

IS CONFUCIANISM COMPATIBLE WITH CARE ETHICS? A CRITIQUE

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Introduction

In recent years, some Confucianists have pointed out certain affinities that Confucianism shares with one branch of contemporary Western feminist philosophy: Care Ethics (Li 1994; Rosemont 1997). And at least one scholar claims that feminism in Confucian societies might take “a new form of Confucianism” (Li 1994, p. 86). This is a surprising claim given the fact that Confucianism, as the dominant ideology of East Asia for over two millennia, has played a central role in subjugating women under one of the most systemic and prolonged patriarchies in human history. Against disbelief, these scholars argue that what gave rise to the subordination of women was the distortion of the pre-Qin 先秦 Confucianism of Confucius and Mencius by later Confucianists; were we to retrieve the original spirit of Confucius, they continue, reconceptualizing Confucianism as feminist would be possible.

My purpose in this essay is to assess this claim critically by examining two aspects of Confucianism and Care Ethics that allegedly converge: first, their emphasis on human relationships, and second, given such an emphasis, their prescriptions for how to maintain harmonious human relationships—the cultivation of *ren* 仁 in Confucianism and caring in Care Ethics. The effort to assimilate Confucianism and Care Ethics, in my view, rests on the downplaying and neglect of *li* 禮, the twin virtue of *ren* in Confucianism, and on the misunderstanding of the feminist conception of care. By providing a rather detailed explication of Care Ethics¹ as well as Confucianism, I hope to illuminate the distinctive and even contradictory moral injunctions entailed by their respective ideals of caring and *ren*. While these two perspectives share certain surface similarities, a careful and methodical analysis of their respective prescriptions regarding human relationships will reveal their unbridgeable differences.

The Importance of Human Relationships

Confucianism

The Confucian conception of the self is “irreducibly interpersonal” (Ames 1991, p. 105) in two senses. First, it is important in the *psychosocial* sense in that the Confucian self emerges only in a net of “five human relations” (*wu lun* 五倫)² in which the self is expected to play definite roles. It is in the process of performing these roles and performing them well that the Confucian self acquires a unique

identity. Therefore, the Confucian self can be conceived as “the totality of roles [he/she lives] . . . in relation to specific others” (Rosemont 1997, p. 71). Every detail of these specific relationships affects the process of identity formation, and if the constituent people of such relationships change, so will one’s roles and *a fortiori* one’s identity. Second, human relationships are important in the *normative* sense in that they are constitutive of the Confucian moral goal. For Confucianists, not only is our embeddedness in human relationships “the point of departure” for becoming truly human, but maintaining harmonious relationships is itself a goal of life. Although the Confucian self is “malleable” (Tu 1993, p. 30) and capable of developing and transforming itself in the pursuit of self-actualization (cf. *Analects* 14.25), not only must Confucian self-actualization occur within the confines of human relationships (Tu 1979b, pp. 20, 22), but maintaining harmonious human relationships is an integral component of it:

[S]ociety is not conceived of as something out there that is being imposed on the individual. It is in essence an extended self. The internalization of social values . . . can therefore be interpreted as a creative step taken by the self to enter into human-relatedness for the sake of none other than its own realization. (Tu 1979b, p. 25)

The life of a lone mystic is not a viable lifestyle for a Confucianist, at least not in the long run.

The emphasis on human relationships does not necessarily imply that any human relationship, regardless of its inner dynamic, must be maintained. Most Confucian relations presuppose reciprocity (Tu 1986, p. 180; Tu 1979b, p. 18), and if one party to the relation does not act in accordance with *ren* and express appropriate *li*, the external manifestation of *ren*,³ then the other party need not reciprocate. In the king-minister relation, if the king does not act like one then he is a mere “fellow” who does not need to be treated as a king (*Mencius* 1B.8).⁴ In the *Li ji* 禮記, the minister is allowed to leave the king if the king thrice does not heed his good advice (*Li ji* 1.2). In the friend-friend relation, where exhorting each other to be moral is a crucial responsibility, if one friend refuses to be moral and good, the other can abandon the friendship (*Mencius* 4B.30).⁵ In the husband-wife relation, it has been traditionally taken for granted that the husband can abandon his wife if she commits an act among the “seven offenses” (*qi qu zhi e* 七去之惡).⁶ Although such regulations apply only to women and not to men,⁷ this at least proves that the marriage relation is not indissoluble in Confucianism.⁸ From this, we may safely infer that non-blood relations can be forsaken if either party does not act in accordance with the required *li*.

However, one kind of Confucian relation must never be abandoned: the parent-child relation, which Confucius considered to be “the root of *ren*” (*Analects* 1.2; cf. C. Y. Lee 1991, p. 101). In the parent-child relation, children must show absolute devotion and “Never disobey” their parents (*Analects* 2.5). Even when parents have committed immoral acts, children should exemplify unconditional filial piety by “conceal[ing] the misconduct” of parents (*Analects* 13.18). This does not necessarily mean that Confucius endorsed unprincipled moral relativism, for when parents

act against *li*, children may “remonstrate” (*jian* 諫), albeit “gently” (*yinwei* 隱微) (*Xiao jing* 孝經 13); in the *Li ji*, if parents thrice do not accept their “gentle” remonstrations, children are urged to follow them wailing loudly (*haoqi* 號泣) (1.2). When parents are not inclined to listen, however, children should not complain but “resume an attitude of reverence and not abandon their effort to serve them” (*Analects* 4.18). Even if parents do not mend their ways despite the children’s efforts, children must never overstep what is prescribed by their filial duty while trying to lead parents in the right direction as best as they can.

This strict prescription to maintain the parent-child relation is based on the symbolic significance of this relation as providing us with the ultimate moral resources to draw from in the later years of our lives.⁹ The family is “the natural home for nourishing the self and, specifically, for helping the self to establish fruitful dyadic relationships” (Tu 1986, p. 183). The family is the fundamental well-spring of love and affection, the very basis of *ren* and *a fortiori* morality, which must be extended in a somewhat diluted fashion to others not related to oneself (cf. *Mencius* 1A:7). In this tradition, love for our parents transcends even death and justifies the Confucian tradition of mourning rites and ancestor worship. “Upon the love of kin that even death could not destroy, Confucians would order their society and claim that *xiao* (filial piety 孝) is the ‘one root’ or the great principle of Heaven and Earth itself” (Lai 1991, p. 58).

Care Ethics

The emphasis on human relationships in Care Ethics is a relatively novel idea in the Western philosophical tradition. Liberalism, the dominant ethical perspective in the West since the age of Enlightenment, views the human self as independent, autonomous, and rational, capable of transcending its contingent circumstances, including personal relationships. Before I examine the Care Ethicist view of the self, I shall briefly consider the view of the self proposed by John Rawls, who is one of the most influential contemporary liberal theorists and a major target of Care Ethicists, because it is mainly as an antithesis to his theory that Care Ethics developed its “relational” conception of the self.¹⁰

According to Rawls, human agents can best realize their nature as “free,” “equal,” and “rational” beings in the “Original Position” (Rawls 1971, p. 515). In this hypothetical situation, agents are situated behind the “Veil of Ignorance” so that they are freed from the effects of “natural contingencies and social accidents” (p. 252) such as their social, economic, political, and psychological status (p. 137); in other words, they exist in the Original Position as transparent “moral agents” divested of all concrete and particular aspects of themselves, aware only of those characteristics they share in common with all others, such as having a conception of the good and a sense of justice (p. 12). They are also endowed with the psychological trait of “mutual disinterestedness” in that they are primarily concerned with their own self-interest (p. 13).

Despite Rawls’ efforts to defend his version of the self from the charges of egoism,¹¹ the line between mutual disinterestedness and egoism is indeed a fine one,

especially if the resources available are scarce. In such a situation, mutually disinterested selves in the Original Position, when they step out into real life, could easily lapse into beings who are in fierce competition with one another (Grimshaw 1986, p. 166). It is true that the assumption of mutual disinterestedness only applies to agents in the Original Position (Rawls 1971, p. 254; cf. p. 129), and real individuals could opt for a life plan that gives caring relationships a top priority (cf. Kohlberg, Levine, and Hower 1983, pp. 22–27; Sher 1987, pp. 186–187). However, it is also undeniable that Rawlsian agents are *not* obligated to form caring relationships, and that the obligation to show empathy and care is at best only a *conditional* one. In other words, even if the once mutually disinterested individuals in the Original Position do have a *choice* to lead a life fully connected to other people when the veil is lifted, it is perfectly legitimate for them to choose not to do so and to remain “mutually disinterested” even in real life. The primary moral obligation for liberal agents is to adhere to the principles of justice, and provided that this obligation is fulfilled they are free to choose any kind of life plan that suits their particular taste, however impoverished or barren it may be. Given the sad reality in which those who try to care for others and maintain a caring relationship are often exploited, it is not inconceivable that many people would prefer an individualistic and career-oriented life plan at the expense of intimate relationships (cf. Baier 1987, pp. 49, 53; cf. Held 1993, p. 187, p. 212, chap. 10; Whitbeck 1989, pp. 55–58).¹²

Care Ethicists concerned with such a limitation of the liberal self have proposed an alternative conception of the self intricately enmeshed in human relationships.¹³ Like Confucianism, this “relational” theory of the self emphasizes human relationships in two ways; they are constitutive of both human identity and moral goals. First, Care Ethics takes human relationships as “ontologically basic” (Noddings 1984, p. 4); the “basic fact of human existence” (ibid.) is that we are beings enmeshed in relationships with “actual flesh-and-blood other human beings for whom we have actual feelings and with whom we have real ties” (Held 1993, p. 58). All of us are related to other people ever since, or even before, birth. From nourishment to socialization we depend on other particular human beings with whom we have close connections in “lived” relationships. Further, not only does our survival depend on relationships, but our identity is constituted by them as well (Whitbeck 1989, p. 62). We come to realize who we are only through interactions with various others throughout our lives, and our sense of self is in a continuous process of modification and alteration in such interactions. “A person is an historical being whose history is fundamentally a history of relationships to other people” (Whitbeck 1989, p. 64). Second, intimate and caring human relationships are also normatively important in Care Ethics. The caring relationship is the most “superior” kind of human relationship (Noddings 1984, p. 83), and, as a “pre-moral good” (ibid., p. 84), it ultimately grounds morality. It is because we categorically value and desire to be in caring relationships that we are motivated to be moral at all (ibid., p. 5). In this view, morality is instrumental to forming and maintaining caring relationships.

Another similarity with Confucianism is that Care Ethics endows the most intimate family relation, the mother-child relation, which they usually refer to as the “mothering relation,” with special significance. While Care Ethics does not valorize all kinds of relationships—for some can be destructive or abusive—the mothering relation is taken to be the caring relationship par excellence that should be emulated by parties in other relations. While mothering has traditionally been conceived of in the West as a primarily biological function and therefore not so far removed from the realm of nature (cf. Ortner 1974), Care Ethicists take it to be a distinctly cultural activity, involving language and culture, that “forms human social personhood” and “develops morality” for all of us who were once children (Held 1993, pp. 55, 60). Moreover, it is a relation in which caring, primarily expressed as “natural caring,” is most saliently exhibited. In the context of mother-child interactions, the mother, as the one caring, has no difficulty “feeling with” the child, the cared-for,¹⁴ and “receiving” and “sharing” the child’s feelings (Noddings 1984, pp. 30–31).

Does this mean that the mothering relation is as inviolable in Care Ethics as the parent-child relation is in Confucianism? There is a passage in Noddings’ work which might suggest that family relations should be preserved at all costs à la Confucianism: Noddings claims that a certain Ms. A, who sides with her racist family members, despite her moral disagreements with them, cannot be criticized from the care perspective (Noddings 1984, pp. 109–112). Whenever the one caring is “forced” to terminate a caring relationship, Noddings continues, she inevitably diminishes her ethical ideal (Noddings 1984, p. 115). However, this is not an unconditional allegiance to family ties, because Noddings makes clear that in Ms. A’s case, the family provided her with proper care, and it is the caring relationship she has with them that justifiably inhibits her decision to follow an abstract anti-racist moral principle. Had the relation been devoid of caring, Ms. A might be justified in relinquishing it. Many Care Ethicists acknowledge the possibility that ideal caring interactions might not be present in all mothering relations (Ruddick 1989, pp. 30, 162; Held 1993, pp. 152–154), and, unlike Confucianists, who consider the parent-child relation as sacred, do not advocate that all mothering relations should be unconditionally maintained. Although Care Ethics and Confucianism may seem to resemble each other in their emphases on similar family relations, the difference here is that in this Western feminist view the value of care is placed above the mere fact of blood-relatedness.

Ren and Care

Given their emphasis on human relationships, both moral views provide prescriptions as to how to best maintain harmonious and caring relationships. The cultivation of *ren* in Confucianism and caring in Care Ethics are considered crucial in this respect. Those who point out the similarity of the two perspectives have argued that these two moral ideals are ultimately equivalent. Let us examine in this section whether indeed this is the case.

Ren

What is *ren*?¹⁵ When we examine the *Analects* we may find that it is not easy to pin down what exactly *ren* is, since *ren*, as a concept that appears most frequently in the *Analects*,¹⁶ appears in various ways in different contexts.¹⁷ It is only when we focus on statements about *ren* as a virtue pertaining to the treatment of others¹⁸ that we find some clues. In 6.28 it is stated that a *renzi* 仁子 is one “wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others.” According to 12.2, *ren* is “not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself” (cf. *Analects* 4.15, 15.23, 5.11). In 12.22, *ren* is defined as “to love all men.” From these various references, two kinds of requirements of *ren* can be discerned, one positive and the other negative. The positive requirement is to “establish” and “enlarge” oneself as well as others (*Analects* 6.28).¹⁹ The negative requirement is implied in the concept of *shu* 恕 as a prohibition not to impose on others what one does not want to be imposed on oneself (*Analects* 12.12, 15.23).²⁰

Adhering to *ren* as this double-sided “Golden Rule,” however, does not necessarily imply “caring” for others, for one can do so out of abstract respect for other people’s moral status, much like a Kantian agent. It is Mencius who adds a “personal” touch to the concept of *ren*. As is suggested by the translation of Mencian *ren* as “love with distinction” (*chadeng ai* 差等愛) (Chan 1955) or “love with gradation” (Lai 1991), *ren* is not a universal prescription the fulfillment of which is manifested evenly across all relationships. Urged by the need to counteract Mozi’s 墨子 doctrine of “Universal Love” (*jianai shuo* 兼愛說), which urges that we should love everyone to the same degree, Mencius claims that the love of our own family and kin has priority over the love of strangers: “[L]ove is not bloodless” (Lai 1991, p. 58). The closer and more intimate we feel toward a person, the better we are able to empathize with his or her emotional configurations. Those who are closest to us in the Confucian worldview are our family members, especially parents and children. This is most succinctly expressed in Mencius’ words, “Treat with respect the elders in my family, and then extend that respect to include the elders in other families. Treat with tenderness the young in my own family, and then extend that tenderness to include the young in other families. Then you may move the world in the palm of your hand” (1A.7). Strong emotional bonds between family members justify our preferential treatment of them, and it is toward them that *ren* should be most strongly exhibited. Unlike in most Western moral perspectives, universal love, for Confucianists, is the love for those near to us that is extended and derived in a somewhat diluted and attenuated form to those far away (cf. *Mencius* 3A.5; Lai 1991, pp. 56–57).

Granted that *ren* is to be expressed in varying degrees, how should it be expressed in specific contexts to maintain harmonious relationships? For this, we must consider another distinctive Confucian virtue, *li*.²¹ For Confucianists, it is not enough that one has *ren* as inner morality. It must be externally expressed in a certain manner appropriate to each role. That is, *ren* should manifest itself in accordance with certain public expectations pertaining to each role, *li* 禮. *Li* refers to “all those ‘objective’ prescriptions of behavior, whether involving rite, ceremony,

manners, or general deportment, that bind human beings and the spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family, within human society, and with the numinous realm beyond" (Schwartz 1985, p. 67). So understood, three functions pertain to *li* (Cua 1996, p. 164). The first is "delimiting" in that *li* sets boundaries of legitimate actions and prohibits certain actions. The second is "supportive" in that *li* provides legitimate channels through which the agent can satisfy his or her needs and desires. The third is "ennobling" in that *li* functions as a moral and aesthetic ideal to be emulated. The conception of *li* as the manifestation of the supreme Confucian virtue *ren* is in line with the third function.

The intimate connection between *ren* and *li* is evident in *Analects* 12.1, which defines *ren* as "to subdue oneself (*ke ji* 克己) and [to] return to *li* (*fu li* 復禮)." Which is prior between *ren* and *li*, however, is a matter of dispute. Fingarette, who proposes a highly idealized portrayal of *li*, interprets *ren* as a decision to follow *li* (Fingarette 1972, p. 51)²² and relegates *ren* to a secondary status to *li*. However, in the absence of an independent moral criterion to judge the morality of *li* rooted in concrete traditions, emphasizing the adherence to *li* may amount to uncritical conventionalism (cf. Weber 1951, pp. 243–244). Indeed, textual analyses of the *Analects* support the view that *li* is *not* to be equated with the merely accepted conventions of one's society. Confucius was deeply concerned about the corrupt state of his own time, and when he spoke of *li* he was referring to the idealized *li* of Zhou 周, which he believed to be more in line with *ren*, not the existing conventions of the Spring and Autumn period in which he was living. Further, even though he looked up to the *li* of Zhou, if it did not conform to what he believed was proper, he showed independence of mind by urging people to follow contemporary customs closer to the spirit of *ren* (*Analects* 9.3). Therefore, I think the interpretation that puts *ren* before *li* is more plausible. According to this interpretation, *ren* refers to an inner morality that is independent of *li*, giving meaning to the latter that is firmly ensconced in concrete traditions (cf. Tu 1979a, p. 9). Confucius' rhetorical question, "If a man is not humane (*ren*), what has he to do with ceremonies (*li*)?" seems to support just such an interpretation (*Analects* 3.3).

However, although *li* may represent an "enlightened" tradition in the spirit of *ren* (Cua 1996, p. 162), *li* is first and foremost a body of intersubjective prescriptions based on communal consensus. Even when a *junzi* 君子 like Confucius exercises his independence of mind and prefers an alternative *li* to an existing convention, he must eventually appeal to the majority for its acceptance as a new tradition. *Li* also has ritualistic implications, as it is often translated as "rites." It is expressive of "refined" ways of treating other people with "loyalty and respect" (Fingarette 1972, p. 7) and reflects the aesthetic and moral sensibility of sagacious predecessors in the tradition. *Li* is the civilized expression of human impulse (ibid.), and human desires and needs are processed through *li* and cleansed of biological impurities. Through *li*, interactions between people become ritualistic and aesthetic and one step removed from direct expressions of raw emotion. As such, adherence to *li* does not come naturally to ordinary people. Novices must go through years of inculcation and habituation to be finally able to internalize *li* and make it their second nature. This is

a very strenuous process, and Confucius himself could completely internalize *li* only at the age of seventy, so that even though he was freely pursuing his heart's desire he would not overstep the boundaries set by *li* (*Analects* 2.4). Construed thus, *li* does not give much room for spontaneity in individuals, and one cannot behave out of subjective whim and expect it to be considered as an adherence to a new *li*. Although both *ren* and *li* may have emotional beginnings (cf. *Mencius* 2A.6), the final cultured expressions of them are far removed from such origins.

Care

The most significant moral imperative in Care Ethics is to form and maintain caring relationships. We might call this the "care principle."²³ Unquestionably the care principle is applicable first and foremost to a small circle of people around the one caring, for whom "natural" caring arises. However, Care Ethics as an ethical perspective that is meant to regulate the treatment of people in general does not ignore non-related others. It addresses how to deal with strangers who come within the range of one's caring as well as how to treat members of one's own family and friends. Nel Noddings deals with this issue by introducing the notion of "ethical ideal" or "ethical self":

The ethical self is an active relation between my actual self and a vision of my ideal as one-caring and cared-for. It is born of the fundamental recognition of relatedness; that which connects me naturally to the other, reconnects me through the other to myself. (Noddings 1984, p. 49)

The reason why I must care for total strangers or for those I find repulsive when they ask for my care is that I have an interest in enhancing my ethical ideal (*ibid.*, p. 50). Therefore, the caring agent must care for loved ones and strangers alike, provided that they are within the reach of her caring, whether she feels inclined to do so or not (cf. p. 84). In an effort to include those for whom natural caring does not arise, Care Ethics requires caring that goes beyond natural caring; such caring is "ethical" caring (p. 80). Even so, ethical caring must not be considered as more fundamental than natural caring; rather, ethical caring is "dependent upon, and not superior to, natural caring" (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, Noddings clearly imposes a limit on the obligation to care. This obligation is conditional on two factors: whether a relation already exists or at least has a potential to exist, and whether a meaningful caring relationship can result from one's caring activities: "We are not obligated to summon the 'I must' if there is no possibility of completion in the other" (Noddings 1984, p. 86). The domain of one's care, then, is bound to be limited to a relatively small circle of people. Noddings claims that the advantage in so confining the domain of care lies in that the one caring can keep her world "manageable" (p. 89). Being able to fulfill her obligations of care within such a manageable world, the one caring can achieve and "complete" the goal of her ethical ideal as a responsible and caring individual (p. 86). It may sound rather cruel and insensitive to limit one's caring to those within one's

reach, yet, according to Noddings, caring with completion in mind is a much more responsible attitude than, for example, the impracticable idea of caring for all humanity (p. 90).

Now that we have determined the domain of care, what does caring for others entail in practice? How does caring function to maintain actual relationships? As Flanagan and Jackson aptly state:

[M]orally good caring requires seeing others *thickly*, as constituted by their particular human face, their particular psychological and social self. It also involves taking seriously, or at least being moved by, one's particular connection to the other. (Flanagan and Jackson 1987, p. 623; emphasis added)

Seeing others "thickly" implies being attentive to the emotional states, idiosyncracies, and particular features of the person with whom one is interacting, for these characteristics as a whole make the person the unique individual that he or she is. We, as the ones caring, must try to find out the particular personal history, emotional states, idiosyncracies, and needs of the one cared for by continuously engaging in actual dialogues with him or her (cf. Held 1993, p. 41; Gilligan 1982, pp. 29–31). The focus is on the cared-for's welfare, and we, as the ones caring, should always try to direct "[o]ur attention, our mental engrossment . . . on the cared-for, not on ourselves" (Noddings 1984, p. 24). This may require at least two things. First, the one caring must assume "a dual perspective" to see things from both her own perspective and that of the cared-for. Noddings calls this "inclusion" (*ibid.*, p. 63). Second, the one caring must try to see "the best self in the cared-for" and to work with him or her to actualize that self. Noddings calls this "confirmation" (p. 64). According to this perspective, failing to do so with respect to the cared-for incurs criticisms on the one caring, just as a mother would be considered morally reprehensible for failing to pay proper attention to the particular needs of all her children.

Construed thus, the care principle imposes a lot of responsibility on the one caring. It is primarily an ethic of responsibility, as opposed to an ethic of rights such as liberalism. Regardless of whether the cared-for has any right to the care and protection of the one caring, the one caring has a responsibility to offer care and prevent harm. Caring agents have a responsibility to prevent not just the "objective" harm that arises due to the infringement of objectively or intersubjectively agreed-upon rights; they also have an obligation to prevent "subjective" harm as well, which encompasses subjective feelings of hurt, disappointments due to unfulfilled expectations, and loneliness, all of which do not necessarily result from the infringement of rights. Care Ethics, however, is not thereby to be equated with an ethic of self-effacement; as Gilligan has shown, a morally mature caring agent must recognize that caring for oneself is as important as caring for others.²⁴ It requires a constant effort to harmonize conflicting responsibilities to care for others as well as oneself. But undoubtedly such a balancing act must be conducted against the backdrop of maintaining caring human relationships, which are fundamental for human flourishing.

Comparison

Undoubtedly, prominent similarities can be discerned between the two perspectives. First of all, both Confucianism and Care Ethics take intimate caring relationships as constitutive not only of our identities but also of moral goals; in other words, caring relationships are not only psychosocially but also normatively significant. Since the ontological reality is relational, and humans cannot live worthwhile human lives apart from human relationships, nurturing and maintaining such relationships is the most important moral end. Both positions regard the most intimate family relation—the parent-child relation in Confucianism and the mother-child relation in Care Ethics—as the most significant relation, although for different reasons. For Confucianism, it is a relation that must be maintained for its symbolic significance as the “root” of *ren*, while for Care Ethics it is valorized as the model relationship of care due to the manifestation of care usually found in such relations.

A second similarity between Confucianism and Care Ethics is the intimate connection they make between emotion and morality. According to both perspectives, empathy, compassion, sensitivity, and caring are prerequisites for morality, and a truly moral person is not someone who controls her emotions with rationality but someone who develops such positive emotions to the fullest. Among Confucianists, the importance of emotions is most prominently argued for by Mencius, for whom the four “constant” virtues of *ren*, *yi* 義 (righteousness), *li*, and *zhi* 智 (wisdom) spring from the feelings of commiseration (*ceyin* 惻隱), shame and dislike (*xiuwu* 羞惡), modesty and yielding (*cirang* 辭讓), and the sense of right and wrong (*shi fei* 是非), respectively (*Mencius* 2A.6). These “four beginnings” constitute the very elements of innate human nature (cf. Tu 1979c, p. 65),²⁵ and morality is none other than the full actualization of these emotional germinations. Admittedly many people lose such beginnings due to inhospitable external circumstances (cf. *Mencius* 6A.7, 6A.8), but they are “recoverable” (Tu 1979c, p. 64) because they are *in* us as “the mind’s original manifestations of its true nature” (*ibid.*, p. 66).²⁶ Even the “will for self-realization” to preserve or retrieve these four beginnings is innate in the “mind” (p. 62), independent of the commands of what might be termed as “rationality.” Also, Care Ethicists, unlike liberals who consider all emotions as prone to bias and egoism, maintain that some emotions are central to morality. The caring so crucial to Care Ethics, for example, is itself partly emotional. When we naturally care for someone, we “feel with” the person (Noddings 1984, p. 30). To be sure, natural caring involves more than feeling, in that non-emotional requirements such as a motivational shift are also needed (*ibid.*, p. 33). However, both the feeling of care and the motivational shift are *not* rational, and in this sense natural caring is “fundamentally nonrational” (p. 61).

From these similarities, does it follow that the prescriptions of *ren* and care are equivalent and that Confucianism can encompass Care Ethics to become the East Asian feminism of the future (cf. Li 1994, p. 86)? The answer is an emphatic “no.” Even if we interpret *ren* as “love with distinction,”²⁷ *ren* is not equivalent to the caring advocated by Care Ethics. This is so because, aside from their similar

theoretical assumptions in the abstract, what Care Ethics *practically* requires differs from what Confucianism *practically* requires. As we have seen, what is practically enjoined by Care Ethics is for the one caring to see the other “thickly,” to be attentive and responsive to the particular characteristics of the one cared-for, to see things from the perspective of the one cared-for, and to work together with the one cared-for to actualize the “best self” of which he or she is capable. To some extent, it requires the one caring, who is usually in a position superior to that of the one cared-for, whether emotionally, morally, or intellectually, to tear down the emotional boundaries that separate herself and the one cared-for and to merge with the latter as if to become his or her alter ego.

What about Confucianism? Although Confucian *ren* is required of both parties to the five relations, the general tendency is that it is more emphasized for the one occupying the subordinate position. This tendency is amplified when it comes to the parent-child relation. If we consult the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, the central question with respect to intimate relationships is how to express love and respect for one’s *parents*. In contrast to the almost complete silence with respect to parents’ obligations toward children, the constant demand for filial piety seems almost bizarre. When Confucianists do discuss how parents should treat children, it is only in regard to the daughter-in-law (*Li ji* 5.12), for whom the parents-in-law typically do not feel “natural caring” and against whom various atrocities have been traditionally committed. Some Confucianists contend that the reason for such a dearth of discussion of parental obligation might be that the care that parents express toward their own children flows so effortlessly and naturally that it does not deserve a separate discussion; on the other hand, according to this line of reasoning, since children obviously have a harder time expressing care and love for their parents, filial piety needs to be emphasized. Yet, even if we grant that parents have a natural tendency to express care for their children, not every expression of love is acceptable or adequate, and, I believe, not to discuss this explicitly is a grave default on the part of Confucianism.

Let us, however, set this problem aside. Perhaps this is due to the contingent, but not inconsequential, fact that East Asia was and still is a highly hierarchical society. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that in Confucianism discussions about how one should comport in an intimate relationship go both ways. Still, what is required in Confucianism is not at all similar to how the one caring should act toward the cared-for. According to the *Analects*, the filial child must do the following: “when parents are alive one should serve them according to *li*; when they die, one should bury them according to *li*, and honor them according to *li*” (2.5). Here, acting in accordance with the required *li* is crucial. As mentioned earlier, *li* is expressive of “refined” ways of treating others with respect, and to adhere to *li* is to be reverent (*jing* 敬) toward the other (2.7; *Xiao jing*, bk. 2). But what exactly *is* acting according to *li* with regard to one’s parents? In the *Li ji*, how to comport oneself in front of parents is extensively discussed, and the unifying theme there is to serve one’s parents sincerely and to maintain a courteous and respectful manner and attitude; this implies that there must be a certain deferential *distance* between parents and

children, whether social or psychological or emotional. Therefore, in the parent-child relation of Confucianism, parents and children cannot become intimate “alter-egos” of each other. An example that attests to this is that in Confucian cultures, whether ancient or contemporary, a father and a son smoking or drinking together face to face is prohibited by custom (cf. *Li ji*, bk. 1). This is in stark contrast to what Care Ethics prescribes, which is to dismantle emotional and psychological barriers and to become friends on equal terms.

Of course, it may not be entirely fair to compare the Confucianism of ancient China, in which hierarchy was the norm, with the Care Ethics of the present-day United States, in which egalitarianism is the norm. The distance between them—temporal, geographical, and cultural—is too great. However, the difference between them is not merely circumstantial; there is also a philosophical/conceptual difference. The key factor here, as has been shown, is the concept of *li*, which makes Confucianism so unique among all intellectual traditions of the world. Because *ren* must be expressed in *li*, in refined and communally accepted formal standards, usually reflective of the unequal positions of the parties to a relation, spontaneous expressions of emotion are in general prohibited, and a certain deferential distance between the parties is required. This is not to deny the possibility of reconceptualizing *li* to be more egalitarian and expressive of emotions. The point is that without such a reinterpretation of *li*, which has yet to be offered by Confucianists, the *ren* of Confucianism as “love with distinction” and the caring of Care Ethics cannot be considered equivalent.

Conclusion

My purpose here is not to disparage Confucianism because it cannot “match up” to the framework offered by Care Ethics. This would be not only anachronistic but also Eurocentric. Confucianism has a unique place in the intellectual legacy of the world, and it should be the mission of contemporary Confucianists to accentuate the strengths of Confucianism, while reducing if not eliminating its weaknesses, to fit the present world of traditionally Confucian societies. Reinforcing Confucianism’s strengths, however, does not imply ignoring wrongs committed under its name in the past. Although some contemporary Confucianists argue that at least Confucius and Mencius did not disparage women and therefore that Confucianism is inherently nonsexist, historical Confucianism was undoubtedly sexist, and modern Confucian societies of East Asia are still suffering from its legacies. While ahistorically comparing and assimilating Confucianism and a branch of contemporary Western feminism may pique intellectual curiosity, what would be more fruitful from a feminist perspective would be to engage in a historically grounded analysis of why the remarkable pre-Qin Confucianism has deteriorated into a sexist and classicist dogma.

This is a project that requires an extensive investigation in its own right that I cannot undertake here, but I suspect that the culprit is the misinterpretation of *li*, which has been reinforced throughout two millennia. *Li* in itself may not be pernicious. Maintaining a certain distance in the spirit of reverence, when required of both parties to a relationship, is perhaps necessary in all relationships including

intimate ones, at least some of the time. Even hierarchy itself may not be entirely deleterious if the involved parties can indeed be construed as “benefactors” and “beneficiaries” who can exchange their roles, whether between themselves or with others in an overarching web of human relationships (Rosemont 1997, p. 74). Perhaps Care Ethics has gone too far in the other direction by valorizing “intimacy.” However, *li* is problematic when it becomes ossified and functions to subjugate certain groups of people, whether women or lower-class people or children, as has happened in East Asia under Confucianism’s ideological reign. Such a misappropriation of *li* by the dominant class to guard its privileges is clearly against the spirit of *ren*. A crucial task for contemporary Confucianists, then, is not just to revive the true spirit of *ren* of ancient Confucianism but also to ensure that it does not lapse into the oppressive ideology it once became by clearly deconstructing the steps of deterioration of Confucianism throughout its dominance.

Notes

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- 1 – I focus on Nel Noddings’ version of Care Ethics because, as extreme as this position is, it is the most similar to Confucianism not only in its emphasis on human relationships and emotions but also in its rejection of general principles.
- 2 – Traditionally, there are “five human relations”—between king and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, and friend and friend—that are crucial to Confucianism. As is evident from the fact that three among these are relations between family members, it is family relations, especially between parent (father) and child (son), that are of particular importance to Confucianism.
- 3 – I shall explicate *li*, as the twin virtue of *ren*, in the third section below. For the time being, let this brief definition suffice.
- 4 – Mencius also states that “If a ruler regards his ministers as his hands and feet, then his ministers will regard him as their heart and mind. If a ruler regards his ministers as dogs and horses, his ministers will regard him as any other man. If a ruler regards his ministers as dirt and grass, his ministers will regard him as a bandit and an enemy” (*Mencius* 4B.3).
- 5 – Similarly, Mencius states that if a friend B does not look after his friend A’s wife and children who are temporarily in B’s care, then friend A may forgo the friendship (*Mencius* 1B.6).

- 6 – Traditionally, a wife can be driven out of the husband’s home (where she was required to reside after marriage) and returned to her maiden home if she (a) disobeys parents-in-law (*bushun jiugu* 不順舅姑), (b) cannot produce sons (*wu zi* 無子), (c) has (or has thoughts of having) an extramarital affair (*yin xing* 淫行), (d) is jealous of other women with whom her husband has sexual relations (*jidu* 嫉妬), (e) suffers from an incurable and prolonged illness that dissipates family resources (*e ji* 惡疾), (f) interferes too much with and is vociferous about the husband’s affairs (*koushe* 口舌), (g) and steals (*daoqie* 盜竊). I would like to thank Dr. Yoon-Ki Hong for providing me with the relevant information on the “seven offenses.”
- 7 – There are no corresponding obligations for husbands, and historically these regulations have been abused as effective means to subjugate women in traditional Confucian societies.
- 8 – Contemporary Confucianist Tu Wei-ming states that marriage can be relinquished because it is based on a contract (Tu 1986, p. 185).
- 9 – In Confucianism, even if parents do not care for children in a particular parent-child relation, children are required to fulfill their filial duty. Such unqualified devotion to parents is required because of the *symbolic* significance of the parent-child relation. This tenet of Confucianism will be contrasted, in the second section below, with the Care Ethicists’ emphasis on the mothering relation, which is important because of the caring component.
- 10 – The portrayal of the Rawlsian self that is given here is admittedly too brief. Also, the Care Ethicist responses to it analyzed here are incomplete, for I focus only on the criticism that the liberal self leads to unwarranted individualism and egoism. Care Ethicists also criticize liberalism’s universality, principle-centeredness, disembeddedness, and autonomy, just to name a few points of contention. I discuss only the criticism on egoism here because of my limited focus on caring relationships.
- 11 – For Rawls’ own defense of his position against the accusations of egoism, see Rawls 1971, pp. 13, 127, 129.
- 12 – For further criticism of the liberal self, not necessarily Rawlsian, as being egoistic and atomistic, see Benhabib 1987, p. 161; Code 1987, pp. 358–360; Keller 1985, pp. 101–102.
- 13 – The seed of such a theory can be found throughout the works of Chodorow, Gilligan, and Noddings, but an independent discussion of such a view is given by Held (1993, p. 60) and Whitbeck (1989, pp. 63–65). For a similar conception of the self, see also Baier 1985. Ferguson (1989) calls this conception of the self the “difference” theory of the self.
- 14 – Noddings uses the concepts of the “one-caring” and the “cared-for” as the parties to a caring relationship. The designation of these terms is by no means

fixed, and the “one-caring” could easily become the “cared-for” and vice versa in a reciprocal relation. I shall use these terms frequently when speaking about caring relationships with such a qualification in mind.

- 15 – In answering this question, I shall focus on how it is actually referred to in the ancient Confucian texts, for, according to some (Li 1994, pp. 81–22), it is there that the true spirit of Confucianism can be found without the sexist taint of later developments.
- 16 – *Ren* appears 105 times in fifty-eight chapters out of the total of 499 chapters of the *Analects* (cf. Tu 1981, p. 48; Chan 1955, p. 296).
- 17 – Sometimes *ren* is referred to as a virtue that encompasses other virtues. A person who is *ren* is also brave (*yong* 勇) (*Analects* 14.5), generous (*kuan* 寬), trustworthy (*xin* 信), agile (*min* 敏), clement (*hui* 惠) (*Analects* 17.6), courteous (*gong* 恭), reverent (*jing* 敬), loyal (*zhong* 忠) (*Analects* 5.18, 13.19, 18.1), filial (*xiao* 孝) (*Analects* 17.21), wise (*zhi* 知) (*Analects* 5.18), and in accord with *li* 禮 (*Analects* 12.1) (cf. Chan 1955, p. 297; Tu 1981, pp. 48–49). At other times, *ren* is reputed to be a fundamental virtue that grounds all other virtues. For example, even if a person is brave, without *ren* he is prone to become reckless or to engage in crime (*Analects* 14.5); on the other hand, knowledgeability (*zhi* 知) is undoubtedly inferior to *ren* (*Analects* 15.33), and even when a person has attained wisdom, it cannot last without *ren* (cf. *Analects* 15.32). Also, however impeccable a person may be in his adherence to the established *li*, if he is not also a person of *ren* he is likely to be disingenuous (cf. *Analects* 3.3). Although these phrases show us what kind of virtues a person of *ren* may display, they do not explain what *ren* itself is.
- 18 – Conceiving *ren* as a virtue in dealing with other people in the manner discussed above seems to be the most widely accepted interpretation (cf. Fung 1948, pp. 43–44; Chan 1955, p. 299).
- 19 – “To serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me. . . . To serve my ruler as I would expect my ministers to serve me. To serve my elder brother as I would expect my younger brothers to serve me. To be the first to treat friends as I would expect them to treat me” (*Zhong yong* 中庸 13).
- 20 – “What a man dislikes in his superiors, let him not display in the treatment of his inferiors; what he dislikes in inferiors, let him not display in the service of his superiors; what he hates in those who are before him, let him not therewith precede those who are behind him; what he hates in those who are behind him, let him not therewith follow those who are before him; what he hates to receive on the right, let him not bestow on the right. This is what is called the principle with which, as with a measuring-square (*ju zhi dao* 矩之道), to regulate one’s conduct” (*Da xue* 大學 10).
- 21 – Although *ren* is the most crucial virtue of the Confucian ethical system, what differentiates Confucianism and renders it a unique philosophical perspective

is the virtue of *li*. Although the Western tradition also has a similar notion, after the advent of the Enlightenment such a system of established norms was regarded with suspicion as inhibiting the self-expression of individuals. In Confucianism, however, such a normative system was not considered as inhibiting but, on the contrary, as a necessary prerequisite for individual self-actualization.

- 22 – Similarly, Arthur Waley misinterpreted “*fu li*” as “to submit to rituals” (Tu 1979a, p. 6).
- 23 – Whether there can be a care “principle” and what its status might be is a moot question within Care Ethics. Although Noddings vehemently rejects all general principles for their inability to “preserve the uniqueness of human encounters” (Noddings 1984, p. 5; cf. pp. 36, 84–85), Held rightfully warns against the tendency to reject all kinds of principles since this entails an “invitation to capriciousness” (Held 1993, p. 75). I agree with Held that Care Ethics endorses principles that are “compatible with particular judgments based . . . on feelings of empathy and on caring concern” (ibid., p. 35).
- 24 – Gilligan’s developmental scale consists of three perspectives and two transitions: (1) An agent who adopts the first perspective is solely interested in caring for herself in order to ensure her survival. (2) As the first transition occurs, the agent criticizes the judgment made in the first perspective as selfish. (3) When the agent assumes the second perspective, the good is equated with caring for others. (4) However, with the second transition, she realizes the implausibility of the equation of conformity with care and the illogic of inequality between other and self. (5) Finally, with the acceptance of the third perspective, the agent embraces care as the “self-chosen principle” that encompasses not only those for whom she cares but also herself (Gilligan 1982, p. 74).
- 25 – Tu states that according to the Mencian perspective, “[a] man without those feelings is not human because it is psychologically impossible for a man not to have them” (1979c, p. 65).
- 26 – The term “mind” is likely to mislead Western readers and therefore requires a clarification. “Mind” (*xin* 心) in Confucianism, unlike the Western notion, which is primarily epistemic, deliberative, and therefore passive, encompasses emotions, desires, and actions and is therefore inherently active and moral. In fact, in Confucianism, distinguishing moral mind from epistemic mind is inconceivable (cf. Yao 1996, pp. 183–184).
- 27 – As mentioned previously, this is not the only interpretation of *ren*, for Confucius regarded it as the supreme moral virtue, which may not necessarily involve feelings of care, and Neo-Confucianists considered it as an abstract principle that regulates the universe and engenders the harmony of all things.

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