# On the Use and Abuse of Confucianism for Virtue Ethics

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(rough draft)

It is my task here to discuss the virtue ethics interpretation of Confucianism. Let me say, right away, that while I have done considerable work on Confucianism throughout the years, I am far from a specialist on virtue ethics.

However, I suspect that my former colleague, Kristján Kristjánsson, invited me to participate on this occasion with the expectation that I would argue agains the virtue ethics interpretation of Confucianism, and, perhaps, for the more recent role ethics interpretation as presented by Roger T. Ames, who happened to be my PhD supervisor over a decade ago.

I'm actually not sure whether I will fulfill these expectations. I am in principle not against the virtue ethics interpretation. On the contrary, I think it has quite some significant merits, while I still have some methodological reservations which I will discuss further. And I am not necessarily for the role ethics interpretation either. In my view, it suffers from some of the same problems – or rather dangers – as the virtue ethics interpretation. I will try to explain what I have in mind. It rests more upon the general problem of classifying or categorizing Confucianism than any distinct technical hermeneutic issues.

For those of us who do research on Chinese philosophy and would like to see more efforts made to engage it in a dialogue with Western thought, the relatively recent virtue ethics interpretation of Confucianism is largely to be celebrated. The not so long history of the reception of Chinese philosophy in the West includes some ups and downs for the Chinese half but has mostly been rather negative in the sense that Western philosophers have been reluctant to take it seriously as philosophy in its own right. In fact, whether China has philosophy or not is still to some extent a debated issue.

The virtue ethics interpretation has done much to foster interest in Chinese thought among Western philosophers. In this sense, Confucian virtue ethics has been a successful framework for interpreting early Confucian ideas. A number of prominent scholars such as May Sim and Yu Jiyuan have joined and made valuable contributions to the discussion, which has, among other things, stimulated the use of Confucianism in contemporary moral philosophy. The virtue ethics approach has also been a useful perspective for Westerners to read the Confucian Analects and understand Confucianism as such. It has been argued, for instance, that virtue ethics "will allow a beginning student swift access to pull together the seemingly disparate accounts found in the Analects, and thereby grasp the overarching

moral tenets of the Confucian tradition."[1] Generally speaking, therefore, it has been successful in the sense that it has presented early Confucianism as a philosophically interesting and relevant school of thought, emphasizing in particular those aspects of Confucianism that have been held against it by Western philosophers, namely its practical orientation and disinterest in universal principles.

Now, despite the general reluctance by Western thinkers to take Chinese philosophy seriously, there has been a number of attempts to compare Western philosophical insights with Chinese approaches, even identify the two as the 'same' in some sense of the word or integrate one with the other. Certainly, such efforts can be both meaningful and fruitful. A certain level of 'sameness' can, of course, also be assumed, as any thinker, whether European, American, Chinese or, for that matter, Greenlandic, refers to a reality that is common to all of us, not least from an ethical point of view, although cultural manifestations may differ in each case.

However, 'sameness' can be very deceptive. The Aristotelian philosophy, which forms the foundation for most virtue ethics interpretations, belongs to a culture that is certainly very different from ancient China, and is therefore sure to differ in its approaches. This is why one of the early founders of virtue ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre, put forth his incommensurability thesis, which his followers have since attempted to overcome. I will not discuss the incommensurability thesis here. In fact, I believe that the notion of 'incommensurability' is an unfortunate one, as it implies that there cannot be any meaningful communication between the traditions. I think this is wrong; there can be meaningful communication, and both traditions can learn from each other. But I also think that an assumption of 'sameness' can go too far in the other direction. Let me come back to this in a moment.

Confucianism has recently also been interpreted as role-ethics.[2] This particular interpretation focuses on the social aspect of Chinese thinking in general and Confucianism in particular, emphasizing the view found in the *Analects* and elsewhere that without at least two human beings, there can be no human being at all. I am tempted to see this as a fundamental point. Without a serious consideration of our social roles in the various stages of our lives, brought to expression through an ever more sophisticated mastery of social propriety (li 禮), virtues have no context in which to manifest themselves.

This is not to say that virtues are not important in Confucianism. They most certainly are. Perhaps one of the strongest argument for the importance of authentic virtues is found in the recently discovered *Wuxing* 五行 document, or *The Five Kinds of Conduct*, a pre-Qin text possibly written by Confucius's grandson, Zisizi, or his students, and excavated in Mawandgui for the first time in 1973, and again at Guodian in 1994. The Wuxing emphasizes

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[1] John Santiago (2008), "Confucian Ethics in the Analects as Virtue Ethics", in *Philosophical Ideas and Artistic Pursuits in the Traditions of Asia and the West: An NEH Faculty Humanities Workshop*, Paper 8, <http://dc.cod.edu/nehscholarship/8>, accessed online, November 29, 2014.

[2] See Roger T. Ames (2011), *Confucian Role Ethics. A Vocabulary*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.

the distinction between conduct that is merely externally appropriate and conduct proceeding from within. In its first paragraph it says that "[w]here communal humanity [ren 仁] takes shape from within, it is called virtuous conduct [de 德]; where it does not take shape within, it is called mere (proper) conduct."[3] The same argumentative pattern is then repeated in the passage about yi 義 (appropriate conduct), li 禮 (propriety), zhi 智 (wisdom), and sheng 聖 (sagacity), all of which are core Confucian notions that are sometimes interpreted as virtues. An important implication here is that actions executed with skill and authenticity, on the one hand, or by sheer imitation, on the other, are bound to be vastly and noticeably different. While the former are authentic, and thus de 德, or, perhaps, virtues, the latter will, quite literally, be hollow, as they are based on mere imitation of external form.[4] In this regard, there is some important emphasis on authentic moral excellence. However, if we simply understand them as laudable individual characteristics, they are more or less meaningless without the social environment in which they play themselves out. In this sense, role ethics provides an important corrective to the tendency inherent in virtue ethics to reduce ethical qualities to individual or psychological states. While Confucianism certainly celebrates acquired characteristics that we can probably justifiably call 'virtues', the strong emphasis on the performative dimension of the virtues themselves – that is to say that they must be manifested in social action – must also be taken into consideration.

A final issue – and I believe this is the main issue in my mind – concerns both virtue ethics and role ethics interpretation, and has to do with the search for the 'distinctiveness' or 'essence' of Confucian ethics. There is a strong tendency to want to pin down what Confucianism is once and for all. Virtue ethics and role ethics proponents argue about who is right and who is wrong. What is Confucianism? Here I am tempted to quote the ancient Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi:

> Suppose you and I get into a debate. If you win and I lose, does that really mean you are right and I am wrong? If I win and you lose, does that really mean I'm right and you're wrong? Must one of us be right and the other wrong? Or could both of us be right, or both of us wrong?[5]

I want to conclude by asking the following questions: must we find *one* approach that explains what Confucianism *is*? What do we mean when we say that Confucianism *is* this or *is* that? Would Confucians themselves be interested in finding some sort of essence that would 'explain' it? Has anyone asked the Confucians what they think about being understood as virtue ethicists – or, for that matter, role ethicists? Is this quest as such not an attempt to reduce it to some kind of theoretical endeavour? Wouldn't it be both realistic and eventually more fruitful to take the complex nature of Confucianism into consideration?

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[3] Li Ling 李零 (2002), Guodian Chu jian jiao du ji 郭店楚簡校讀記, Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, p. 78 §1.
[4] I discuss this further in my forthcoming book (February 2015), *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning. A Philosophical Interpretation*, Albany: SUNY Press.
[5] *Zhuangzi. The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (2009), transl. Brook Ziporyn, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, ch. 2, p. 19.

After all, the multifaceted role(s) that Confucianism has played in East Asia during the last two and a half millennia makes it very different from Aristotelianism, while Aristotle's philosophy certainly influenced Christianity and Western culture. Confucianism was much more all-embracing in Chinese and East Asian social, political, religious and artistic life. So I need to continue my questioning: are proponents of virtue ethics and role ethics perhaps overemphasizing certain aspects of Confucianism and reducing it to an ethical system? Considering the broad social application of Confucianism, perhaps we are even justified in questioning its definition as 'ethics' – for while ethics is in there, it is certainly much much more than that. I look forward to fruitful discussion on this and other issues with the audience.