Why Confucius's Ethics is a Virtue Ethics

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The question whether Confucius's view of ethics is a virtue ethics is in dispute. If virtue ethics is understood as an ethical theory that rivals others such as deontology and consequentialism in assessing the morality of actions (Tiwald 2010: 56; Huang 2005: 510), then some commentators would maintain that Confucius's account of morality in the *Analects*, cannot be classified as a virtue ethics as he was not even aware of such rival theories (Chong 2006: 60), or his ethics does not completely separate virtues from the rules (of ritual propriety, *li* 禮) (Liu 2006: 226, 228-230), nor separate virtues from duty (Lee 2013, 52-53) to be distinct enough to warrant the name of virtue ethics. Rather, some skeptics assert that Confucius's ethics is really a role ethics (Nuyen 2009; Rosemont and Ames 2009; Ames 2011). Some interpreters even point to Confucius's focus on the practical to preclude attributing any sort of ethical theory to him (Hansen 1992; Ames 2011: 164-165). On the contrary, if 'virtue ethics' were more loosely defined as an ethics that emphasizes the dispositions, character, motivation and virtues of the agent for evaluating morality, in short, an ethics that focuses on the agent's exemplary excellence, (Slote 2000, Santas 1993, Buckle 2002), then there are interpreters who agree that Confucius's ethics is a virtue ethics (Cua 2003; Huang 2005: 511; Tiwald 2010; Van Norden 2003; Van Norden 2013; Wilson 2001; Wong 2003).

Against skeptics who deny that Confucius offered a theoretical account of ethics, let alone a theory of virtue ethics that rivals those that endorse universal rules or principles for assessing moral actions, here are two responses: 1. Even though Confucius had never encountered a deontologist and a consequentialist, who would agree that there

are universal rules for determining all moral actions, it doesn't mean that he had not offered an account that would rival an approach like theirs if a comparison were made. If Confucius doesn't think that following a set of universal rules can lead to moral actions, and if he advocates a way that emphasizes the virtues for morality, then he has offered an account that rivaled the deontologists and consequentialists, regardless of whether his intention was to challenge their theories. 2. Just because Confucius emphasized the practical over the theoretical does not entail that he had nothing theoretical to offer in his ethics. Consider his contrasts between an exemplary person's (*junzi's* 君子) and a petty person's (*xiaoren's* 小人) behavior, and his remarks delineating the conditions of someone who possesses the highest virtue of humaneness (*ren* 仁, the graduated extension of love for one's own family to others in the community). Even if Confucius himself didn't organize such materials in a systematic way so as to present us with a 'thick' theory as Van Norden puts it, it's possible for interpreters to arrive at a coherent account that reflects a 'theory' of ethics, no matter how 'thin' it may be in comparison to an Aristotelian, Kantian or Utilitarian account (Van Norden 2003: 99-102).

Virtue ethics is commonly distinguished from Kantian deontology's emphasis on adhering to the categorical imperative (which asserts that an action is right if the maxim governing it can be willed to be a universal law), and from utilitarianism's principle of maximizing happiness for the greatest number of people, for assessing right actions. Contrary to these approaches, virtue ethics is characterized by its focus on how the agent's character enables her to act virtuously in particular situations; what's right cannot be captured in some universal principles as exemplified by its rivals. Instead of focusing

on the rightness of actions, or how the content of right actions can be prescribed by universal principles, virtue ethics is qualified by its holistic focus in which the agent's virtues of character not only constitute his goodness in particular situations but also lead to his having a flourishing life. In David Wong's words, virtue ethics "provides guidance to the individual primarily through description of ideal personhood and character traits to be realized rather than the application of general principles purporting to identify general characteristics of right or dutiful action" (2003: 52).

Let us consider how Confucius's ethics emphasizes an exemplary person's virtuous character to explain and assess morality in his *Analects*. This discussion will show that his ethics satisfies a loosely defined account of virtue ethics even if it isn't an explicit reaction to ethical theories like deontology and consequentialism. Not only does Confucius provide an account of the necessary virtues for morality, he also accounts for the cultivation of virtues. Getting clear about Confucius's views about the virtues will enable us to understand why his ethics is a type of virtue ethics and let us assess if some of the interpretations that deny this are defensible. That Confucius's virtue ethics can provide resources for the practice of social justice is a thesis I've defended in "Rethinking Virtue Ethics and Social Justice with Aristotle and Confucius" (2010). Likewise, I've shown in recent works that Confucius's focus on the virtues offers resources for securing human rights (2013a), and provides norms for our relations to economic goods and a sustainable relationship with our environment (2013b).

Confucius's exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) is truthful (*xin* 信) and does his best (*zhong* 忠) not only with respect to his own character, but also in relation to others.

Moreover, the *junzi* values knowledge (*zhi* 知) and learning (*xue* 學), acts with reciprocity (*shu* 恕), appropriateness (*yi* 義), and by according to the ritual proprieties (*li* 禮). Ultimately, the *junzi* possesses the highest virtue of humaneness (*ren* 仁).

More specifically, truthfulness (*xin* 信) is the virtue of living up to one's words. The importance of truthfulness is shown when Confucius said that one who is unable to make good on one's words is not viable as a person (2.22) and when he asserts that one who speaks glibly is the destroyer of states and families (17.18).[1] Being truthful is essential for gaining trust so essential to everything that we do whether we are dealing with relatives, relating to others in the community, serving the ruler or being the ruler of the state. Thus, Confucius includes truthfulness as one of the virtues in the way (*dao* 道) for leading a large state (1.5), or ruling well (13.4), and stresses it in how one should speak in the community (1.6) as well as in interactions with friends and colleagues (1.7). However, this doesn't mean that the virtue of trustworthiness is always achieved by following a universal rule such as 'always tell the truth'. This is evident in Confucius's disagreement with the Governor of She regarding what it means to be a true person (直 *zhi*) (13.18). Whereas the governor thought that the villager in his state who reported his father's theft of a sheep was a true person, Confucius thought that a son who covered for his father, or a father who covered for his son under such circumstances is more exemplary of a true person.

In defense of Confucius's recommendation about how relatives would mutually

cover up each other's crimes, one could imagine that by not reporting the father's theft, Confucius doesn't mean that the son shouldn't be truthful with his father regarding his theft. Rather, it means that the son should do what is appropriate (*yi* 義) in the situation. This might entail his returning the sheep on his father's behalf if the father's theft were due to, say, dementia, and then speaking with his father about his illness and what they should do to prevent such actions in the future. As Rosemont and Ames put it, "The Confucian tradition is preemptive in trying to establish a social fabric that would reduce the possibility of crime, rather than adjudicating hard cases after the fact" (2008: 18). Such a response would be preferable to turning in his father to be punished, which penal response Confucius disapproves because of his skepticism regarding its effectiveness for correcting anyone. Instead of punitive measures that would only lead the offender to try to avoid punishments without stopping his vice, Confucius thinks that leading others through one's own exemplary virtue (*de* 德), would be more effective as this would shame the offender into ordering himself (2.3). Note that such a response by the son would not only be just, and thus appropriate for the victim, by returning what had been stolen, but appropriate (*yi* 義) for the father, by maintaining the respect he is owed, yet addressing his vice. Such a harmonizing response isn't something at which one could arrive by appealing to an agent-neutral universal principle like 'act in such a way that the maxim of your action can become a universal law' or 'maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. With respect to the categorical imperative, the sort of response between a father and son isn't one that is universalizable to everyone else. By the same token, one could imagine that the consequentialist response of maximizing pleasure or

happiness might preclude the son's addressing the father's vice or dementia, given the potential unpleasant consequences such an act would incur. The defect of the deontological and consequential approaches through their respective universal principles is clear as Angle puts it, "According to the Confucian model of ethical judgment . . . thinking about our responsibilities in terms of 'maximizing' a single value . . . stripped bare from context and from all other related values, is a deeply impoverished approach to our ethical lives" (Angle 2008: 39). Thus, an emphasis on the virtue of truthfulness or trust in a virtue ethics framework is multiply relative to: the agent's own excellence, the particularity of his situation (or the specific problem he is to address), his relationships with those toward whom his action is directed, and the actions that are appropriate. Only a virtuous agent has the resources to carry out the virtue of truthfulness correctly given these relativities.

In the example of the son's appropriate response to his father's criminal activity, we can also see an illustration of the Confucian virtue of doing one's best (*zhong* 忠) that concerns one's character cultivation and relationships with others within and outside the family. More elaborately, Master Zeng examines himself everyday about three subjects. He says, "In my undertakings on behalf of other people, have I failed to do my best (*zhong* 忠)? In my interactions with colleagues and friends, have I failed to make good on my word (*xin* 信)? In what has passed on to me, have I failed to carry it into practice?" (1.4). In all three subjects of self-reflection, the examination is about Master Zeng's own character regarding whether he has practiced the virtues of doing his best for others, being truthful, or acting on his responsibilities. As such, his self-reflection exemplifies

doing his best with respect to himself by cultivating himself to become an exemplary individual who possesses humaneness.

In the above example about the son's appropriate behavior toward his father and the victim of theft, insofar as he exhibited truthfulness (*xin* 信) by returning the sheep and did his best (*zhong* 忠) for the victim by this reparation, and for his father by respecting him and preventing him from future thefts, he is also doing his best to be a good person by acting virtuously and appropriately in a situation. Hence, doing one's best (*zhong* 忠) is not only the virtue, along with truthfulness, on which Confucius encourages his disciples to focus (1.8), but it's also the virtue, along with reciprocity (*shu* 恕), which make up the 'one thread' that characterizes Confucius's way (*dao* 道) (4.15). If virtue ethics is focused on an agent's dispositions, motivation, virtues and character, then Confucius's emphasis on doing one's best not only for others, but for one's own cultivation through self-examination, not only fits the framework of virtue ethics, but rightly emphasizes the significance of one's motivation and efforts in acquiring the virtues for such an ethical theory.

Of all the virtues that are important for Confucius's ethics, reciprocity (*shu* 恕), which means not doing to others what we do not wish others to do to us, or the 'silver rule', seems most like one of the universal principles that characterizes the ethical theories of deontologists and consequentialists. When Zigong asked, "Is there one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one's days?", Confucius responded

with, "There is *shu* 恕: do not impose on others what you yourself do not want" (15.24, see also 5.12 and 12.2). This exchange regarding *shu* makes it sound like a rule that can govern all ethical actions. I've discussed in detail (2007: 41-45) why even though reciprocity (*shu* 恕) seems to help us determine moral actions independently of virtues, traditional rules of ritual proprieties, and exemplary persons as models, reciprocity alone will not lead us to moral actions if the agent is not moral. This is because reciprocity alone won't prevent an agent from doing something immoral to get what he wants if he thought that he could guard himself against similar immoral acts from others, e.g., he'd opt to use force to get what he wants if he thought that he could always overcome force from others. As I've put it, "the [silver] rule itself presupposes a standard of morality in order to be effective" (2007: 42). Similarly, I think that Wang Qingjie's attempt to explicate reciprocity as "interpersonal care and love" that acts as the basis for other Confucian virtues like *zhong* 忠, *xin* 信 and *li* 禮, succumbs to the same criticism that reciprocity itself doesn't offer us a standard for action (1999). Wang translates *shu* as following "each individual's heart/mind" (1999: 423). However, because he emphasizes the heart instead of the mind, he elevates emotional love, starting with love for one's own family, as the foundation of all virtues. Love alone, especially for the family, as Liu Qingping has pointed out, is the source of "theoretical defects and practical evils of Confucianism" (2007: 16). This is because Liu maintains that when kinship love conflicts with the ideal of humaneness (*ren* 仁, which is family love that's extended in a graduated manner to the community), priority must be accorded the former, thus

sacrificing the latter. In Liu's words, "the core of my criticism has always been that, because Confucianism regards kinship love as the ultimate principle of human life and prefers to sacrifice anything else to maintain this particular affection, its universal ideal of loving all humans will not be realized when it conflicts with kinship love" (2007: 16). Even though Liu is critical of Confucianism's elevation of kinship love, he and Wang are agreed that kinship love is foundational and fundamental. I'll show later that even though kinship love may be prior in time for the cultivation of the virtues, it isn't prior in principle to Confucius's understanding of humaneness (*ren* 仁) as the standard of morality.

There is no doubt that the traditional ritual proprieties (*li* 禮) are key to one's becoming virtuous for Confucius, with precedence accorded to the rituals associated with filial piety (*xiao* 孝, the respect and obedience owed to one's parents and elders). This emphasis is clear in the discussion about kinship love above. In general, ritual proprieties prescribe the proper behavior toward one's relatives, superiors, subordinates, peers and community members, to discipline oneself; a requirement for becoming humane (*ren* 仁) (9.11, 12.1). Knowing the proper behavior for one's different roles and relationships leads to harmony (*he* 和). In Master You's words, "Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮). In the ways of the former Kings, this achievement of harmony made them elegant, and was a guiding standard in all things large and small" (1.12). The reason why the rituals of filiality governing expressions of

love, respect and obedience for parents and elders is so significant is because we are closest to our family, and most likely to experience first, in this context, the love and care that is to be extended to the larger community that defines the virtue of humaneness. Cultivating the proper rituals of relating to our family is for Confucius, the way to cultivate the rituals of love and care with others in the communal context, in short, harmony. In Master You's words, "It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial and fraternal piety (*xiaodi* 孝弟) to have a taste for defying authority. And it is unheard of for those who have no taste for defying authority to be keen on initiating rebellion. Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way (*dao* 道) will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal piety, it is, I suspect, the root of humaneness (*ren* 仁)" (1.2, with modifications).

Not only do the rituals enable someone to cultivate the virtues, they also inspire others to become virtuous (1.9, 15.33, 8.2). There's something magical about someone who accords with the rituals. Arguing against the necessity of capital punishment in effective government, Confucius says, "what need is there for killing? If you want to be truly good (*shan* 善), the people will also be good. The excellence (*de* 德) of the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) is the wind, while that of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend" (12.19). Moreover, Confucius maintains that only someone who is humane can accord with the rituals in his actions (3.3). What's distinctive about the observance of ritual propriety for Confucius is that it's not just the

adherence to a set of rules like adhering to the utilitarian principle or the categorical imperative. Rather, additional character traits so significant to virtue ethics are constitutive of Confucius's ethics. More specifically, he stresses character traits like having the right dispositions, motivations and emotions in adhering to the rituals. For example, in discussing the ritual of mourning, Confucius insists on expressing real grief rather than obsessing about the formal details (3.4). Likewise, he maintains that what's important in sacrificial ceremonies is the investment of oneself, saying, "If I myself do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as though I have not sacrificed at all" (3.12). Again, he criticizes those who just go through the motions in observing rituals. He does so by comparing the people who think that filial piety consists in merely the act of providing for their parents, to how even dogs and horses are accorded that much care (2.7). In contrast, he stresses having the right motives (2.10) and countenance (2.8) in the performance of virtuous actions.

As is clear from this discussion, what is virtuous for Confucius isn't something that can be accomplished by merely going through the motions of ritual proprieties. Contrariwise, carrying out the rituals with the right motives, attitudes, personal investment and emotional feelings are required. Such qualities of character cannot be achieved by just following the letter of the rules of propriety. What's required is the right spirit, which no universal rule can command. Given these extra conditions that must accompany the observance of ritual proprieties, Liu Yuli is mistaken to think that Confucius's ethics is simply a combination of virtues and rules (2006), which misunderstanding led her to deny that Confucius's ethics is a virtue ethics, which she took to preclude any rules. Unlike the rule of Kant's categorical imperative that is devoid

of emotions, Confucius's ritual proprieties insist on the display of right emotions. By the same token, unlike the utilitarian rule that ignores the agent's motivation and focuses only on the consequences of the action, Confucius's ritual proprieties must issue from the right motivations. Thus, even if we can speak of rules of propriety for Confucius, they are so different from the rules that govern deontologists and consequentialists that there's no risk that the rules of propriety should make Confucius's account of ethics akin to the rule-governed moral theories.

Closely related to how character traits like the above cannot be achieved by universal principles is Confucius's view of what's right or appropriate (*yi* 義). *Yi* too cannot be captured by universal rules that apply to everyone and all situations. Rather, as Confucius puts it, "Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (*yi* 義)" (4.10). That the virtues are what appropriateness aims at is clear in this passage: "If on seeing a chance to profit, [complete persons], [*chengren* 成人, i.e., those possessing humaneness] think of appropriateness (*yi* 義), on seeing danger they are ready to give their lives, and when long in desperate straits, they still do not forget the words they live by—such persons can also be said to be complete" (14.12). Again, Confucius says, "wealth and position gained through inappropriate (*buyi* 不義) means—these are to me like floating clouds" (7.16). Generalizing from these passages, appropriateness seems to be about external goods that could benefit us, like profit, safety, wealth and honor.

External goods such as these, which are coveted by the many, tempt one to stray from the virtue of appropriateness, which depending on the situation at hand, call for fairness, courage, truthfulness or doing one's best to be appropriate. Right judgment then, about what is called for in particular situations is required, instead of just applying universal rules regardless of one's roles and relations.

In addition to cultivating oneself by observing the ritual proprieties that contribute to our ability to make right judgments about what's appropriate, knowledge and learning too help with right judgments. More specifically, knowledge (*zhi* 知) is to know what one knows and doesn't know (2.17, 19.5). Such knowledge, in turn, enables one to learn (*xue* 學) what one doesn't know. Love of learning (*haoxue* 好學) is a virtue for Confucius, which is exemplified by those who associate with others who know the way (*dao* 道) in order to improve themselves (1.14). In fact, Confucius thinks that someone who loves the virtues without an equal love of learning will succumb to their corresponding vices. He says, "The flaw in loving humaneness without loving learning is that you will be easily duped; the flaw in loving knowledge without loving learning leads to self-indulgence; the flaw of loving truthfulness (*xin* 信) without loving learning is that it leads one into harm's way" (17.8, my modifications), continuing with the flaw of candor leading to rudeness and boldness leading to unruliness, etc. I think that this emphasis on the love of learning stems from: (i) Confucius's belief that even exemplary persons can go astray so that they need to rectify themselves, and continuous learning is a way to improvement. As Zigong puts it, "When exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) go

astray, it is like an eclipse of the sun and the moon. When they stray, everyone sees it, and when they correct their course, everyone looks up to them" (19.21). (ii) Confucius's view that exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) are to cultivate themselves not only by bringing peace to man (*an ren* 安人) but also to the common people (*baixing* 百姓, literally, a hundred surnames) (14.42, my translation). Given the expansiveness of what's expected of the *junzi* in his self-cultivation, nothing short of continuous learning is required (1.6). Ultimately, it is Confucius's answer to Fan Chi's inquiry about humaneness (*ren* 仁) and knowledge (*zhi* 知) that enables us to see the significance of knowledge and learning to the virtue of humaneness. More specifically, Confucius responded to Fan Chi by saying that humaneness (*ren* 仁) consists in loving man (*ai ren* 愛人), and knowledge (*zhi* 知) lies in knowing man (*zhi ren* 知人) (12.22). This means that one needs to have knowledge of men in order to make appropriate judgments about how to love them, which requires the other virtues like truthfulness (*xin* 信), doing one's best (*zhong* 忠), reciprocity (*shu* 恕), appropriateness (*yi* 義), all of which make up one's humane character.

By now, it should be clear that the virtue of humaneness (*ren* 仁) is first cultivated in the family where someone learns the rituals of filial piety which expressions of love for his family is gradually extended to the rest of the community. If this highest Confucian virtue relies on the virtues of character such as truthfulness, doing one's best,

acting with reciprocity, appropriateness, love of learning and having knowledge, which virtues enable the agent to act morally, and lead a flourishing life, then why is Confucius's ethics not acknowledged to be a virtue ethics by commentators like Nuyen and Ames who maintain that his ethics is better characterized as a role ethics? Given the prominence Confucius attributes to fulfilling the responsibilities of various roles for the effective governance of a state and the cultivation of virtues, we should examine if his ethics isn't a virtue ethics but a role ethics instead. For instance, in responding to Duke Jing's query about effective government, Confucius says, "The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son" (12.11). Again, when asked why he isn't employed as a government official, Confucius responded by citing the *Book of Documents* that says, "It is all in filial conduct (*xiao* 孝)! Just being filial to your parents and befriending your brothers is carrying out the work of government" (2.21, see also 1.2 cited above regarding filial and fraternal piety as the root of humaneness). Let us examine the reasons Ames and Nuyen offer for why Confucius's focus on roles precludes his ethics from being a virtue ethics.

Roger Ames thinks that Confucius's ethics is a role ethics instead of a virtue ethics because he holds that virtue ethics is just like other ethical theories which appeal to abstract and reductionistic principles (2011: 161,171) that are neither compelling nor able to offer concrete guidelines for actions (2011: 168). On the contrary, Ames thinks that Confucius's role ethics "looks primarily to the contours of our concrete familial and social roles for guidance, roles that are existentially more instructive than such abstractions" (2011: 161). Because we concretely experience the various roles that specify the concrete conducts that come with them, plus how the various roles of mother,

father, son, friend and teacher already come with norms and "ethical injunctions" that tell us how to mother or father, Ames says that "they serve as concrete guidelines that help us to determine what to do next" (2011: 168). Ultimately, Ames says, "Role ethics offers guidelines on how to behave more productively and provides an explanation for proper conduct that allows for the inevitable complexity of human activities" (2011: 161).

Elevating roles and deprecating the way that ethical theories understand 'virtues' by reifying and metaphysicalizing them (Ames 2011: 180), Ames follows John Dewey in calling the problem of appealing to abstract principles "the philosophical fallacy" (2011: 181). Ames explains this fallacy as follows: "we take the fixed and final to come before experience (in our appeal to moral principles), we mistakenly take kinds and categories as an adequate expression of what are complex, relationally defined, social situations (in our appeal to virtuous individuals), and we think because we have abstract names we also have 'things' that match up with them (in our appeal to virtues such as 'courage' and 'justice')" (2011: 181). Instead of being an abstract virtue that can be attributed to someone's character, and specified independently of a situation, Ames says that the virtue of *ren* is "not a 'good' but an efficacious 'good at, good in, good to, good for, good with' that describes a relational dexterity within the unfolding of social experience" (2011: 182). Ames concludes by saying that *ren* "is not any specific kind of action; the situation is primary and will itself determine the most appropriate response" (2011: 182). Yet Ames continues by saying that *ren* "requires a certain quality of action" to be appropriate and goes on to assert that one's motivations, relationship with those in the situation, and the consequences, are all relevant to a *ren* action (2011: 182).

As I've argued in my review of Ames's *Confucian Role Ethics* (Sim 2012), he

contradicts himself in eschewing anything that is fixed, essential, definable, universal, and specifiable regarding *ren* (仁 and all the other virtues), but nevertheless specifies qualities of action like motivations and consequences, not to mention other specific virtues like appropriateness (*yi* 義), reciprocity (*shu* 恕) and appropriation of ritual proprieties (*li* 禮), that are required by *ren*. Since motivations and consequences, along with the other virtues that *ren* requires are never dispensible regardless of the situation, they specify the *kind* of action that defines *ren*, and hence contradict Ames's denial that *ren* and the other virtues are specific kinds of actions that can be specified independently of the situation. Put otherwise, if there aren't any circumstances in which the virtue of *ren* can be performed by the *junzi* without his necessarily acting with appropriateness (*yi*) and reciprocity (*shu*), and accord with the ritual proprieties (*li*), then these are the essential and universal virtues required by *ren* regardless of the situation. No doubt, what particular *ren* action is exercised will depend on the situation. E.g., it might be a situation that calls for courage or generosity. But notice that no courageous or generous act by one with *ren* can be inappropriate, lack reciprocity and not accord with the proper rituals or disregard the *junzi's* motivation and the consequences that follow. If these virtues and conditions should always accompany *ren* actions, it's difficult to see how they aren't essential, universal or specifiable even before considering the situation.

By the same token, Nuyen denies that Confucius's ethics is a virtue ethics because he thinks that a virtue ethics entails a conception of moral agency that's alien to Confucius's view. He thinks that Confucius's view of the self is based on the roles and relations within which it lives. In contrast, Nuyen asserts, "the agent in traditional moral

theories is a self-sufficient, autonomous individual who understands himself or herself as separate from and independent of others and who chooses to form relationships with others," which are merely contingent so that their moral obligations are also contingent (2009: 2). More specifically, Nuyen says that in virtue ethics, "obligations are derived from the virtues, or the character traits that enable an autonomous and independent agent to live well, traits that an agent can choose to cultivate . . . thus . . . the agent must see himself . . . purely as a rational, autonomous, and independent self" (2009: 2). Since Nuyen mentions Aristotle's ethics as an example of the virtue ethics he describes, we should examine if Aristotle's account demands the autonomy, self-sufficiency and independence of others Nuyen attributes to him.

That Aristotle doesn't ignore the roles and relations into which we are born, but like Confucius, insists on the special obligations engendered in them is evident in his discussion of unequal friendships in Book VIII of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999). Aristotle maintains that the relationship between children and parents is an instance of unequal friendship that is comparable to that between human beings and God, for it reflects a friendship "toward what is good and superior" (1999: 1161b5-6). Because parents not only cause their children's existence, but also nurture and educate them, children owe their parents honor (1161a20-21) and love (1159b1), and it is worse for them to strike their father than someone else (1160a6). It is also worse for brothers to fail to help each other than strangers (1160a6) because familial relations are closer than communal ones for Aristotle.

Friendships with peers for Aristotle, in a sense would fit into Nuyen's characterization of roles and obligations that we can choose to cultivate. My qualified

claim is based on Aristotle's view that the specific friendships we cultivate are a matter of choice. However, that someone cannot live without *any* friends is evident in Aristotle's view that human beings are by nature political animals and thus need to live with some friends. In fact, friendship is classified as the most important external good without which human beings cannot flourish for Aristotle. This is because friends are required for the perfection of our virtues so necessary for our flourishing (*eudaimonia*). For instance, we need friends to help us perform virtuous actions (1999: 1099b1). Since Aristotle derives our flourishing from the human function, which is in turn based on human nature, it is not a matter of choice to forego all friendships. The fact that some friendships are voluntary for Aristotle doesn't make his ethics different from Confucius's since friendships for Confucius are voluntary too. He repeatedly tells his disciples to befriend those who are at least as good as, or better than themselves, to improve themselves (16.5, 1.8, 9.25). Moreover, there are other roles and relations beyond friendships for Confucius that are chosen. The relationships between superiors and subordinates, and even rulers and ruled, are voluntary for Confucius. E.g., he advises someone against entering a corrupt state (8.13, 15.7) and talks about how one can choose not to occupy an official role in government (2.21, 5.2, 14.1).

From this discussion, we can see that Aristotle's virtue ethics is amenable to Confucius since he too acknowledges and prioritizes familial roles and relations over the nonfamilial. Given the necessity of the family, friendships and political relationships to Aristotle's account of human flourishing, Nuyen's claim that Aristotle's virtue ethics requires an autonomous, self-sufficient and independent individual who is separate from others is also questionable. Finally, the passages in Confucius's *Analects* that show the

numerous non-familial relations that are voluntary for him, such as friendships, relations between rulers and ruled, as well as other non-familial relations, contradict Nuyen's contrast between the obligations of virtue ethics which he claims are contingent, and the obligations of role ethics which he maintains are always constitutive of the self and thus, non-contingent. Contrary to Nuyen, both virtue and role ethics include contingent and non-contingent relationships.

Having argued against Ames and Nuyen that Confucius's ethics has all the qualities of a virtue ethics instead of being restricted to a role ethics that puts roles above all else, regardless of whether such roles are contingent or non-contingent, it's time to show why Confucius's ethics doesn't prioritize roles, especially the familial ones, to the extent that they would always trump the virtue of humaneness. That is, I want to discuss why even though kinship love is prior in time for Confucius, it isn't prior in principle when it comes to the standard of morality. Rather, what is prior in principle is humaneness (*ren* 仁).

One key reason why kinship roles cannot be prior in principle for morality is because not all roles are fulfilled according to their norms, and conflicts between different roles are irresolvable within them. More specifically, not all mothers or fathers carry out the ethical injunctions that come with their roles. When conflicts between someone's different roles occur, say, between his obligation to his family and the state, or between his friend and the state, as I've discussed in my book (2007: 163), they are not resolvable within one or the other role. Even though Confucius opted to side with the father in the theft of the sheep discussed earlier, and he advocates deference and obedience to our parents and elders in general, neither of these necessarily reflects the

sort of conflict between different roles. The case of the son who didn't report his father's theft wasn't a conflict in roles since the son only had the role of the son rather than an official as well. The same is true for the requirement of filial piety in general. Confucius never discussed filiality in the context of conflicts. However, a clue that priority should be given to the virtue of humaneness, and appropriateness it entails, in determining one's actions in times of conflict is evident when Confucius discusses these two virtues. Consider, for instance, Confucius's remark, "In striving to be *ren* (仁) in your conduct, do not yield even to your teacher" (15.36). Similarly, he maintains that the *junzi* conducts himself in the world by not being for or against anything, but by acting with appropriateness (*yi* 義) (4.10). Since *ren* is the highest virtue for Confucius, and filiality is a way to cultivate *ren* and extend the love from the family to the community, *ren* rather than filiality is prior. True to a virtue ethics account, Confucius's view of the *junzi* with *ren* is the standard and measure of moral acts because instead of relying on some external universal principle to guide him, he exemplifies the excellent character by having the virtues, motivations, attitudes and emotions that'll always produce moral acts.

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[1] All parenthetical references to, and quotations from Confucius's *Analects* are from Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (trans.), *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).