoism and Buddhism (p. 754).

<sup>104</sup> See Fung Yu-lan's, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (2017), Fung presents a contrasting interpretation of Neo-Confucianism to that of Chan. While Chan sees it as a philosophy of immanence, Fung describes it as a philosophy of transcendence—shaped by Buddhist metaphysical concerns, particularly regarding the nature of reality and consciousness. According to Chan's account, Fung later reconsidered his early stance, stating it 'over-stressed the universal and was too strongly influenced by Taoism and Buddhism' (1969, p. 754).

<sup>105</sup> In 'Cultural China' (1991) Tu examines how Confucianism has been reinterpreted under the pressures of colonialism, modernisation, and global capitalism. He introduces the concept of 'Cultural China' to analyse how Confucian values are transmitted not only in the Chinese mainland but also through diaspora communities and modern institutions. His essay is especially important in understanding the shift from Confucianism as a state ideology to a diffuse cultural ethos embedded in education, ethics, and identity.

education as formation rather than instruction. To retrieve Confucianism is not to revive a static past, but to engage in the ongoing task of reimagining what it means to live well, together, in morally fractured times. By situating Confucian thought within global philosophical discourse, the thesis affirms its place not as a cultural relic but as a vital interlocutor in contemporary efforts to recover ethical presence and relational seriousness.

To summarise, this thesis makes three core contributions to moral philosophy and educational theory:

1. A dynamic reinterpretation of the *jūnzǐ*, not as a static moral exemplar but as a figure of lifelong ethical striving shaped by ritual, failure, and perseverance.
2. A critical relational anthropology that redefines personhood as a centre of moral responsiveness within social, familial, and ritual networks—challenging liberal notions of autonomous moral agency.
3. A critique of contemporary moral education and leadership, exposing the technocratic reduction of virtue to behavioural metrics, and proposing instead a model of moral presence rooted in moral excellence (*dé*), relational attunement, and lived ethical practice.

Recognising the cultural specificity of all traditions reframes Confucianism not as an exception, but as an exemplar of ethical embeddedness. This thesis defends Confucian ethics as a living tradition capable of addressing modern moral disorientation—not as nostalgia for the past, but as a resource for reimagining ethical life in fractured times. It offers three central contributions: a reinterpretation of the *jūnzǐ* as a figure of lifelong moral striving; a relational account of personhood grounded in ritual and responsiveness; and a critique of technocratic models of moral education, proposing instead a pedagogy rooted in *dé* and ethical presence. Situated within global discourse, Confucianism emerges here not as a cultural relic, but as a vital interlocutor in contemporary efforts to recover moral seriousness and relational integrity.

## **7.4 Critical Reflections and Limitations**

The present thesis acknowledges that while the reinterpretation of Confucian relational ethics offers powerful resources for contemporary moral renewal, it must also confront certain unresolved questions and potential difficulties. These include tensions internal to Confucian thought itself, challenges arising from bringing relational role ethics into dialogue with pluralistic modern societies, and conceptual issues concerning the limits of approaches such as Kohlberg's moral cognitivism,

virtue ethics, and character education. Moreover, the thesis recognises its own scope limitations, particularly in relation to empirical application and feminist reinterpretation. Each of these areas will be addressed in turn, not in a spirit of resignation, but as an extension of the Confucian ethos of continual moral striving and critical self-cultivation.

#### 7.4.1 Tensions within Confucian Ethics: Filial Reverence, Patriarchy, and Hierarchy

While Confucian relational ethics offers profound resources for reimagining moral life, it is not without internal tensions that demand critical reflection. In particular, the traditional emphasis on filial reverence (*xiào*), the historical entanglement of Confucian practices with patriarchal structures, and the reinforcement of hierarchical social orders pose significant challenges for the contemporary application of Confucian thought. A philosophically serious retrieval of Confucian relational ethics must therefore confront these tensions openly, neither excusing nor dismissing them, but engaging in the ceaseless ethical labour of critical reinterpretation.

*Xiào* stands at the heart of Confucian moral cultivation, as discussed in Chapter 4. It is within the intimate bonds of family that relational responsiveness, ethical attention, and ritual competence are first developed. Confucius teaches that moral excellence begins with cultivating respectful and attentive relationships within the family, especially toward one's parents and elders. In *Analects* 2.7, he stresses that true *xiào* requires reverence, not just providing material support. Similarly, in *Analects* 1.7, Tzu-Hsia highlights the moral worth of someone who serves their parents with dedication, even without formal instruction. However, the valorisation of filial reverence risks degenerating into uncritical obedience when removed from the broader ethical context of mutual care and moral discernment. As Tu Weiming (1985 ch. VII) argues, filial reverence in its deepest sense is not mere subservience but a dynamic, ethically attentive relationship based on reciprocal respect and responsibility. Nevertheless, in various historical contexts, applications of Confucian filial ethics have often reinforced rigid family hierarchies, constraining the moral agency of younger generations and particularly of women within patriarchal family systems.

The entanglement of Confucian ethics with patriarchal structures poses an even more substantial difficulty. Although the *Analects* themselves are relatively restrained in their gender prescriptions, later Confucian traditions codified gendered hierarchies into ritual practice and moral expectations. As discussed in Chapter 5, rituals concerning mourning, lineage, and familial responsibility often privileged paternal over maternal kinship ties, implicitly devaluing women's relational contributions. This historical development reflects not a necessary entailment of Confucian relational ethics, but

a particular cultural manifestation shaped by broader socio-political forces. Nevertheless, it remains a legacy that any contemporary Confucianism must critically address.

Hierarchy more broadly is embedded within the Confucian vision of relational life. As articulated in the doctrine of the Five Relationships — ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, friend and friend — Confucian ethics prescribes differentiated roles and expectations based on relational proximity, age, and social position (*Analects* 12.11). The emphasis on graded love, wherein ethical obligations are strongest toward those closest in relational intimacy, accords with psychological realism. Yet, as David Wong (2004, p. 97) warns, it also risks promoting parochialism and the neglect of broader civic and global responsibilities if not tempered by an ethic of expanding circles of care.

The moral justification of hierarchical differentiation is particularly fraught in modern contexts committed to ideals of equality and individual dignity. While Confucian thought emphasises that those in positions of authority bear heightened ethical responsibilities — rulers must govern through virtue, fathers must care attentively for their children — the structural asymmetries remain. As discussed in Chapter 5, Confucianism redefines legitimate authority through the concept of moral excellence (*dé*), arguing that leadership should rest not on inherited status or institutional power but on embodied moral excellence cultivated through lifelong ethical self-formation. Nevertheless, the historical record shows that Confucian ethical ideals have too often been co-opted to legitimate authoritarian and exclusionary practices. Ritual practice itself, while central to moral cultivation, is implicated in these dynamics. Rituals shape moral perception and relational responsiveness; yet when ritual forms ossify, they can become vehicles for entrenching unjust power relations rather than cultivating ethical attunement. The Confucian emphasis on sincerity (*chéng*) and appropriate responsiveness (*yì*) within ritual participation thus serves as an internal critical standard. Rituals must be evaluated not merely for their formal correctness but for their capacity to cultivate human flourishing (*rén*).

Therefore, a contemporary retrieval of Confucian relational ethics must distinguish between the dynamic spirit of relational moral cultivation and the historically contingent forms through which it has been institutionalised. As discussed in Chapter 5, Confucianism insists that ritual must remain ethically alive—grounded in sincerity (*chéng*) and responsiveness (*yì*)—and warns that ossified forms can distort its moral purpose. For instance, filial reverence (*xiào*), traditionally seen as children's respect for parents and elders, has often been tied to rigid hierarchies and patriarchal structures. A living Confucianism would reinterpret this principle as fostering mutual respect and

care within families, rather than blind obedience. In practice, this could mean open communication and shared decision-making, ensuring that each family member's dignity and autonomy are upheld. Confucianism's vitality lies in its capacity for ethical self-renewal, not in preserving outdated hierarchies. Thus, a living Confucianism must affirm its core insights into relational moral development while reimagining relational life to promote equality, inclusivity, and justice. Far from undermining its relevance, critically engaging with Confucianism's historical entanglements strengthens its contemporary role as a dynamic tradition of ethical cultivation, attuned to the demands of human flourishing in a pluralistic and egalitarian world.

#### 7.4.2 Challenges of Confucian Role Ethics in Pluralistic Societies

While Confucian relational ethics offers a rich vision of personhood grounded in communal participation, its relevance in today's pluralistic societies is not without challenge. Contemporary life is marked by fluid identities—across gender, culture, and belief—and by affiliations shaped through global mobility, career shifts, and reconfigured family forms. Digital environments further complicate selfhood, enabling individuals to inhabit multiple, often disjointed personas across platforms. Moral life increasingly unfolds across overlapping frameworks—from liberal individualism to religious, Indigenous, and social justice ethics. Within such complexity, Confucianism's emphasis on fixed roles and hierarchical obligations must be critically reassessed if it is to remain a viable ethical resource.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Confucian relational personhood arises through participation in ritualised relationships that cultivate moral perception and responsiveness. The self is not pre-social but formed through embedded roles in familial, communal, and civic life. Yet in contemporary societies, the coherence of these roles is often unsettled, as individuals navigate fragmented affiliations and conflicting expectations across families, workplaces, classrooms, and transnational communities. The challenge for Confucian ethics is not merely to preserve its vision of relational personhood, but to rearticulate its moral grammar in ways attuned to the fluidity and plurality of contemporary life.

One key challenge arises from the potential rigidity of traditional role expectations. In classical Confucian thought, as exemplified by the doctrine of the Five Relationships, roles were relatively stable, and ethical responsibilities were largely determined by one's relational position (*Analects* 12.11). However, in modern societies, roles are increasingly negotiated rather than inherited, and individuals often inhabit multiple, overlapping, and evolving relational identities. Gender roles, for instance, have been radically reconfigured, as have expectations concerning authority, filial

responsibility, and civic duty. Simply reaffirming traditional Confucian role structures risks rendering the tradition ethically obsolete or, worse, complicit in reinforcing unjust or exclusionary norms.

Moreover, the Confucian model of graded love — which prioritises obligations to those nearest in relational proximity — should be critically reconsidered in light of modern ideals of impartial justice and universal human rights. As David Wong (2004) argues, while partiality to intimates reflects natural psychological tendencies and cultural insight, mature relational ethics must also nurture a widening moral concern that includes civic and global responsibilities. This does not require abandoning Confucian relationality, but invites its reinterpretation in a way that affirms the communal good as a shared moral horizon, recognises the mutual reinforcement between individual rights and social responsibilities, and acknowledges the ethical imperative of accommodating diverse values and worldviews within pluralistic societies (Wong, 2009b).

Qingping Liu (2003) offers a pointed critique, arguing that the Confucian prioritisation of consanguineous affection risks enabling nepotism and undermining social justice by placing familial loyalty above public duty. Yet a Confucian defence, drawing on the reinterpretation of *xiào* explored in Chapter 4, maintains that familial partiality can serve as a moral foundation rather than a limit. When understood as a formative practice of reverent care, *xiào* cultivates the affective and ethical dispositions — attentiveness, empathy, responsibility — that may be extended beyond the family. Thus, Confucian relational ethics offers not a rejection of impartial concern but a path toward it, rooted in the concrete intimacy of early moral life. Moreover, although often perceived as anthropocentric, Confucianism—both classical and contemporary—articulates a moral vision that extends responsibility to non-human life. Mencius links humane governance to ecological restraint, advocating seasonal harvesting to ensure renewal (*Mencius* 1A:3), and praises King Xuan's compassion in sparing an ox from ritual slaughter, treating sensitivity to animal suffering as evidence of a benevolent heart (*Mencius* 1A:7). While not a modern animal rights advocate, Mencius affirms that moral cultivation includes empathy toward non-humans. Xunzi similarly promotes ecological balance through ritual and restraint, regulating human desires to prevent environmental degradation. Jonathan Chua interprets Xunzi's philosophy as grounded in reciprocal harmony, where humans owe an existential debt to Heaven and Earth, creating a moral obligation to protect and enhance nature. Xunzi writes that 'Heaven and Earth give birth to exemplary persons, and exemplary persons bring order to Heaven and Earth... They are partners of Heaven and Earth, governors of the myriad things' (*Xunzi* 9/65-66 in Chua Yi, 2022, p. 558), and insists that 'when the grasses and trees are flowering and abundant, axes and hatchets are not to enter the mountains and forests' (9/76 in *ibid.*, Chua Yi, 2022, p. 564), reflecting a commitment to ecological flourishing

through seasonal awareness. In contemporary thought, Tu Weiming's 'anthropocosmic' vision reframes the human as a dynamic centre within the Heaven–Earth–human continuum, where virtues like attentiveness and care extend analogically to non-human life. Tu affirms that 'humanity forms one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things' (Tu, 2024, p. 152), and that ecological stewardship arises from cultivating the 'original heart' (本心, *běnxīn*), which enables humans to participate in the 'transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth' (ibid., 2024, p. 154). Confucian ethics, far from being narrowly anthropocentric, embed ecological responsibility within their core commitment to relational harmony and moral cultivation.

The epistemic conditions of pluralism pose another major challenge. As lightly touched on in Chapter 1, contemporary societies are marked by deep disagreement not only about the good life but about the very frameworks through which moral meaning is constituted. In such contexts, the communal moral horizons presupposed by Confucian ritual practices cannot be assumed. The danger, therefore, is that rituals and role-based practices may lose their normative grip, becoming perceived as arbitrary or oppressive rather than as sources of ethical attunement. As Fingarette (1972/1998, p. 14) emphasises, the power of ritual lies in its capacity to disclose a shared moral world; where such shared horizons are absent, ritual must be reimagined in ways that are responsive to new forms of community and moral solidarity. A promising avenue for addressing these challenges lies in foregrounding the virtues underlying Confucian role ethics rather than rigidly preserving specific traditional roles. As discussed in Chapter 5, particularly through the dynamic relationality proposed by Tu Weiming (1985, p. 118), the emphasis should fall on cultivating relational virtues such as attentiveness, responsiveness, care, sincerity, and appropriate deference. These virtues can guide ethical engagement across diverse relational contexts, even where traditional role structures are absent or transformed. For example, in an urban classroom where students and teachers come from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, these virtues can transform the classroom into a moral community. A teacher might practice attentiveness by recognising each student's unique cultural resources, responsiveness by adapting lesson plans to reflect students' lived experiences, and sincerity by creating an atmosphere of genuine dialogue. Appropriate deference here does not entail uncritical obedience but a mutual respect that affirms each participant's dignity and perspective. In this way, Confucian relational ethics can offer a flexible yet principled framework for navigating the complexities of pluralistic moral life.

Nevertheless, a tension remains between the particularistic rootedness of Confucian ethics and the level of abstraction necessary for cross-cultural applicability. Confucian thought privileges the concrete, the particular, and the historically situated. Yet if it is to function as a viable moral resource

in pluralistic contexts, it must also articulate principles capable of guiding moral deliberation across diverse relational landscapes. Balancing these demands requires a careful philosophical negotiation: retaining the relational sensibility and ritual embeddedness that are the lifeblood of Confucian ethics while articulating norms that are sufficiently flexible and inclusive to accommodate moral diversity.

Finally, the political dimensions of Confucian relational ethics demand critical attention. In liberal democratic societies, political legitimacy is grounded in the equal moral worth of all citizens, irrespective of social role or status. Traditional Confucian models of governance, by contrast, presupposed hierarchical structures of authority justified by moral excellence (*dé*). As discussed in Chapter 5, any contemporary reconstruction of Confucian political ethics must firmly reject inherited status as a basis for authority and insist that leadership is legitimised through relational competence, moral character, and service to the community. Confucian ethics thus offers a vision of leadership that is relationally grounded and ethically accountable, though this vision must be critically adapted to contemporary commitments to equal moral worth and inclusive participation in public life.

In summary, while Confucian role ethics faces serious challenges in pluralistic societies, it also offers profound resources for reimagining moral life amidst diversity. By shifting emphasis from static roles to dynamic relational virtues, by critically reconstructing ritual practices, and by engaging seriously with the demands of justice, inclusivity, and pluralism, Confucian relational ethics can be revitalised as a living, dynamic tradition capable of guiding human flourishing in a complex and evolving world.

### 7.4.3 Rethinking Moral Development: From Autonomy to Relational Cultivation

Contemporary moral education, and theory, particularly in Anglophone countries, have been shaped by three dominant frameworks: Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental model, modern virtue ethics, and character education initiatives. While distinct in emphasis, these models share a set of underlying assumptions about moral development—namely, that it is primarily an internal process, achieved through individual reasoning, habituation, or personal mastery. Kohlberg (1981) stresses moral autonomy as the ability to apply abstract, universal principles; modern virtue ethicists such as Alasdair MacIntyre (2007), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), and Julia Annas (2011) focus on the cultivation of internal dispositions through habituation, narrative identity, and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Character education theorists like Thomas Lickona (1996, 2009), William J Bennett

(1992), and institutions such as the *Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues* in the UK promote moral development through explicit instruction, school-wide ethos, and behaviour-focused programmes. Despite their differences, both traditions often prioritise moral interiority and individual agency—framing virtue primarily as an internal quality possessed by the agent.

From a Confucian perspective, this shared orientation risks overlooking the relational, embodied, and ritual-structured nature of moral development. In Confucian ethics, virtue is not solely an internal possession but a relational achievement—emerging through role-based interactions, ritual participation, and responsiveness to others. Ethical life, in this view, is cultivated not only through reflection and deliberation, but through patterned engagement in the moral textures of daily social life. This critique becomes particularly sharp in the case of Lawrence Kohlberg, whose influential six-stage model of moral development emphasises cognitive progression toward justice-based moral autonomy. Drawing on Kantian rationalism and moral cognitivism, Kohlberg’s framework imagines ethical maturity as the capacity to abstract from particular contexts and apply universal norms through reason alone. From the standpoint of Confucian relational ethics—as explored in Chapters 3 and 5—this model exhibits deep conceptual limitations.<sup>106</sup> As Tu Weiming (2024) and David Wong (2004) argue, moral reasoning cannot be abstracted from the relational and affective contexts in which ethical life unfolds. Confucianism resists the proceduralism of decontextualised moral norms, instead locating moral development in embodied ritual practice (*lǐ*), affective attunement, and deepening responsiveness to one’s social roles. Ethical maturity, in this view, emerges not from detachment, but from deeper engagement with the interdependent networks that shape moral perception and action. As Fingarette (1972/1998, p. 9) observes, ritual serves as the aesthetic and practical medium through which emotion, perception, and judgment are refined.

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<sup>106</sup> Kohlberg’s stage-based theory of moral development rests on a Kantian conception of rational autonomy, where moral judgment derives from the capacity to universalise maxims (Kant, 1785/1997). While this model remains influential, it has been subject to sustained critique. Western psychologists such as Gilligan (1982), Haidt (2001), and philosophers Schinkel and de Ruyter (2017) challenge its rationalist and universalist assumptions, arguing that moral reasoning is shaped by emotion, intuition, and cultural context. Empirical research has failed to confirm the fixed hierarchical sequence Kohlberg proposed, particularly the elusive nature of Stage 6 (Snarey & Samuelson, 2015; Vitz, 1994). Yet Confucian critiques go beyond these empirical objections, rejecting the very premise that moral knowledge is best understood as a matter of cognitive abstraction. Instead, they present a relational and practice-based alternative: moral development as *xiūshēn* (self-cultivation) through ritual (*lǐ*), mentorship, and affective attunement (Chuanbao Tan, 2021; Tu, 1972; 2002). Emotions, in this view, are not *post hoc* rationalisations or inner states but ethically formative dispositions (*Mencius* 2A:6). Where Kohlberg imagines the moral agent as an autonomous rational chooser, Confucian ethics sees the person as relationally constituted — a ‘holographic self’ (Ames, 2021) embedded in networks of duty, care, and social harmony. Thus, while Western critiques often aim to revise Kohlberg’s schema, Confucianism offers a fundamentally different vision of moral life: not a progression toward autonomy, but a deepening of relational responsiveness within embedded practices.

Without such cultivated responsiveness, moral reasoning risks becoming disembodied abstraction, lacking the sensibility required for humane action.<sup>107</sup>

Modern virtue ethics, while a welcome departure from deontological and consequentialist theories, often preserves assumptions about moral interiority and autonomous agency. Drawing from Aristotle, it stresses character development, habituation, and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Aristotle famously argued that virtue is cultivated through repeated action until ethical dispositions become second nature (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a17–25).<sup>108</sup> Moral growth, in this view, is relational and context-sensitive, grounded in upbringing and experience. *Phronesis* enables moral agents to navigate complexity by discerning the mean between extremes (1140a24–1140b12). Contemporary virtue ethicists continue this trajectory: Anscombe (1958) redirected moral philosophy to questions of character; Murdoch (1970) emphasised moral attention and the inner life; MacIntyre (1981/2007) framed virtue as tradition-bound; and Annas (2011) analogised moral education to skill acquisition, suggesting that individuals become virtuous by observing role models and engaging in repeated ethical practice.<sup>109</sup> Despite these innovations, much of virtue ethics retains an individualistic orientation. MacIntyre grounds virtue in the narrative unity of a life, viewing virtues as integral to sustaining coherent life stories; Annas (2011) in internalised moral mastery; Hursthouse (1999) in character traits that promote individual flourishing. While these thinkers distance themselves from abstract moral rules, the self remains the primary locus of ethical development.

From a Confucian perspective, this internalist framing is insufficient. Confucian ethics provides a deeper reorientation of moral development, foregrounding relational embeddedness and performative cultivation over psychological coherence. Tu Weiming (2024) characterises the Confucian self as emergent and relational—formed through embodied participation in ritual, familial roles, and civic responsibilities. Moral development, in this view, is not the accumulation of fixed traits but a dynamic, aesthetic process of self-cultivation grounded in affective and socially embedded practices. In this context, *li* is not mere etiquette but moral grammar—a generative

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<sup>107</sup> Fingarette (1972/1998, p. 9) outlines how ritual in Confucian ethics cultivates ethical awareness through performative participation. This emphasis on ritual underscores the limitations of Kohlberg's model, which neglects emotion and social practice.

<sup>108</sup> Aristotle's view (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a17–25) that virtue is formed through habit and community involvement foregrounds the embodied and relational basis of ethical development, challenging Kohlberg's abstract individualism.

<sup>109</sup> Annas (2011, pp. 23, 38) likens moral learning to skill acquisition, while MacIntyre (1981/2007) stresses narrative and tradition. These differences reveal an unresolved tension within virtue ethics between individual mastery and social embeddedness.

pattern that shapes ethical perception, attunement, and relational responsiveness.<sup>110</sup> Just as Wittgenstein's *forms of life* ground language use (*PI* §§19, 43), Confucian ritual configures moral perception through lived, relational practice.

Charlene Tan (2021a) reinforces this by showing that moral development in Confucianism is inseparable from symbolic and communal learning. Virtue is cultivated through drawing on shared cultural resources and participating in moral traditions—not through isolated internal reflection.<sup>111</sup> This embeddedness resonates with Alasdair MacIntyre's account of virtues as historically contingent, shaped by the narratives and practices of particular communities. However, unlike MacIntyre's view that virtues are wholly contingent upon tradition, Confucianism maintains that certain core virtues—such as *rén* (consummate conduct), *yì* (appropriateness), *xìn* (making good one's word), and *chéng* (sincerity)—retain enduring relevance, even as their concrete expression adapts to changing times. Unlike Western virtue ethics, which often lacks a defined moral *telos* beyond individual flourishing, Confucian ethics envisions moral growth as a lifelong journey toward sagehood (*shèngrén*) and harmony with the cosmic order. Tu Weiming (2024) further critiques the anthropocentric limits of Western virtue ethics by situating Confucian self-cultivation within a cosmological framework: moral excellence involves aligning one's conduct with Heaven (*Tiān*), Earth (*Dì*), and human community (*Rén*). In this view, virtue is not just moral strength but attunement to the ethical rhythms of the universe.

Even as Confucianism affirms the centrality of ritual, it recognises the risk of ethical formalism. As discussed in Chapter 5, when *lǐ* is divorced from *chéng* (sincerity) and *yì* (appropriate action), it loses its ethical vitality. The Confucian solution, however, is not to reject form but to revitalise it — to reinhabit ritual with attentiveness, imagination, and moral care. In doing so, Confucianism presents not only a critique of Western virtue ethics but a compelling alternative: one in which ethical life is neither rule-bound nor self-contained, but relationally and ritually cultivated across the full scope of human and cosmic life.

The same concerns arise when examining contemporary character education, particularly in its attempts to institutionalise virtue through structured moral instruction. Approaches advanced by Thomas Lickona, William J. Bennett, and the *Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues* in the UK

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<sup>110</sup> See also Ames & Rosemont (1998, p. 51) and Li (2007, p. 311) who introduce the notion of *lǐ* as a structuring moral grammar. Tu (1972) similarly underscores how ritual shapes moral perception through bodily and social enactment.

<sup>111</sup> Tan (2021) shows that Confucian moral learning is symbolically mediated and communally enacted. Her insights extend the view of *lǐ* beyond custom to include moral pedagogy grounded in collective cultural forms.

aim to cultivate core moral traits through explicit teaching, curricular design, and school-wide programming. Lickona (1996, 2009) promotes a tripartite model centred on moral *knowing*, *feeling*, and *doing*;<sup>112</sup> Bennett (1992) advocates character formation through didactic storytelling and traditional moral exemplars; while the *Jubilee Centre*, under James Arthur, develops its *Caught, Taught, and Sought* framework, which embeds moral learning within school culture, explicit instruction, and student self-reflection (2017, p. 5).<sup>113</sup> Despite differences in emphasis, these models share an underlying assumption: that virtue can be taught as a stable, transferable trait through behavioural reinforcement and cognitive instruction.<sup>114</sup>

From a Confucian standpoint, this assumption reveals deep philosophical and pedagogical limitations. Western critics such as Judith Suissa (2015) and Lee Jerome & Ben Kisby (2022), have argued that character education risks reducing moral life to behavioural compliance and depoliticised norms, Confucianism challenges the disembedding of virtue from its relational, ritual, and communal foundations. However, whereas Western critiques often advocate for more politically engaged and critically reflective forms of moral education, Confucian ethics offers a different corrective—emphasising moral cultivation through *lǐ* (ritual), habitual ethical participation, and the refinement of self within relational hierarchies. As Chuanbao Tan (2021b) and Charlene Tan (2021a) argue, character cannot be developed through instruction alone; it must be cultivated through lived experience, structured social roles, and emulation of ethical exemplars (*jūnzǐ*). Moral knowing does not automatically generate moral doing; ethical perception is formed through daily enactment within a moral tradition. Furthermore, the individualist assumptions underpinning Western character education stand in tension with the relational ontology of Confucian ethics. While Lickona and Bennett stress self-discipline and internalised moral agency, Confucian thinkers such as Jin Li (2021) and Tu Weiming (2024) argue that virtue emerges through embeddedness in social

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<sup>112</sup> Thomas Lickona's (1996) *Smart and Good Schools* model offers a directive approach to character education, integrating performance (e.g. perseverance) and moral virtues (e.g. honesty) into all aspects of school life (1996). Drawing on Kohlberg's moral development theory, he combines explicit instruction with structured ethical discussion. His *Eleven Principles* provide a practical framework emphasising whole-school involvement, moral leadership, and the integration of values into curriculum, discipline, and community engagement (ibid., pp. 96–97). Lickona also stresses formative evaluation—assessing school ethos, staff development, and student behaviour through surveys, disciplinary data, and moral reasoning tools—to ensure sustained impact (ibid., pp. 98–100). His goal is to foster students who not only understand and value ethical principles but live them in action.

<sup>113</sup> Character is *caught* through the school's moral ethos—expressed in its culture, traditions, and the conduct of teachers and peers; *taught* through explicit instruction, ethical dialogue, and structured moral inquiry; and *sought* when students assume responsibility for their growth through reflection, leadership, and lived application of values.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Smith (2022) questions whether character education genuinely fosters moral behaviour, critiquing its assumption that virtues are stable traits that can be universally taught. Citing studies like the *Stanford Prison Experiment*, he argues that behaviour is often shaped more by context than by internal dispositions. This challenges virtue-based models such as James Arthur's (2020), which treat character as a stable foundation for ethics. Smith calls for approaches that recognise the fluid and context-dependent nature of moral decision-making.

roles and obligations, not through autonomous choice. Moral development is a communal enterprise, grounded in intergenerational learning and structured ethical interaction, not merely a matter of individual reasoning or performance. Consequently, character education models that isolate moral formation from familial and civic contexts risk fostering fragmented or superficial moral identities.

Confucianism also contests the moral absolutism implicit in some character education frameworks. Bennett's reliance on universal moral narratives and prescriptive virtues overlooks the Confucian emphasis on contextual moral discernment, adaptability, and continuous self-refinement. Charlene Tan (2017) contends that Confucian education eschews rigid, dogmatic moral instruction in favour of cultivating ethical judgement, wherein learners are expected to apply the normative discourse of *dào* to particular situations through the reflective and context-sensitive observance of *lǐ*. This emphasis on lifelong cultivation and situational responsiveness aligns with empirical critiques, such as those by Pike et al. (2021), who found that while projects like the *Narnian Virtues* enhanced moral vocabulary, they failed to effect lasting behavioural transformation.<sup>115</sup>

Crucially, Confucian ethics insists on the centrality of ritual in moral education. Tu Weiming (2024) and Roger Ames (2021) argue that ethical growth occurs through structured, embodied participation in shared social practices. While programmes like the *Jubilee Centre* gesture toward cultural embedding, they do not incorporate the Confucian conception of *lǐ* as a moral grammar—an aesthetic and performative medium through which virtue is enacted, not merely expressed. In this view, virtue education must involve not only reflective understanding but embodied habituation, guided by role modelling (*shēnjiào* 身教, 'teaching by example') and self-examination (*xǐngchá* 省察), as enshrined in the *Analects*. Confucian thought, therefore, reframes the critique of character education by proposing an alternative paradigm: not a rejection of moral instruction, but its relocation within ritualised relational life. Moral development is conceived not as a cognitive ascent toward fixed virtues, but as a lifelong, participatory journey of self-cultivation, relational attunement, and moral imagination. In contrast to the behavioural and curricular formalism of many contemporary character education programmes, Confucianism affirms a deeply embodied, socially embedded, and cosmologically informed vision of ethical life—one that does not merely supplement

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<sup>115</sup> Based on C S Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*, the 12 'Narnian Virtues' that comprise the basis of the curriculum are: wisdom, love, fortitude, courage, self-control, justice, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, integrity, hard work, and curiosity. The study observed that while students acquired moral vocabulary, behavioural changes were limited over time. This supports Confucian critiques that virtue cannot be transmitted through abstract instruction alone, but requires continuous, context-embedded moral cultivation.

character education, but redefines the very conditions under which moral learning becomes meaningful and transformative.

In drawing together the critiques of Kohlberg, modern virtue ethics, and character education, this thesis challenges the procedural, rationalist, and individualist assumptions that dominate many influential approaches to moral development. Confucian ethics offers not merely an alternative but a corrective: a model of moral education that affirms the centrality of *relationship*, *embodied practice*, and *attentive cultivation*. Rather than seeking moral legitimacy through abstraction or the codification of internal traits, Confucianism proposes an ethic of situated cultivation — pluralistic without being relativistic, principled without being detached. It is through such a model that moral education can more fully respond to the complexity, affective depth, and interdependent nature of the human condition.

#### 7.4.4 Feminist Reinterpretations of Confucian Relational Ethics

The historical association of Confucianism with patriarchal structures has long posed a formidable challenge to its contemporary rehabilitation, particularly within feminist moral philosophy. As established in Chapter 5, Confucian familial and social ethics—rooted in graded love, hierarchical roles, and ritual differentiation—has historically reinforced gendered norms that subordinated women to the authority of fathers, husbands, and sons. However, as this thesis has argued throughout, these historical configurations do not exhaust the ethical possibilities of Confucian thought. A deeper engagement with Confucian relationality reveals that, properly understood, its central concepts offer powerful resources for feminist reconstruction. Across earlier chapters, it has been shown that Confucian relational ethics can be critically reinterpreted in ways that affirm gender equality, mutual flourishing, and dynamic role reconfiguration, without abandoning the tradition's foundational insight: that personhood is constituted through responsive participation in networks of ethical relationship.

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the traditional Confucian ordering of relationships—articulated through the 'five cardinal relations' and codified in ritual form—positioned women in roles of structural subordination. Daughters were subject to paternal authority, wives to husbands, and even mothers were ritually ranked below paternal kin in mourning rites. These hierarchies were not incidental but embedded within the moral grammar of *li*, which shaped the fabric of everyday ethical life. Although Confucius himself did not systematically theorise gender roles, the historical development of Confucianism entrenched patriarchal norms that restricted women's agency, public

presence, and moral recognition. In light of contemporary feminist commitments to equality, autonomy, and mutual respect, these historical realities demand rigorous ethical critique. Yet, as argued especially in Chapters 4 and 5, the relational ontology that underpins Confucian ethics is not inherently patriarchal. On the contrary, the idea that personhood is cultivated through attuned and ritualised relationships—relationships governed by mutual care and ethical discernment—can be separated from the fixed gender hierarchies that have historically accompanied it. As thinkers such as Tu Weiming and Roger Ames have emphasised, Confucian relationality is dynamic, emergent, and responsive to context. This thesis builds on such interpretations to argue that Confucian ethics can sustain a feminist moral vision without forfeiting its core commitments.

The work of Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, examined in Chapter 4, exemplifies this strategy of critical reinterpretation. Rosenlee (2006) demonstrates how Han dynasty interpretations of *yīn-yáng* and *nèi-wài*—originally flexible and correlative concepts—were gradually reified into metaphysical hierarchies that justified gender subordination. By mapping gender onto cosmological categories, these later interpretations naturalised social asymmetries as eternal principles. Rosenlee contests this ontologisation, arguing that properly understood, *yīn-yáng* and *nèi-wài* affirm reciprocity and complementarity, not inequality. ‘Confucian feminism,’ she writes, ‘affirms the complementarity and reciprocity of *yīn-yáng* and *nèi-wài* as the basic structure of human relations’ (2006, p. 157). Her analysis thus exposes the patriarchal distortion of Confucian metaphysics while recovering its relational logic for feminist purposes. In her more recent work, Rosenlee (2023) develops a constructive vision of Confucian feminism that replaces the spousal hierarchy with the ethics of *yǒu* (友, friendship), a gender-neutral relationship founded on mutual trust and cultivation. She also extends the ethics of *rén* into the political sphere, arguing that Confucianism offers a care-based alternative to liberal autonomy—one that places responsiveness to dependency and moral obligation at the heart of just governance. These arguments, already analysed in prior chapters, support the thesis’s broader claim that Confucian relational ethics, when disentangled from patriarchal overlays, can provide a robust framework for ethical and political life rooted in interdependence, care, and mutual accountability.

Complementing Rosenlee’s work is the contribution of Sin Yee Chan, whose arguments were also explored in Chapter 4. Chan challenges essentialist interpretations of *yīn-yáng* and *nèi-wài*, but does so by situating these categories in their institutional and historical development. Her analysis of how *nèi-wài* evolved into a powerful regulative framework—structuring access to education, moral authority, and political participation—reveals the depth of gendered exclusion in Confucian tradition (2023, p. 409). However, Chan also insists that this exclusion was not premised on an

ontology of female inferiority. Drawing on *Mencius* 6A:6, she underscores that the Confucian tradition affirms a shared moral endowment across all human beings. Her use of Bourdieu's concept of 'dominated power' illustrates how women exercised ethical agency within constrained relational roles, leveraging relational influence even in the absence of formal authority. Like Rosenlee, Chan contends that women are equally capable of *jūnzǐ* cultivation, provided the structural impediments to moral education and civic engagement are critically dismantled. Her analysis reinforces this thesis's claim that Confucian ethics, while historically exclusive, contains internal resources for a more inclusive, egalitarian moral vision.

A central pillar of that vision is the Confucian concept of *rén* (consummate conduct), which has been identified throughout the thesis—particularly in Chapter 5—as a locus of feminist reconstruction. As Chenyang Li (1994) argues, and as developed earlier, *rén* is not gendered, but relational: a capacity for ethical responsiveness cultivated through practice, reflection, and ritual engagement. If *rén* becomes the evaluative core of Confucian ethics, rather than inherited role hierarchies, then both social roles and ritual norms can be assessed based on their contribution to mutual flourishing. This shift places Confucianism under a moral horizon that demands continuous scrutiny and potential revision. As Rosenlee (2023) argues, such a perspective allows Confucian care ethics to function not only within the family but within institutions of governance, where rulers, like parents, are called to act with moral attentiveness and care. In this framework, *rén* serves as a bridge between personal ethics and political justice, enabling Confucianism to meet feminist demands for structural accountability and relational dignity.

The same ethical dynamism extends to Confucian ritual. As discussed in Chapter 5, Confucius conceived *lǐ* not as static command but as a performative grammar through which ethical meaning is generated and expressed (*Analects* 17.9). Rituals, in his view, are vehicles for cultivating emotional intelligence and moral discernment, not instruments of social conformity. This conception opens *lǐ* to feminist reinterpretation. As explored in previous chapters, rituals can be reconfigured to reflect changing norms and egalitarian commitments: ceremonies of mutual caregiving, public acknowledgements of non-gendered family roles, or mourning practices that honour relational significance rather than patrilineal order. Far from violating Confucian spirit, such adaptations exemplify its core ethical impulse: to refine the self through relational engagement attuned to the needs of others and the demands of justice. The *jūnzǐ*, the Confucian exemplar whose role has been traced throughout this thesis (particularly in Chapter 3), further supports this reconstructive trajectory. The *jūnzǐ* is not defined by birth, wealth, or gender, but by ethical cultivation, relational attunement, and ritual competence. As the thesis has argued, there is nothing within the conceptual

structure of the *jūnzǐ* that requires gender exclusivity. Feminist Confucianism can therefore reclaim the aspiration to *jūnzǐ*-hood as a shared human task: the pursuit of moral refinement through sustained and responsive participation in relational life.

In summary, this thesis has argued that the feminist reinterpretation of Confucian relational ethics requires a double movement: the critical rejection of inherited patriarchal structures, and the creative retrieval of the tradition's dynamic, relational core. Through close engagement with key thinkers, historical developments, and core ethical concepts such as *rén*, *lǐ*, and the *jūnzǐ*, this study has shown that Confucianism can be reinterpreted to sustain a feminist vision of ethical and political life—one rooted not in hierarchy or obedience, but in care, mutual cultivation, and the shared moral agency of all persons. Such a vision affirms that Confucian relational ethics, far from being a relic of feudal order, can remain a living resource for reimagining human relationships in a pluralistic and interdependent world.

#### 7.4.5 Limitations of the Thesis and Future Critical Work

No philosophical project can avoid recognising its own constraints. While this thesis has sought to revitalise Confucian relational ethics as a living resource for addressing contemporary ethical, educational, and civic crises, it must be acknowledged that the scope of this inquiry remains primarily theoretical. Several important limitations arise: the absence of empirical application, the selective engagement with Confucian traditions, the initial stages of feminist integration, and the challenge of transplanting relational role ethics into pluralistic modern societies. Reflecting on these limitations is not merely an academic obligation; it is a continuation of the Confucian spirit of critical self-cultivation and continuous moral striving (cf. *Analects* 2.4, discussed in Chapter 3).

The first major limitation lies in the thesis's focus on philosophical reconstruction rather than practical application. Throughout the study—particularly in Chapters 4 and 5—the argument has centred on recovering the conceptual resources of Confucian relational ethics: namely, the interdependent constitution of the self, the formative role of *lǐ* (ritual propriety), and the vision of ethical life as dynamic relational striving. However, the thesis does not extend to empirical exploration of how these insights might be operationalised within real-world educational systems, leadership frameworks, or civic practices. As discussed in Section 7.4.3, while modern character education initiatives such as the Jubilee Centre's *Namian Virtues* programme seek to integrate virtue into pedagogical contexts through literary engagement and self-reflection, they often fall short by overlooking the formative role of relational and ritual contexts in moral cultivation. Future

research must therefore move beyond philosophical synthesis to explore applied models—piloting and evaluating educational experiments explicitly grounded in Confucian relational and ritual-centred ethics. Such research would offer critical insight into the extent to which Confucian models can cultivate genuine ethical responsiveness, rather than merely promoting procedural virtue literacy.

A second limitation concerns the inevitable selectivity with which Confucian sources have been treated. While the thesis has focused primarily on the early Confucian canon—Confucius, Mencius, and to a lesser extent Xunzi—and on modern New Confucian thinkers such as Tu Weiming, Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames, this necessarily leaves unaddressed the full complexity and diversity of Confucian traditions across history. While this chapter has drawn on core themes from Confucian ritual theory, the metaphysical elaboration of *lǐ* and moral cultivation in Neo-Confucianism—particularly Zhu Xi’s cosmological synthesis of *lǐ* (principle) and *qì* (vital force)—has only been touched upon. As Wing-tsit Chan (1988) and others have noted, Zhu Xi’s system sought to ground ethical practice in a metaphysical structure, transforming ritual into a vehicle of cosmic alignment. However, the normative implications of this synthesis—especially its role in naturalising social and gender hierarchies—remain complex and warrant deeper philosophical treatment beyond the scope of this study (cf. Chapter 5). Moreover, later developments, including Korean, Japanese, and contemporary global Confucian movements, lie outside the scope of the thesis. Each of these traditions introduces important nuances concerning the role of metaphysics, cosmology, and political theory within relational ethics. A fuller account would require tracing how Confucian relational ethics has been diversely articulated, contested, and reformulated across different cultural and historical contexts, thereby enriching the resources available for contemporary critical engagement.

Thirdly, while the thesis has begun the necessary work of engaging feminist critiques of Confucianism, this remains an initial foray rather than a comprehensive integration. As discussed in Section 7.4.4, feminist scholars such as Rosenlee (2006) have argued that Confucian relationality, disentangled from its patriarchal distortions, can provide a compelling framework for egalitarian ethics. The emphasis on dynamic relational attunement and mutual responsiveness aligns, at least potentially, with feminist ethics of care. Yet the historical entrenchment of gendered hierarchies within Confucian practice—evident in traditional mourning rituals, filial norms, and the exclusion of women from *jūnzǐ* cultivation—poses conceptual challenges that cannot be resolved by mere reinterpretation. As shown in Chapters 4 and 5, these structures were not only embedded in social convention but were often justified by metaphysical appeals to *yīn-yáng* and *nèi-wài* as

expressions of a cosmic moral order. The thesis has proposed a critical reimagining of rituals and role ethics to support mutual flourishing across gendered lines, but further philosophical work is needed to reconstruct foundational categories such as *xiào* (filial reverence), *lǐ*, and *rén* in explicitly feminist terms. In addition, a more extensive engagement with feminist care theorists such as Nel Noddings (2003)—whose relational models of ethics both resonate with and depart from Confucian conceptions—would be essential to a fuller, more critical synthesis.

A further limitation concerns the transplantation of Confucian role ethics into pluralistic and liberal modern societies. As developed in Section 7.4.2, Confucian ethics presupposes a relatively cohesive cultural matrix in which the significance of roles and rituals is shared and internalised across generations. In fragmented, mobile, and highly pluralistic societies, such assumptions no longer hold. The ethical content of roles—what it means to be a good parent, citizen, or friend—is contested, and traditional rituals often lack the resonance they possessed in Confucius' time. As David Wong (2004) has argued, relational ethics must adapt flexibly to cultural pluralism without losing its normative force. The thesis has suggested that the underlying virtues of relational sensitivity, responsiveness, and ritual cultivation can be preserved even as specific roles and rituals are reinterpreted (cf. Chapter 5), but this remains a philosophical proposal. Further work must explore how Confucian relational ethics can operate pragmatically within multicultural contexts without either collapsing into relativism or imposing homogenised ethical visions.

Finally, the thesis acknowledges that while Confucian relational ethics provides a profound critique of procedural individualism and moral cognitivism, it has yet to fully develop a political theory adequate to contemporary demands for justice, rights, and institutional fairness. As discussed in Chapter 5, liberal political theory—despite certain limitations—has developed powerful tools for safeguarding individual dignity against domination. Confucian relational ethics, with its emphasis on role-based obligations and graded love (cf. *Mencius* 3A:5; *Analects* 1.6), may risk insufficient attention to the need for impartial protections across diverse relational contexts. Contemporary scholars have proposed Confucian models of democracy that integrate relational ethics with political liberalism, but these remain contested and in development. Future research must therefore continue to ask how Confucian relational ethics can underpin not only personal and communal flourishing but also political institutions that respect equality, protect against coercion, and foster deliberative inclusivity.

In reflecting upon these limitations, the thesis remains committed to the Confucian ethos of continuous learning and self-cultivation. Confucius' own life trajectory—a ceaseless striving

towards greater ethical understanding without resting in static self-satisfaction (*Analects* 2.4)—provides the appropriate model. If the Confucian project of moral renewal is to survive and flourish in the modern world, it must embrace this same spirit: recognising its historical burdens, critically reinterpreting its core insights, and continuously engaging with new social, political, and philosophical challenges. As Tu Weiming (2024) affirms, Confucianism must be understood not as a static doctrine but as a continuing conversation—an open, evolving tradition capable of sustaining ethical life amidst the complexities of global modernity. Rather than seeing these limitations as undermining the thesis's contribution, they should be seen as invitations: to further empirical inquiry, deeper historical engagement, more radical feminist and political reinterpretations, and courageous experiments in enacting relational and ritual ethics in contemporary life. Only through such sustained, critical, and imaginative work can the profound ethical possibilities of Confucianism be fully realised in our time.

## **7.5 Vision for the Future**

The reinterpretation of Confucian ethics undertaken in this thesis is not intended as an exercise in historical exegesis alone, but as a contribution to the living project of reimagining ethical life in the contemporary world. In a time marked by fragmentation, disillusionment, and moral confusion, the Confucian vision of relational self-cultivation, ritualised ethical practice, and dynamic moral striving offers profound resources for education, leadership, and civic renewal. Yet the application of these insights must proceed with sensitivity to contemporary realities, including the demands of pluralism, gender justice, and global interconnectedness. What follows, therefore, is not a blueprint, but a set of reflections on how Confucian relational ethics might inform future practices and research agendas in the pursuit of a more humane, just, and flourishing world.

First, the future of education must be radically rethought if it is to meet the ethical challenges of our time. As discussed in Chapter 1, modern educational institutions have largely become credentialing machines, rewarding technical competence and strategic acumen while neglecting the formation of moral character (Connell, 2013; Nussbaum, 2010). Against this backdrop, Confucian education offers a radically different *telos*: the cultivation of the whole person through practices that integrate intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and moral development. Education, in the Confucian sense, is not preparation for employment alone, nor even for citizenship in the procedural sense; it is preparation for life as a relational, ethical being. This demands curricula that do not merely add 'ethics modules' as adjuncts to technical instruction, but that embed moral cultivation into every

dimension of learning: through the cultivation of attentiveness, reflective practice, ritualised interaction, and relational responsibility.

Concrete educational reforms inspired by Confucian principles might include the reimagining of classrooms as communities of relational learning rather than sites of competitive achievement. Teachers would be seen not primarily as transmitters of information but as moral exemplars, embodying the virtues they seek to cultivate in their students—a vision consistent with Confucius' own understanding of the educator as a model of ethical life. Assessment would shift from narrow standardised testing toward evaluations of relational maturity, reflective depth, and moral discernment. Ritual practices—adapted to local cultural contexts—might be reintegrated into educational life, not as empty ceremonies but as meaningful practices of recognition, gratitude, and communal attunement. The goal would not be the production of technically skilled individuals alone, but of *jūnzǐ*-like persons: human beings capable of acting with wisdom, care, and integrity across the full range of their relationships.

Secondly, leadership must also be re-envisioned through the lens of Confucian relational ethics. As analysed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5, contemporary leadership models, particularly within political and corporate spheres, often valorise strategic competence, charisma, and rhetorical effectiveness over moral character. Leaders are too often rewarded for their ability to dominate, manipulate, and perform, rather than for their capacity to embody and foster ethical life. In stark contrast, the Confucian model insists that true leadership flows from moral exemplarity (*dé* 德), relational attunement, and the ability to cultivate harmony without effacing diversity (*hé* 和) (Chapter 3).

In practice, this would require a profound cultural shift in how leadership is conceptualised, cultivated, and evaluated. Leadership development programmes might focus less on strategic planning and more on self-cultivation practices, relational ethics, and the embodiment of sincerity and benevolence. Criteria for political or organisational leadership could include demonstrated commitment to relational responsibility, long-term community flourishing, and the consistent practice of ethical discernment under conditions of complexity. Leadership would no longer be measured by metrics of visibility, profitability, or electoral success alone, but by the capacity to sustain the moral ecology of the communities one serves. Moreover, a Confucian-inspired leadership ethic would challenge the hyper-individualism of modern political discourse, reasserting that to lead is not to dominate, but to nurture the flourishing of others through one's own exemplary practice.

Civic life, too, stands to be revitalised by the insights of Confucian relational ethics. As thinkers such as Bauman in his *Liquid Modernity* (2000) and Sandel in *Tyranny of Merit* (2020) have argued, the erosion of communal bonds and the ascendancy of individualism have left modern societies morally fragmented and politically paralysed. Confucianism offers a compelling alternative: civic flourishing arises not from isolated self-interest or abstract proceduralism, but from the dense, often uncelebrated practices of relational care, mutual recognition, and communal responsibility. The health of a polity depends not only on institutional design but also on the moral character of its citizens and the quality of their relationships. Revitalising civic life thus requires a reinvigoration of everyday rituals of respect, gratitude, and responsibility—practices that cultivate the relational awareness and ethical responsiveness essential to democratic life.

While this thesis has centred on moral cultivation, it recognises that ethical education is inseparable from political formation. Schools are not neutral instructional spaces, but sites of shared moral purpose and participatory democratic life (Fielding, 2012). A Confucian ethic of role-based care and relational responsibility thus offers not a retreat from democracy, but a foundation for renewing it. Moral personhood, in this framework, is the ground of civic agency: the capacity to act politically emerges not from procedural abstraction, but from cultivated attentiveness, ritualised care, and embodied responsiveness to others. In the school context, ‘ritualised interaction’ refers to recurring, structured practices—such as morning assemblies, daily greetings, collaborative classroom set-up, shared meals, or reflective closing circles—that embody mutual respect, nurture attentiveness, and sustain the relational bonds that undergird both moral and civic life. Confucian thought affirms that the school is a formative public institution—one that can help restore democratic seriousness through the slow cultivation of ethical and relational life.

Community-based initiatives inspired by Confucian ethics might include rituals of civic welcome and farewell (such as ceremonies that symbolically mark a new neighbour’s arrival or a long-time resident’s departure), public commemorations that honour relational virtues (like community festivals celebrating caregivers, mentors, or peacemakers), and spaces for communal reflection and dialogue (such as neighbourhood councils or public forums designed to cultivate collective wisdom rather than adversarial contestation). Such practices need not replicate traditional Confucian forms uncritically; rather, they can be creatively adapted to contemporary pluralistic contexts, preserving the animating spirit of *li* while respecting diverse cultural forms. The guiding question would be: how can we reweave the fabric of civic life through practices that honour and nurture our shared humanity? Future research directions suggested by this thesis are manifold.

One urgent area concerns the empirical exploration of Confucian-inspired educational and civic experiments. Pilot programmes in schools, universities, or community organisations could test the feasibility and efficacy of relational moral education grounded in ritual practice and reflective cultivation. Such initiatives could be studied longitudinally to assess their impact on students' moral reasoning, relational capacities, and civic engagement.

Another vital research direction involves the gender-sensitive reinterpretation of Confucian concepts. As noted in Chapter 5, while the relational anthropology of Confucianism offers resources for resisting certain tendencies within Western autonomy models that privilege atomistic individualism, it has also historically been implicated in gender asymmetries and patriarchal norms. Future work must therefore continue the project of re-reading Confucian texts and practices through feminist and intersectional lenses, uncovering resources for more inclusive and egalitarian articulations of relational ethics. This may involve critical retrievals of marginalised voices within the tradition, creative re-interpretations of familial and civic roles, and the re-articulation of *xiào*, *lǐ*, and *rén* in ways that affirm mutuality, reciprocity, and shared moral agency across gendered and generational lines. Finally, philosophical work remains to be done in elaborating the theoretical implications of Confucian relational ethics for broader debates in moral philosophy, political theory, and educational thought. The relational conception of selfhood developed here challenges dominant assumptions not only in ethics but also in theories of rights, justice, and autonomy. Future scholarship might explore, for example, the implications of Confucian relationalism for debates about multiculturalism, social solidarity, and environmental ethics, where the interconnectedness of beings is a foundational concern.

In envisioning these futures, it is crucial to recall that Confucian ethics offers not a completed system, but a tradition of dynamic, situated, and evolving moral reflection. As this thesis has argued throughout, the power of Confucian thought lies not in its ability to deliver fixed solutions, but in its capacity to cultivate persons capable of responding wisely, creatively, and responsibly to the ever-changing moral demands of relational life. The *jūnzǐ* is not an ideal frozen in time, but a living model of ethical becoming, an embodiment of the enduring human possibility of moral excellence through relational and ritualised striving. Thus, the future of Confucian ethics is not behind us, sealed in the past, but ahead of us, beckoning through the urgent ethical questions of our time. It invites us to ask, not merely what norms or rules we should follow, but what kinds of persons we ought to become, and what kinds of relationships we ought to nurture, if we are to live well together in ways that honour our shared humanity and sustain the fragile, beautiful world we inhabit. To illustrate how these broad philosophical insights might find concrete expression within contemporary

educational settings, the following section sketches a practical framework for cultivating moral presence in pluralistic schools, drawing on Confucian relational and ritual-based ethics.

In reframing the canon as a site of ethical-aesthetic formation across traditions, one might move away from a closed Confucian curriculum toward a curated, cross-cultural selection of poetry, music, and ritual forms that refine ethical sensibility. Just as the *Shijing* (*Book of Songs*) was not taught for information but for moral rhythm, so too can contemporary students engage diverse traditions that attune feeling to form: reciting Tagore alongside Confucius, listening to the African *kora* alongside the Chinese *guqin*, reflecting on the American poet Langston Hughes alongside Du Fu.<sup>116</sup> Memorisation and recitation, long devalued in modern pedagogy, could be carefully restored—not for rote performance, but to allow ethical cadences to take root in the *xīn* (heart-mind).<sup>117</sup>

Ritual practices, understood as micro-forms of ethical attention, can reshape the classroom not as a space of mere instruction but as a field of cultivated presence. *Lǐ* (ritual) shaped daily life in classical Confucianism not as rigid custom but as ontological choreography—inviting individuals into forms of reverence and care. In a contemporary British secondary school setting, these practices are most effective when they build on what students already value—like feeling seen, supported, and connected to one another. For example, during tutor time or PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) lessons, students might begin with a brief check-in—sharing something positive from their week or a song that’s resonating with them. Before group projects, teachers could prompt a short discussion on how to ensure everyone’s voice is heard and valued, drawing on students’ own ideas for fair and inclusive collaboration. In assemblies, schools might include a ‘gratitude spotlight’ where students nominate peers who have shown kindness or helpfulness. Rather than imposing formal rituals, these practices—co-created by students—can foster an atmosphere of attentiveness, kindness, and mutual respect. Rooted in the spirit of

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<sup>116</sup> Both Du Fu (8th-century Tang poet) and Hughes (20th-century African American poet) use poetry to bear witness to suffering and injustice, giving voice to the marginalised and elevating the moral and relational dimensions of everyday life. Their work exemplifies the convergence of aesthetic form and ethical responsibility across cultures.

<sup>117</sup> Tu Weiming argues that rote memorisation lays the foundation for deeper understanding. In traditional Confucian education, students began studying the *Zhong-Yong* as early as the age of eight, first committing the text to memory before gradually coming to appreciate its inner logic through personal reflection—without imposing preconceived interpretations (Tu 1989: 11). For these students, recitation—often misconstrued as unthinking rote learning—was a long and rigorous process intended to integrate cognitive and experiential dimensions, fostering a holistic vision. Confucian recitation, as William Sin (2020: 219) observes, was not merely rote: it involved ‘emotive immersion, and certain bodily engagements, such as the use of the voice in recital,’ extending beyond a purely rational inquiry. Such complete immersion of mind and body in study enabled rigorous thinking and moral cultivation.

Confucian relational ethics, these small, student-led practices help cultivate a more caring and collaborative school culture, even in a pluralistic and diverse setting.

Teacher formation, understood as presence as moral pedagogy, lies at the heart of Confucian educational thought. Confucian pedagogy insists that the teacher's way of being—her coherence of gesture, tone, and silence—is itself the primary medium of moral education. Thus, professional development must move beyond technical skill to the cultivation of ethical presence. Workshops could focus on attentive listening, disciplined silence, and relational responsiveness—training teachers not merely to manage classrooms, but to inhabit them with moral gravity. Here, Iris Murdoch's (1970) claim that we are what we attend to finds practical enactment: the teacher's gaze itself becomes formative.

Shared rituals among staff—small acts of collective attentiveness and mutual respect—could further root teaching in communal presence rather than procedural compliance. In this way, the vocation of teaching would be renewed as a form of continuous ethical self-cultivation, resisting the market logics that reduce education to service delivery. Yet, as Lapsley and Woodbury (2016) and Sanderse and Cooke (2021) argue, the moral dimension of teaching is often overshadowed by performative pressures and a narrow focus on subject knowledge. Indeed, studies show that many UK teachers themselves feel ill-equipped for this dimension of their role. While they intuitively see moral formation as central to teaching, they report that their initial teacher education rarely addresses this directly—focusing instead on subject mastery and classroom management. Lacking explicit training or a shared moral vocabulary, teachers are left to navigate these ethical complexities through personal intuition and experience alone (Sanderse & Cooke, 2021). The crowded, outcome-driven curricula in British schools leave little room for sustained ethical reflection, and teacher education programmes often prioritise content mastery and measurable outcomes over relational ethics (Orchard, 2021). Promising initiatives such as 'Philosophy for Teachers' (P4T) and 'Shared Space' demonstrate that dialogical, experiential approaches can nurture moral reflection and relational ethics among teachers, yet these remain marginal rather than central.

The implication is clear: whether teachers like it or not, they are, by their very vocation, moral exemplars. What they do—or do not do—matters. Their presence, gestures, and relational practices shape the ethical atmosphere of the classroom and the broader school community. For the Confucian tradition, a teacher is not a neutral manager, nor a moralising figurehead, but a participant in the shared work of becoming human. Carr (1993) highlights that moral development

is not an optional extra for teachers, as it might be for lawyers or surgeons—it is fundamental to their work. In this view, the teacher’s moral life is not an added asset but the very ground of her practice. She does not model virtue as a performance; she embodies it as a way of being. Her authority is thus ontological, rooted not in credentials but in the visible coherence between what she *is* and what she *does*. To truly reanimate the role of the teacher as moral exemplar, teacher education must prepare and impress upon future teachers that moral formation is not an optional add-on but an inescapable dimension of their professional identity. Only by recognising this and cultivating spaces for ethical reflection and relational practice can teachers inhabit their classrooms with the moral gravity that Confucian ethics, and indeed any humane pedagogy, demands.

Integrating Confucian values into diverse schools requires framing them not as cultural doctrines but as practical pathways to relational moral formation. For example:

- **Rén (仁):** Encourage weekly reflection on how one’s actions have supported or strained communal life, fostering relational attentiveness.
- **Yi (義):** Use open-ended role plays to help students navigate moral dilemmas without prescriptive rules, cultivating ethical discernment and contextual judgment.
- **Xin (信):** Assign small commitments—such as maintaining a classroom task for a month—to reinforce integrity through the alignment of word and deed.
- **Lǐ (禮):** Establish simple, non-religious rituals—greetings, expressions of thanks, and intentional closures—to embed care and respect into daily routines.

In all cases, the emphasis is on forming ethically responsive persons through embodied practice, rather than imposing cultural norms.

Anticipating challenges such as formalism and cultural appropriation is essential when adapting Confucian insights into contemporary pedagogy. Two dangers must be vigilantly resisted. First, the risk of formalism: rituals becoming hollow gestures unless continually reanimated by sincerity (*chéng*). As Confucius warned, without *rén*, *lǐ* and music lose their moral substance (*Analects* 3:3). Second, the risk of cultural exoticism: presenting Confucian forms as alien rather than as converging with practices of reverence found across human traditions. Teachers must frame rituals and practices as invitations to ethical presence, not performances of cultural identity. By navigating these tensions with humility and attentiveness, educators can adapt Confucian insights into a living pedagogy—one that refuses both relativism and rigid orthodoxy, and that sustains the possibility of moral seriousness in a fractured world. In this way, the *jūnzǐ* may yet find new life—not as a figure of cultural nostalgia, but as a quiet guide for becoming human well in diverse and demanding times.

In the final measure, this thesis has sought to recover and reimagine the Confucian figure of the *jūnzǐ* not as a relic of a vanished civilisation, but as a living model for ethical life in a fractured and uncertain world. The *jūnzǐ* stands as a reminder that moral excellence is not a static achievement nor a personal possession, but a continual, dynamic process of relational cultivation, ritual participation, and ethical attunement. In contrast to modern images of the moral agent—the procedural calculator, the entrepreneurial self, the strategically rational citizen—the *jūnzǐ* embodies a mode of being rooted in care, responsiveness, and the aesthetic refinement of everyday life. Her journey is one of continual becoming, guided not by rigid doctrines or abstract principles, but by the sustained effort to integrate emotional discernment with one’s place in the world. This thesis does not propose a nostalgic return to idealised pasts, nor the wholesale adoption of ancient forms. Rather, it calls for a critical and creative engagement with the Confucian imagination—an effort to forge new forms of education, leadership, and civic life capable of nurturing relational dignity and ethical seriousness amidst the complexities of global modernity. The ethical future envisioned here is not one without conflict, uncertainty, or tragedy, but a future in which human beings, individually and collectively, embrace the slow and arduous task of becoming more fully human—together. As Confucius reminds us:

At fifteen, I set my heart upon learning;  
at thirty, I stood firm;  
at forty, I had no doubts;  
at fifty, I understood the decrees of Heaven;  
at sixty, my ear was obedient;  
  
at seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart  
without overstepping the bounds of right (*Analects* 2.4).

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## Appendix: Pinyin and Wade-Giles Romanization Systems

The following tables provide a comparative overview of the Pinyin and Wade-Giles romanization systems for Standard Mandarin Chinese. Pinyin, developed in the 1950s and officially adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1958, is now the international standard. Wade-Giles, a system created in the 19th century, was widely used in English-language texts before Pinyin's adoption. These tables include common examples and demonstrate the distinctions in representing consonants, vowels, and tones in each system.

**Table 1: Initials (Consonants)**

| Pinyin | Wade-Giles | Example (Pinyin) | Example (Wade-Giles) | Pinyin | Wade-Giles | Example (Pinyin) | Example (Wade-Giles) |
|--------|------------|------------------|----------------------|--------|------------|------------------|----------------------|
| b      | p          | bā (爸)           | pa (pa)              | q      | ch'        | qī (七)           | ch'i (ch'i)          |
| p      | p'         | pī (批)           | p'i (p'i)            | x      | hs         | xī (西)           | hsi (hsi)            |
| m      | m          | mā (妈)           | ma (ma)              | zh     | chih       | zhī (知)          | chih (chih)          |
| f      | f          | fā (发)           | fa (fa)              | ch     | ch'ih      | chī (吃)          | ch'ih (ch'ih)        |
| d      | t          | dī (低)           | ti (ti)              | sh     | shih       | shī (师)          | shih (shih)          |
| t      | t'         | tī (踢)           | t'i (t'i)            | r      | jih        | rì (日)           | jih (jih)            |
| n      | n          | nǎ (哪)           | na (na)              | z      | tz         | zī (资)           | tz (tz)              |
| l      | l          | lù (路)           | lu (lu)              | c      | tz'        | cī (次)           | tz' (tz')            |
| g      | k          | gē (哥)           | ke (ke)              | s      | s          | sī (思)           | ssu (ssu)            |
| k      | k'         | kē (科)           | k'e (k'e)            | y      | i / y      | yī (一)           | i (i) / yi (yi)      |
| h      | h          | hē (喝)           | ho (ho)              | w      | u / w      | wǔ (五)           | wu (wu)              |
| j      | ch         | jī (鸡)           | chi (chi)            |        |            |                  |                      |

**Table 2: Finals (Vowels & Codas)**

| Pinyin | Wade-Giles | Example (Pinyin) | Example (Wade-Giles) | Pinyin | Wade-Giles | Example (Pinyin) | Example (Wade-Giles) |
|--------|------------|------------------|----------------------|--------|------------|------------------|----------------------|
| a      | a          | mā (妈)           | ma (ma)              | ao     | ao         | hǎo (好)          | hao (hao)            |
| o      | o          | mò (末)           | mo (mo)              | ou     | ou         | dòu (豆)          | tou (tou)            |
| e      | e          | hē (喝)           | ho (ho)              | an     | an         | màn (慢)          | man (man)            |
| i      | i          | mǐ (米)           | mi (mi)              | en     | en         | mén (门)          | men (men)            |
| u      | u          | lù (路)           | lu (lu)              | ang    | ang        | bāng (帮)         | pang (pang)          |
| ü      | ü          | lǜ (绿)           | lü (lü)              | eng    | eng        | měng (猛)         | meng (meng)          |
| ai     | ai         | zài (在)          | tsai (tsai)          | ong    | ung        | dōng (东)         | tung (tung)          |
| ei     | ei         | měi (美)          | mei (mei)            | er     | erh        | ér (儿)           | erh (erh)            |

**Table 3: Four Tones Chart**

| Tone | Pinyin | Wade-Giles      | Example (Character) | Meaning |
|------|--------|-----------------|---------------------|---------|
| 1st  | mā     | ma <sup>1</sup> | 妈                   | mother  |
| 2nd  | má     | ma <sup>2</sup> | 麻                   | hemp    |
| 3rd  | mǎ     | ma <sup>3</sup> | 马                   | horse   |
| 4th  | mà     | ma <sup>4</sup> | 骂                   | scold   |