

CHAPTER 14

CONFUCIUS AND THE SUPERORGANISM

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Seeing ourselves as part of a superorganism allows us to understand our actions, choices, and experiences in a new light. If we are affected by our embeddedness in social networks and influenced by others who are closely or distantly tied to us, we necessarily lose some power over our own decisions. Such a loss of control can provoke especially strong reactions when people discover that their neighbors or even strangers can influence behaviors and outcomes that have moral overtones and social repercussions. But the flip side of this realization is that people can transcend themselves and their own limitations.

—Christakis and Fowler 2009

How does one acquire a sense of oneness? An obvious answer is through religion or religious texts. One might read of the notion of Brahman in the Vedanta school of Hinduism—pure consciousness or bliss—which is the unified and singular true nature of reality, of which we are but temporary manifestations (apparent but not real). Hence we are all ultimately one, though temporarily we are not. Or one might read of neo-Confucians thinkers claiming that every creature, every single specimen under the stars, forms one body with every other (天地萬物為一體). Of course, such notions are quite distant from where I now sit in my office in

mid-Manhattan, typing this essay. They are distant in an obvious and trivial sense—namely, that they represent ideas written in contexts far removed from our own, both spatially and temporally. However, they also advert to metaphysical beliefs that are difficult to take on board.

Nonetheless, feeling connected to others, as though one is part of a larger plan or goal, or feeling a kinship with all living things—these need not stem from extraordinary metaphysical views. They might, instead, express values that individuals affirm, which factor into their well-being and psychological economy—contributing, say, to their overall sense of belonging or meaning. But even while this may be true of scores of individuals, it is not obvious how affirming one's values through expressions of oneness might have purchase for those who are not inclined to think in these terms, and who might take such language as, at best, expressing relatable values using strong metaphysical language or, at worst, expressing “heroic” metaphysical beliefs (to borrow a euphemism) using clichéd language.¹

In what follows, I will describe a sense of oneness that, while having its roots in a tradition of thought far removed from our own, might nonetheless be accessible to many persons. It is a sense of oneness that is, admittedly, smaller in scope than the two options just canvassed. It is not a oneness with all of humanity, let alone with all the creatures under the sky or all the elements of the cosmos. Nevertheless, it is recognizably a sense of oneness that transcends one's own person and connects one to a larger whole.

I will be calling this conception that of a *superorganism*, to borrow another phrase, this time from the natural and social sciences, where it finds paradigmatic application to collectives of eusocial animals—for example, an ant colony, which consists of numerous individual members yet which also constitutes an entity with properties that go beyond that of any of its members. There are obvious and significant discontinuities between ant colonies, on the one hand, and human societies, on the other. I don't mean to suggest that human beings are mindless agents, or that human societies are superorganisms in the exact same way ant colonies are. Nonetheless, human societies are entities that transcend their individuals. In the words of Borgatti et al., “the idea is that social ties can bind nodes together in such a way as to construct a new entity whose properties can be different from those of its constituent elements” (Borgatti et al. 2009, 894). I will be exploring, then, a conception of oneness not by canvassing spiritual views of connectedness or metaphysical views about the ultimate nature of reality, but instead by seeing groups of entities as forming a new, super entity. It's a view that arises when thinking in network or collective terms as opposed to node or individual terms.

I find this particular sense of oneness in classical Confucian conceptions of society, though without the explicit (and robust) metaphysics of the later neo-Confucians. Though this sense of oneness is not stated in explicit terms, it is

nonetheless one that can be easily reconstructed out of certain views of individuals and collectives in classical Confucian texts. I begin with passages from the *Analects* that can be interpreted as containing within them such a sense of oneness as superorganism. Later, I present what I take to be stronger evidence of a more explicit kind in the *Daxue* and *Zhongyong* chapters of the *Liji*. I then conclude by arguing that thinking of Confucian social and political philosophy in terms of a superorganism can be helpful in understanding why the entire project may have been ill founded.

The Zhou Superorganism

In *Analects* 19.22, Zigong, a student of Confucius, is asked the following question: whence his teacher's knowledge of the *dao* of sage kings of the past, who flourished centuries before he was even born (ca. 551 BCE)? The answer Zigong gives is noteworthy:

Analects 19.22: Gongsun Chao of Wei asked Zigong, "From whom did Confucius acquire his learning?" Zigong replied, "The *dao* of Kings Wen and Wu has not yet sunken into the ground—it still exists in people. Those who are worthy understand its greater aspects, while those who are unworthy understand its lesser aspects. There is no one who does not have the *dao* of Wen and Wu within them. From whom did the Master not acquire his learning? And what need was there for him to have a formal teacher?"²

The sage kings Wen and Wu, founding figures of the Zhou dynasty, are long since dead. Confucius could not learn from them directly, or from any of the other towering figures of this era (such as the Duke of Zhou). But their teachings remain embedded in what I'll call the latent Zhou superorganism that remained nascent in the state of Lu. Lu was Kongzi's home state and where the high culture of the Zhou dynasty had managed to persist in spite of the very real and precipitous decline of the power of the Zhou kings starting in 771 BCE. That superorganism might not have been revived were it not for one particular individual—Confucius—who would stitch it back together.

Brook Ziporyn (2012) places special emphasis on this passage, and his reading of it bears similarities to my own (even while he does not use the image of a superorganism in his explication). As Ziporyn notes, in this passage,

We are presented with a sense in which a certain *specific cultural tradition*, to which special *value* is attached, is omnipresent within the members of a particular community. We are told that it can be found everywhere in that community, but the decisive thing here, the turning of the tables, is that what really

actualizes this omnipresence is Confucius himself, that is, his ability to recognize the coherence of these various cultural forms, to ask the right questions, to “thread them together,” to borrow a trope he uses elsewhere.

The presence of the particular concerns, values, and projects of Confucius is what makes this omnipresence effectively present around him. What actualizes this presence as something readable, the Way of Wen and Wu, is the way it is connected to, interacts with, *coheres* with, the dispositions, cognitive and ethical, of a certain human being, Confucius. . . . And this Way is neither purely internal to Confucius nor existing independently outside him. He does not invent it *ex nihilo*, but nor does it simply impose itself upon him. If he were not there to see it that way, the fragments of the Way of Wen and Wu, though present everywhere, would not cohere into anything intelligible. It is the focus provided by his own activity and presence, his own orientation and disposition of character, that make it come together sustainably and discernibly around him, to be seen as, and indeed to genuinely function as, a resource for his own particular inquiry. The things out there in the world are neither the same as what Confucius sees, nor different from it. He sees an aspect of what is there, and by so seeing makes this aspect, as present in many places, cohere into a particular presence.

(Ziporyn 2012, 94)

Ziporyn does not speak of a superorganism, nor does he use resources from network theory. However, we do see here a sense of a collective that contains, within it, knowledge that any particular member lacks, and Kongzi as the person who is able to see its coherence.³ Confucius becomes a new node through which the superorganism is reinvigorated. He is able to become a central conduit through which its various parts interact and communicate to one another. Importantly, Confucius sees himself as playing this precise role.

Analects 9.5: The Master was surrounded in Kuang. He said, “Now that King Wen 文 is gone, is not culture (*wen* 文) now invested here in me? If Heaven intended this culture to perish, it would not have given it to those of us who live after King Wen’s death. Since Heaven did not intend that this culture should perish, what can the people of Kuang do to me?”

Networks, Nodes, and Influence

A social network consists of all the connections and ties within a collection of individuals, or nodes. A node (or self) is constituted by the larger network while also constituting it. To be a self in a network is to be a particular point upon which network forces impinge (in both manifest and imperceptible ways), while also impinging upon others similarly in turn. This notion finds

expression throughout classical texts in the Confucian philosophical tradition, which often discuss how individuals and groups influence and shape one another.

One of the powerful roles that networks play is to build a bridge from the local to the global—to bridge from individuals to groups, or from nodes to networks—and back again. In this way, explanations can be provided for how simple processes at the level of individual nodes and links can have complex effects that ripple through a population as a whole. That early Confucians saw individuals as deeply affected by their social environments is well known, as discussed in a number of recent papers (for example, Hutton 2006, Sarkissian 2010b, Slingerland 2011). Ziporyn makes similar claims.

Confucius is nonnegotiable a member of a group, prior to any choice, and yet at the same time decisively constitutes the nature of the group of which he is a part, from which he can only depart in terms of his prior commitment to that group, but which nonetheless requires his own present deed to be actualized in a particular way. He cannot choose not to be a member of this group, but he can choose what sort of group it is that he is a member of. Just which forces of world, nature, culture, and deceased semi-personal spiritual powers are considered to be contributing members to the collective body of which he considers himself a part depend on his own “take” on the trajectory of the tradition he connects to. He is educated in this tradition, and selectively emphasizes those aspects to which he, in both the literal and figurative senses, “connects.”

(Ziporyn 2012, 97–98)

For the early Confucians, no person is an independent actor in any interesting sense. The classical texts characterize individuals as acting on their own choices and deliberations, and assuming responsibility for the course of their lives, while also acknowledging that any particular person’s behavior is continually shaped by the behavior of others in his or her midst, by the objects and variables in their immediate environments and, ultimately, by the various other nodes that comprise her larger network of relations. This assumption formed the basis of much else in early Confucian thought. Network theory provides a way to bring such notion of influence, shaping, and constitution into sharper focus, by providing more robust theoretical resources to understand the relationship between individuals and the collectives in which they participate.⁴

The key notion representing the influence of individual nodes on other nodes in the classical texts is *dé* 德, which, at its core, refers to a person’s ability to influence others through noncoercive means. In the words of A. C. Graham, it had traditionally represented “the power, whether benign or baleful, to move others without exerting physical force” (Graham 1989, 13). The importance of “effective power” or “power over others” in understanding *dé* is recognized by nearly everyone. For example, Arthur Waley translates *dé* as “moral force”

(Waley 1938), Graham as “potency” (Graham 1989), Philip Ivanhoe as “moral charisma” (Ivanhoe 1999), Bryan Van Norden as “a sort of ‘ethical force’ that a person has, which can have a transformative effect on others” (Van Norden 2007, 21). In addition, scholars also agree that this power seems, for the Confucians, to be the prerogative of morally upright or charismatic individuals, lending them authority in the eyes of others. David Nivison was characteristically perceptive in noting that the concept of *dé* “has implications, not easily analyzed, that make mature and sophisticated moral-philosophical discussion by the Chinese philosophers complex and fascinating—even when the word and syllable *de* has been left behind, and these philosophers are talking about *rén* 仁 (“benevolence”), *yì* 義 (“duty”), *xìn* 信 (“trust”), *lǐ* 禮 (“propriety”), *liáng zhī* 良知 (“moral intuitions”), etc.” (Nivison 1996, 17).

In previous work, I have tried to explicate one sense of *dé* by discussing the attractive power that accrues to individuals owing to the scrupulous way they mind their impact over others, including not only their honing the accuracy of their moral inclinations and reactions over time (2010a), but also their minding features of their self-presentation (2010b) and regulating themselves when they are the site of others’ scrutiny (2015). The *jūnzǐ* (nobleman/moral exemplar) in classical Confucian texts is represented as capable of cultivating himself along these lines and thereby wielding influence over others, who find the *jūnzǐ* to be both agreeable and authoritative—someone to cooperate with or yield to. Indeed, a prominent aspect of *dé* in the *Analects*—besides its characteristic power—is its linkage to self-cultivation (*xiū* 修—for example, 7.3, 12.10, 12.21, 16.1). Since moving others (or influencing them) to make social and political changes was the ultimate goal of Confucius and his disciples, cultivating *dé* or “effective nodal influence” was one of their chief aims. It is discussed in several passages in the text.

Analects 4.24: The master said, “One who possesses *dé* is never solitary; he is certain to have neighbors.”

Analects 9.14: The master expressed a desire to go and live among the Nine Yi Barbarian tribes. Someone asked him, “How could you bear with their uncouthness?” The Master replied, “If a gentleman were to dwell among them, what uncouthness would there be?”

Analects 12.19: The *dé* 德 of a gentleman is wind, the *dé* of a petty person is grass—when the wind blows, grass bends.

Analects 2.3: The master said, “Guide them with governance (*zhèng* 政), regulate them with punishments, and the people will evade them with no sense of shame. Guide them with *dé* 德, regulate them with ritual propriety, and the people will have a sense of shame and be orderly.”

These effects flow from one person to another, which is also known as dyadic spread (Christakis and Fowler 2009). What can spread from one node to another is not just influence or mood or behavior but also information, materials, or other resources.⁵

However, there is also hyperdyadic spread, which characterizes the tendency of effects to spread from node to node to node outside of a person's direct social ties and thus to ties of those ties. The more someone has ties to others, the more susceptible is one to the flows of information within it. Some passages in the classical Confucian literature express this relationship between the individual and the greater whole as going through several intermediary nodes or subnetworks, evoking a sense of oneness or unity greater than the self. We find this expressed in the *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning), a chapter in the *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Ritual*), an important early source of Confucian writings.

The ancients who wanted to manifest radiant *de* first ordered their states.
 Wanting to order their states they first aligned their familial clans.
 Wanting to align their familial clans they first cultivated their persons.
 Wanting to cultivate their persons they first set their minds straight.
 Wanting to set their minds straight they first made their intentions sincere.
 Wanting to make their intentions sincere they first reached understanding.
 Reaching understanding lies in getting a handle on affairs.⁶

Consequences at the level of the network (ordering the state) are linked to the influence of a particular node (the cultivated mind of the ruler, its central node). The passage continues:

So you get a handle on affairs and only then reach understanding,
 You reach understanding and your intentions become sincere,
 When your intentions are sincere your mind straightens.
 Your mind straightens and your person becomes cultivated
 Your person is cultivated and your family becomes harmonized.
 Your family is harmonized and your state becomes ordered
 Your state is ordered and there is tranquility under the skies
 From the node of the king to the nodes of the common people, all must take
 the cultivation of their own persons as the root (of everything else).⁷

It should be emphasized that such scrupulous self-attention was counseled not for everyone, but rather for those who sought positions of authority. As De Bary notes while discussing this theme in the *Analects*, “when Confucius speaks of the *chun-tzu* [jūnzǐ] as someone especially careful and restrained, one who is punctilious about not overstepping the bounds of what is right, it is not because he expects ordinary men to exercise the same circumspection or constrain themselves to the same degree, but because those he addresses have

a heightened visibility and potentially more far-reaching influence on others” (De Bary 1991, 29). Self-regulation is especially important when one is the main focus of an entire group’s attention.

The importance of self-regulation is heightened in proportion to the greater impact one can have on others through their shared focus (Sarkisian 2014). Because they occupy a stratum of society that has the possibility to influence the whole network, they believe they will be modeled by others, and so they perceive themselves from the point of view of the network, regulating their intentions and conduct by anticipating larger, wider network effects.

Put another way, if one both understands behavior as being obviously and significantly sensitive to immediate situational factors, *and* if one also wants to shape human behavior toward the end of social harmony, then one would do well to attempt to control those signals that promoted harmony and marshal them toward this end. So the emphasis on norms of self-scrutiny, personal decorum, and cultivated influence is intricately connected with certain entrenched views concerning the working of moral psychology.

The Sagely Node

The early Confucians believed in *virtue politics*—the idea that bringing about a state of harmony in the general population required a commitment to placing virtuous individuals in positions of power. Virtuous individuals would affect others through their *dé*, which would resonate out from the ruling class through the rest of the network, binding and shaping the superorganism. Of course, the Confucians themselves sought positions of power to embed themselves as key nodes within the network, yet a virtuous ruler was vital for the Confucian vision to succeed. A truly cultivated, virtuous, and charismatic ruler was believed capable of transforming the entire world by sheer power of his *dé*.

Analects 2.1: The master said, “One who governs by means of his *dé* is comparable to the Pole Star, which occupies its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars.”

Analects 8.18: The master said, “Majestic! Shun and Yu⁸ possessed the whole world without even managing it.”

Analects 15.5: The master said, “Someone who ruled without even acting (*wuwei* 無為)—was this not Shun? What did he do? He made himself reverent and took his proper position facing south—that is all!”

Here we find the telltale effects of *dé* on a grand scale. Rather than simply affecting those in his immediate presence, a ruler with *dé* was thought to affect an entire nation.

Indeed, one of the fundamental axioms of network theory is that the opportunities and constraints of any particular node—the degree to which it is both susceptible to network effects and capable of affecting the network—hinges on its *position* within the network (Borgatti et al. 2009, 894). The outsized effects of *dé* noted in the passages can be explained by the fact that they stemmed from a central position where resonance was most potent, keyed to the centrality of the ruler's node.

Following Freeman (1978), we can discriminate between three distinct measures of centrality in networks. The first concerns *degree*, or the extent to which a given node is directly connected to other nodes. The ruler, being at the center of the superorganism, is well positioned to be connected to more nodes more directly than most any other node in it. The second concerns *betweenness*, or the extent to which a node falls between pairs of other nodes within the network. The ruler, receiving tribute from the various noble houses in the realm, lies in between them all, for the ruler occupies the central node through which all resources and information follow. The third is *proximity*, or the number of nodes that any other node must go through to reach any other point in the network. It is thus a measure of access. The ruler has access to any other node through fewer intermediaries than any other node (say, a member of a noble house of a particular fiefdom). A ruler with *dé*, then, would influence and transform his senior ministers, who in turn would influence their subordinates, creating a linked chain of virtuous behavior that would be modeled down through the ranks of officials to village and clan leaders. Through ritual performance, personal excellence, and scrupulous devotion to the superorganism, the ruler would bind the network together.⁹

We find this reflected in passages even where the notion of a collective is not even salient, and even where the notion of *dé* is not even tokened. Consider, for example, *Analects* 13.3:

Analects 13.3: Zilu asked, “If the Duke of Wei were to employ you to serve in the government of his state, what would be your first priority?” The Master answered, “It would, of course, be the rectification of names (*zhengming* 正名).” Zilu said, “Could you, Master, really be so far off the mark? Why worry about rectifying names?”

The Master replied, “How boorish you are, Zilu! When it comes to matters that he does not understand, the gentleman should remain silent. If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practice and music will fail to flourish; when

ritual and music fail to flourish, punishments and penalties will miss the mark. And when punishments and penalties miss the mark, the common people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves. This is why the gentleman only applies names that can be properly spoken and assures that what he says can be properly put into action. The gentleman simply guards against arbitrariness in his speech. That is all there is to it.”

Here, I suggest that we have a striking example of the effect a single, weighty, embedded node can have on an entire network. It’s imperative that information is passed along without degradation or noise from this node.

Confucius is, of course, speaking counterfactually. He was not in a position to rule. And, as we noted in the quotations at the outset of this section, the ruler was not supposed to actively manage the state. Instead, the ruler was meant to attract other individuals of virtue to take up positions in his government, manning posts and embedding themselves in positions of influence. For example, we find the following passage in “The Doctrine of the Mean,” another chapter in the *Liji*: “Therefore the administration of government lies in procuring proper men. Such men are to be procured by [the attractive power of] the ruler’s own person. His person is to be cultivated by following the right *dào*, and he cultivates the right *dào* by means of his humankindness.”¹⁰ According to this passage, a virtuous ruler attracts good men by his side, who would, in turn, work tirelessly for the benefit of the ruler and his people. These ministers would be weighty nodes themselves, serving to enable the ruler to exercise his benevolent will while also constraining him by advising and exhorting him and thus providing for checks on mistakes.

Such a structure would allow the ruler to govern “effortlessly”—by just sitting on the throne (as it were), the heaviest, weightiest, most influential node in the network. After all, the ruler occupied the top position of a thoroughly hierarchical network system that demanded loyalty to those above, and powerful examples from above might have significant effects below. In the words of Bruce and Taeko Brooks, “if the ruler has the right qualities, those below will *spontaneously* acquire those qualities. We might call this the *assent* of the governed; their capacity to respond to good influence” (Brooks and Brooks 1998, 94).

Moving the Superorganism from the Periphery

We can understand this process of attracting individuals as one of constructing, node by node, the state superorganism. However, there was a fundamental structural challenge to the hopes of this model working. Becoming good *itself* (and in the first place) required influence from the right kinds of experienced

mentors, who were customarily *above* one in the social hierarchy. If the ruler was starkly deficient in virtue (as was the norm), who does he model? There is no one above him, no one to whom he ought to defer. Of course, Confucians such as Mencius would argue vehemently that the ruler ought to comply with his ministers (for example, *Mencius* 4A1, 6B8), but this was more aspiration than reality. In Wm. Theodore De Bary's memorable characterization, Mencius better exemplified "the fearlessness of the teacher in a classroom than that of the minister at court or the soldier in battle" (De Bary 1991, 16).¹¹ In practice, the Confucians had to defer to (and await recognition from) the rulers of the time, and otherwise lacked institutional support to remonstrate with them in any effective fashion.

Put another way, this is the problem of moving the superorganism by influencing the central node from the periphery. This highlights a concession or severe limitation in the Confucians' conception of cultivating *dé*—namely, the influence that accrues to an individual node by virtue of his or her position in the network. In a hierarchical system (such as the Confucians endorsed), one typically holds sway over one's peers and those beneath one in the social hierarchy. So it is likely that rulers were largely immune from the example of the nobleman, no matter how cultivated, owing to their superior position. The ruler would be tone-deaf to influence because others were expected to yield to him. Indeed, all of the paradigmatic examples of *dé* in the *Analects* have this very feature of working *down* the social ladder—from *jūnzǐ* to barbarian, from *jūnzǐ* to petty person, and from rulers to everyone else.

Experiments on social networks seem to provide us with some vindication of this. In an experimental study using a representative sample of 1.3 million Facebook users, Aral and Walker (2012) found that younger users of the platform were more susceptible to influence than older users, that men were more influential than women, that women influenced men more than they influenced other women, and that influential individuals were less susceptible to influence than noninfluential individuals were. Influential individuals cluster together in the network, whereas susceptible individuals do not. So influential people are instrumental in the spread of information throughout the network. Influential people are therefore instrumental in the spread of information throughout the network while also, and simultaneously, not being as susceptible to influence within it. They are loci of influence. They are sources of potency. They drive the superorganism.

De Bary called the problem of influencing bad rulers a key aspect of *The Trouble with Confucianism* (1991). If a system is strictly hierarchical, then who leads or guides the person at the apex? Various models were proposed in the classical period: Heaven (for the Mohists), the inheritance of the ancient Sage Kings (for Xunzi), the Dao (for Laozi). But these are all rather impersonal, abstract models. In practice, a ruler occupied power by virtue of occupying the

seat at the apex, and transforming *him* proved to be a thorny and delicate task. Indeed, the very fact that Mencius speaks so boldly with the various rulers of his time has been taken by some as *prima facie* evidence of the fictional status of these dialogues (Brooks and Brooks 1998). Petty persons might bend to the noblemen like grass to wind, but rulers were an entirely different story.

This doesn't impugn the general model of *dé*, or the idea of nodes influencing networks. However, it must be considered a fatal flaw in classical Confucianism political philosophy. A Confucian nobleman's goal was to wield influence and have real impact over social policies and practices, and knowing that such influence was often highly improbable led to much consternation about whether or not a Confucian should accept an official title; if one could not hope to transform one's ruler, should one accept the job? "In general, the noble man assumes office only when he can hope to influence the rulers. To accept office with an unsavory ruler whom one cannot possibly influence to the good is to justify the suspicion that one is motivated by a desire for emoluments and fame and not by the ideal of service. . . . [Yet] is it not the duty of the *shih* [scholar-official] to *attempt* to influence them?" (Schwartz 1985, 112). Seeking such influence and then failing at it could easily make one a tool for those in power, serving individuals with questionable or even immoral ends. The problem of wanting to serve and fulfill one's ethical obligation, but only when one can have some real expectation of exerting influence, and only in a way that will preserve one's own integrity, plagued Confucian philosophy from the *Analects* onwards. It is perhaps for these reasons that throughout the *Analects* there is an insistence that it's OK to be a political loser (so to speak) so long as one maintains one's integrity (for example, 1.1, 1.16, 4.5, 4.14, 11.19, 14.30, 15.19).¹²

Finally, it is not at all clear that, *even if* a virtuous ruler were to take the throne, the network model of *dé* could work on a scale envisioned by the early Confucian thinkers. Though Confucian, Mohist, and Legalist texts alike emphasize the ruler's crucial duty to place meritorious individuals in administrative posts and properly manage the kingdom's affairs, the means by which the ruler was to secure such individuals and assure their performance was a matter of dispute. Many, such as Han Fei, would come to doubt that the ruler's moral excellence could serve any useful role in the process of filling administrative posts and properly managing the kingdom's affairs.

Hanfeizi: When a sage governs a state, he does not wait for the people to be good in deference to him. Instead he creates a situation in which people find it impossible to do wrong. If you wait for people to be good in deference to you, you will find that there are no more than ten good people within the borders of your state. But if you create a situation in which you find it impossible to do wrong, the entire state can be brought into compliance. In governing, one

must use what is numerous and abandon what is scarce. Therefore, the sage does not work on his *de*, he works on his laws.

(Sahleen 2006, 354)

As others have noted, these and related passages in the Han Fei constitute a basic (and forceful) critique of the Confucian view of top-down, *dé*-inspired rulership models. The crux of Han Fei's criticism seems to be that such models, resting on the attractive and transformative power of moral example, are "impossibly idealistic, because they hopelessly over-estimate the number of people who can be transformed and made good through the power of virtue" (Hutton 2008, 429). Basing one's political philosophy on the appearance of such a ruler has been described as "ludicrous" (Liu 2006, 188–89). Hence, Han Fei and others emphasized clear laws and standards with manifest rewards and punishments. Put another way, such thinkers believed it was better to have a population that was law-abiding and compliant rather than to wait for a population to be transformed to the good because a virtuous ruler sat on the throne.

* * *

The sage kings were the central nodes of the early superorganisms. So long as a sage did not reappear, it could not be fully reconstituted. However, even though this ideal would not be realized, thinking of oneself as a node of influence on one's network can have purchase for us today. It can serve as a reminder that one may continuously exert influence over the broader course of one's social network just by occupying one's position in one's own distinctive way. We might tend to think of how we influence those around us in volitional terms, through discrete, agential actions. The early Confucians remind us that this is perhaps an overly simplistic view of things. We cannot be a node in a network without shaping it to one degree or other. And some of our networks (for example, our classrooms, our students, our families) will be influenced by us continually and in significant ways. Herbert Fingarette expresses this point nicely in a discussion of *ren* (what I've been translating as humankindness) that could just as well be a discussion of *dé*.

Let us attempt finally to place Confucius's own way of seeing *ren* in focus . . . and try to find an image that both distinctively and truly reflects Confucius's way of seeing *ren*. Such an image must suggest a power emanating from the actor. . . . Finally, this power is to be essentially human power; that is, it is a power of human beings (when they are truly human) and it is directed toward human beings and influences them. . . . It seems to me that the Western image that would serve best is one drawn from physics—the vector. In the case of *ren*, we should conceive of a directed force operating in actions in public space and

time, and having a person as initial point-source and a person as the terminal point on which the force impinges. The forces are human forces, of course, not mechanical ones.

(Fingarette 1972, 36–37)

Thinking through these issues from the Confucian perspective can serve to remind us of the forces that emanate from our own persons, and how they might be impinging upon others. This is a first, and necessary, step in uncovering, understanding, and ultimately shaping one's own *dé*.

Notes

1. P. J. Ivanhoe refers to neo-Confucian metaphysics as “heroic” while explicating the sense of oneness that can be found in their writings. He explains his choice of term as follows: “I mean by [heroic] that such beliefs would be very difficult for a modern person to embrace, since they cannot be reconciled with views that are now widely accepted by science. I find these traditional metaphysical views implausible, just as I find many of Plato’s views about value or Aristotle’s views about human nature, untenable” (2015, 231–32). I take it, then, that “heroic” may be amenable to a euphemistic reading. See Ivanhoe (2016) for further discussion of this term, in particular how it also reflects the strong ethical demands that such a metaphysical view entails.
2. Translations follow Slingerland 2003, with some modification.
3. Ziporyn draws support for his reading here by a particular interpretation of *tian* 天, or “Heaven,” as a kind of superorganism as well. As Ziporyn notes, the way that *tian* is presented in the *Analecets* reflects some middle position between referring to a personal agent as found in the *Mozi* (a contemporary rival school of thought), on the one hand, and referring to a thoroughly naturalized conception of nature or natural progression as we find in the *Xunzi* (a later Confucian text), on the other (2012, 95). He cites Ivanhoe for inspiration: “There are a number of ways in which one might attribute agency but not personality to Heaven. One way would be to see Heaven as a kind of collective will—a conception that as noted earlier can be found in the early Zhou sources. A jury can make judgments and assign guilt without being a single person or being of any kind. At a minimum though, Kongzi and Mengzi did regard Heaven as what Daniel Dennett calls ‘an intentional system’” (Ivanhoe 2007, 217n11). Ziporyn develops this idea in a particular direction, arguing that heaven “would be conceived along the lines of the collective body of ancestors . . . thought to maintain their personalities, their concern with specific purposes in the world, and their consciousness of their earthly life in inverse proportion to the length of time they had been dead” (Ziporyn 2012, 95).
4. So far as I know, no one has used resources from network theory to understand classical Confucian thought, though Karyn Lai has noted the appropriateness of thinking of the relationality of selfhood in the tradition in node-and-network terms: “The idea that people within a community participate in its moral life and enrich each other is a theme of profound significance in Confucian thought. In the Confucian scheme, each individual is a necessary and distinct node within a web-like network of different relationships. Engagement with others in society presents opportunities for self-fulfilment and development in that context. The harmonies that are created rely on

the concerted effort of people who are fine-tuned to each other and who are mutually responsive” (Lai 2006, 155). Similar statements are likely to be found in the secondary literature.

5. Cf. *Analects* 6.30: “Now he who exemplifies humankindness—by wanting to establish himself thereby establishes others, by wanting to advance himself thereby advances others.”
6. 古之欲明明德於天下者、先治其國。欲治其國者先齊其家。欲齊其家者先脩其身。欲脩其身者先正其心。欲正其心者先誠其意。欲誠其意者先致其知。致知在格物。My translations of the final two lines follow a suggested reading by Steve Angle and Justin Tiwald.
7. 物格而后知至。知至而后意誠。意誠而后心正。心正而后身脩。身脩而后家齊。家齊而后國治。國治而后天下平。自天子以至於庶人、壹是皆以脩身爲本。
8. Mythical heroes and sage-rulers of antiquity, venerated by the Confucian and Mohist schools.
9. A ruler might quickly cultivate his *dé* by bestowing favors on his subjects, who would in turn feel “generosity-gratitude” toward him (Nivison 2002, 234). These feelings of gratitude and indebtedness would be amplified by socialization forces in Chinese culture demanding that individuals display gratitude and respect whenever favors are bestowed upon them. In this way, a natural sense of gratitude would be amplified by social norms and serve as powerful sources for a ruler’s accumulating moral power through a grateful and lovingly obedient population.
10. 故為政在人，取人以身，修身以道，修道以仁。
11. The problem extends to other social relations as well. Consider the family: children may remonstrate with their parents when appropriate, but if their counsel falls on deaf ears they must desist and obey without resentment (*Analects* 4.18). Indeed, a filial son must cleave to the ways of his father even after the latter has passed away, and for the entirety of the three-year mourning period; only then could he consider departing from his father’s example (*Analects* 1.11).
12. There is the separate question of whether the fact that most of Confucius’s disciples failed to achieve office impugns Confucius’s teachings. Confucius himself was a failure in this regard, and at times appears to admit that his work is doomed (5.27, 14.38). Elsewhere, he expresses doubts as to whether Heaven has abandoned him and his mission (9.9, 11.9), and is subject to mocking by his contemporaries (3.18, 14.32). The issue of his disciples’ failures has received comparatively little scholarly attention, but is given excellent treatment in Wong and Loy (2001).

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