

CONFUCIAN ROLE ETHICS: A MODEL FOR 21st CENTURY HARMONY?

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Exemplary persons help the needy; they do not make the rich richer.¹

Analects 8.6

George Orwell might have had the date wrong, but the horrible world he described in *1984* could yet become a reality if current geopolitical trends continue unchecked.

As competition within and between nations grows more fierce, as more states are failing and/or engulfed in civil wars, as resources become more scarce, as ideologies become more absolutist, and – most important – as the disparity between the haves and the have nots grows ever wider with terrorism becoming ever more common in response, we can see the slaughters, economic dislocations, and environmental destruction characterizing the early years of this century as harbingers of what might well be the future.²

Globalization activities are arguably responsible for many of the problems currently destabilizing the world, and their potential for improving the lot of mankind will remain unrealized, I believe, until and unless those activities are regulated by an international authority with many of the trappings of a world government. Just as the United States would quickly degenerate if each of the 50 member states developed their own economic, legal and foreign policies with respect to the other 49 – and the same holds true for China -- so, too, may we expect much, if not most of international affairs to degenerate unless there is an international organization with sufficient authority to bring harmony out of the present growing discord. It is clear, to me at least, that the “invisible hand” of unbridled capitalism cannot wield the needed baton. If harmony is a goal, then democratic procedures and processes should be cooperative rather than competitive in spirit, and those procedures must govern much in the economic realm as well; the good must be seen as an objective possibility for all rather than subjectively determined privately for each of the almost 7 billion people now living, thus placing us in competition – democratic or otherwise – with those who define the good differently.

But “harmony” is not a common term in contemporary political and moral discourse in the West, in part because it seems incompatible with the capitalist ethos of rugged individualism, competition, and self-interest, enlightened we hope, but

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¹*Analects* 6.4. All citations to this text are from the translation by Roger Ames and myself (Random House/Ballantine Books, 1999), which I have modified on occasion.

²The best-selling *Guns, Germs & Steel* by Jared Diamond, among many such books, takes up these themes. W.W. Norton & Co., 1999.

selfish we know. To many, these qualities are valuable, or at the least, in the nature of things. Immanuel Kant, for example, described human beings in terms of:

“...the unsocial sociability of men...bound together with a mutual opposition which constantly threatens to break up the society. ...he has a strong propensity to isolate himself from others, ... expects opposition on all sides because, in knowing himself, ... he knows he is inclined to oppose others. This opposition it is which awakens all his powers, brings him to conquer his inclination to laziness and, propelled by vainglory, lust for power, and avarice, to achieve a rank among his fellows whom he cannot tolerate but from whom he cannot withdraw. Thus are taken the first steps from barbarism to culture. . . . Thanks be to Nature, then, for the incompatibility, for heartless competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and to rule!”³

Although diametrically opposed to Mencius on human nature, Kant optimistically believed the continuing development of reason would eventually bring about an end to discord, but it would be harder to find a more secure foundation for the morality of capitalism than is found in these lines of his. And with 200+ years of hindsight, we can say that his faith in the triumph of reason has proved unwarranted.

Many other philosophers, theologians, legal and political theorists have thought along similar lines. I chose Kant because he also wrote the first treatise that discussed morality between nations at some length, and his *Perpetual Peace* hints at a world government of sorts, what he called “A league of peace” (*foedus pacificum*).⁴

Without something resembling Kant’s “league of peace,” a world government of sorts, I personally hold little hope for a more peaceful and prosperous world. The United Nations is clearly the prime candidate for such an institution, but for reasons that would not surprise Kant, it is a fairly ineffectual organization largely due to the consistent efforts of the United States and, increasingly, China -- as well as France, England and Russia --because of its growing economic and hence political influence of in world affairs. Although it has accomplished much in some areas, the U.N. is not capable of effectively halting genocide, much less protecting the environments and resources of the earth, regulating trade, commerce, and immigration, or in preventing wars.

The major reason for the obstinacy of the US, China, and other powerful nations in refusing to grant greater authority to the UN is that the grant would *eo ipso* curb the freedom of these countries to do whatever they pleased, and would soon prove very expensive because the poorer and less powerful nations -- a solid majority of UN member states -- could reasonably be expected to quickly enact legislation redistributing some of the world’s wealth toward themselves. It is thus no real surprise that the most democratic element of the UN -- the General Assembly -- is toothless, and what action there is at the UN takes place in the Security Council. It is

³“Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” in *On History*, by Immanuel Kant, translated by Lewis White Beck. Bobbs-Merrill Library of Liberal Arts, 1981, pp. 15-16.

⁴“Perpetual Peace,” *Ibid.*, p.100.

difficult to imagine any greater hindrance to democratic governance than to give 5 out of 191 members of the organization absolute veto power over any legislation.

There is clearly very little harmony in evidence at the UN, and unfortunately, many people are happy about that, owing to their beliefs about capitalism, about laws, about human rights and about human nature.(and about the organization itself; both corruption and inefficiency have marred the UN's reputation).

These views underlying hostility to the UN, especially the democratic General Assembly, are by no means new; they go back at least to the founding of the United States as an independent nation.

When the U.S. Constitution was promulgated in 1787 it was the most democratic political instrument in history. To be sure, women, slaves, people under twenty-one years of age, lawbreakers and the mentally deranged had no suffrage, but many more men were eligible to participate in government than had ever been the case in the past, even including Periclean Athens.

This is not to say that the Founding Fathers universally held their fellow human beings in higher esteem than Kant (although some of them probably did). It was to curb the excesses of the masses that an elaborate system of checks and balances were instituted. Democracy there might be, but not too much of it; hence an appointed Senate, electoral college, and many more constraints were placed on the ability of the electorate to determine the policies of the country. The rhetoric then as now has been that such constraints were necessary in order to prevent a tyrannical majority from imposing its will on minorities. These latter are usually seen as religiously circumscribed, but that is not what the framers of the Constitution had in mind. James Madison was remarkably candid about the matter: "In England, at this day, if elections were open to all classes of people the property of landed proprietors would be insecure. An agrarian law would soon take place." Therefore, he went on, "Our government ought to secure the permanent interests of the country against innovation." Which could best be accomplished by a system of checks and balances "so as to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority."⁵

Madison later came to be horrified at the unconscionable greed of the "opulent minority" and began himself to have more faith in the common man,⁶ but the deed was done, and its effects clearly visible in the country today, where the 6,126 taxpayers who made more than \$10 million dollars in 2004 each received approximately \$520, 000 in tax cuts⁷, which will continue at least until 2012 now that the cuts have been renewed by the 111th Congress just prior to its adjournment in 2010.

⁵Quoted in Noam Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects*. South End Press, 1999, p.117, which contains the reference. At other times Madison was supportive of "innovation," so long as it enhanced "private rights and public happiness." See *America's Constitution*, by Akhil Reed Amar. Random House, 2005, p.42.

⁶Gordon S. Wood, "How Democratic is the Constitution?" in the *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 23, 2006, p.27.

⁷*New York Times*, April 5, 2006, p. C4.

For myself, I believe that if increasingly diverse communities, ethnic and religious groupings, and nation states are to live together in amity not enmity, and so democratically, it is necessary to fundamentally alter the conception of what it is to be a human being that currently undergirds virtually all political, legal, and moral thinking today, and dominates the discourse on these issues as they are shaped by the government of the United States, and pretty much shared by so-called liberals and conservatives alike.

The altered concept I wish to propose has a number of similarities with the way human beings have been viewed in the three Abrahamic religious traditions, wherein each person is defined as standing in a basic set of relations to deity. But these Abrahamic views, important as they are, cannot conceptually ground dialogues for peace and social justice efforts, or the search for a more international system of governance, both because deity is construed somewhat differently by Jews, Christians and Muslims – not to mention Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Daoists, Sikhs, and the adherents of other faith traditions – and also because tens of millions of people do not accept the concept of deity at all.

The view I will advance defines human beings most fundamentally as standing in sets of relations, not with deity, but with other human beings living and dead, a view first articulated in the texts of classical Confucianism, wherein the absence of the concept of a creator deity in no way attenuates the moral, political and spiritual insights to be found in them. The concept of harmony looms large in these texts, and to my mind the concept is essential for genuine intercultural dialogues, dialogues enhanced by taking place between role-bearing cooperating persons rather than rights-bearing competing individuals.

But before elaborating the Confucian vision in the context of harmony, I must first sketch in greater detail some more of my criticisms of the concept of the rights-bearing individual as that concept is found in most contemporary legal, economic, political and moral thinking, especially in human rights discourse: human beings are basically abstract individuals, individuals who are free, and in addition, are defined as rational, autonomous and self-interested.

John Locke basically proffered this definition to argue for a number of universal human rights,⁸ which he employed in part as a conceptual check on the divine right of kings as articulated by defenders of monarchical power. Much good has come from this individualistic conception of persons, and the many gains in human dignity it has brought about are to be celebrated. The U.S. has been at the forefront of championing individualism, and has linked it to democracy, which is why so many peoples of the world enduring dictatorial governments have been inspired by the U.S. model.

But the dark side of individualism is coming increasingly to the fore as the growing maldistribution of wealth both within and between nations becomes starker, as transnational corporations become less accountable to any political or legal institutions in their search for ever greater profits, and as the policies and actions of the United States, adamant in pressing this unfettered capitalism grounded in rugged

⁸Throughout Book II of the *Second Treatise on Government*, especially Chapter 8.

individualism on all nations, are doing more to exacerbate than alleviate the gross inequalities that contribute so much to the violence in so much of the contemporary world. This dark side of the ethics of the abstract individual is that when freedom is weighted far more heavily than social justice, the political, legal and moral instruments employed in defending and enhancing that freedom virtually insure that social justice will not be achieved, as I have already hinted at above (with reference to the UN).

To see more closely how and why this is so, consider the U.S. Bill of Rights, enshrining many of Locke's views as amended by Thomas Jefferson and focusing on freedom: of speech, of association, of worship, and to freely own and freely dispose of property legally acquired. Clearly these civil and political rights – now regularly referred to as “first-generation” rights – are linked to the individualistic view of persons: if I am essentially free, and rational, self-interested and autonomous, then certainly no one else, especially a government, should interfere with my speaking my mind, worshipping as I choose, or associating with whomever I wish, as I pursue the projects I have chosen for myself.

It must be noted however, that these civil and political rights are passive, in that they are solely focused on freedom *from*, which can be seen from the fact that I can fully respect all of your civil and political rights simply by ignoring you; of course you have a right to speak, but not to have me listen.

To appreciate the significance of this passivity, or “negative liberty” as Isaiah Berlin defended it,⁹ we must look to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights,¹⁰ which in addition to the civil and political, also lists a number of social, economic and cultural rights, such as the right to a job, education, health care, decent housing, and much more. (Articles 22-27). These “second generation” rights are active rather than passive, concerned as much with freedom *to* as freedom *from*. They are active in the sense that there are certain things I must do if you are to secure the benefits of these rights – at the least, pay more taxes.

By simply listing all rights *seriatim* the Universal Declaration implies that they are compatible with each other,¹¹ but unfortunately they are not, for if I acknowledge your rights claims to housing, health care, a job, and so on, then I must actively help you obtain them so that you may pursue your own projects. But then I would no longer be fully free to self-interestedly pursue *my* own projects, and consequently I am strongly inclined to deny that you have legitimate social, economic and cultural

⁹*Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1992.

¹⁰Published in many places, including *The United Nations & Human Rights 1945-95*. United Nations Press, 1995. The Universal Declaration is Document 8, pp153-55.

¹¹Many people of good will have insisted on the inseparability of all the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration. See, for example, Sumner B. Twiss, “A Constructive Framework for Discussing Confucianism & Human Rights,” in *Confucianism & Human Rights*, ed. Wm. T de Bary and Tu Weiming, Columbia University Press, 1998. I endorse this argument wholeheartedly from a political point of view, but cannot do so logically; the putative inconsistency I raise here I have also raised elsewhere, and has never been responded to in any way to the best of my knowledge.

rights at all. That I, too, could secure the material benefits accompanying second generation rights is no counter to this argument if I believe I can secure these material benefits on my own, or in some freely chosen, rational contractual form in conjunction with a few others. Nor can it be replied that I may freely choose to assist you on my own, for this would be an act of charity, not an acknowledgement of your rights to these goods.

Unlike most other nations, the US defines “persons” in such a way that the first-generation civil and political rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights can be used to thwart democracy and hinder social justice. “Person” is defined officially in the US “to include any individual, branch, partnership, associated group, association, estate, trust, corporation or other organization (whether or not organized under the laws of any State), or any government entity.”¹² Such “persons” pay lobbyists large sums of money to influence legislation that affects them, and they can pay the media large sums of money to “spin” the legislation so that it misleadingly appears to be to everyone’s benefit, from giving away public lands and resources to extraction companies, to subsidizing oil companies, defense contractors and other major corporations, to repeated tax cuts for the wealthy.

Consequently, if I am well off I will be strongly disinclined to see second-generation rights as truly rights, for I would surely be less “free” and not as well off if they were. Rather will I want to elect officials who will see them as “hopes” or aspirations” as the U.S. Senate has done when it consistently refuses to ratify the U.N. International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (as all other developed countries have done, and many others as well).¹³ Former UN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick was more explicit, referring to social, economic and cultural rights as “letters to Santa Claus,”¹⁴ while her successor Morris Abrams described such notions as “little more than an empty vessel into which vague hopes and inchoate expectations can be poured.”¹⁵

Thus, without diminishing the great importance of first generation civil and political rights when applied to flesh and blood human beings, and with admiration for the national and international NGOs that police their abuse,¹⁶ it must nevertheless be emphasized that when taken to the personal and corporate levels, respect for first generation rights doesn’t cost very much, requires very little effort, is a bulwark protecting the rich and powerful, and has thus become a hindrance to the implementation of second-generation rights, and attendant social justice both nationally and internationally.

¹²*Survey of Current Business* 76:12. U.S. Dept. of commerce, Dec., 1996. Quoted in Noam Chomsky, *Rogue States*, South End Press, 2000, p.117.

¹³*Human Rights: International Instruments*. United Nations Press, 1998, p.10.

¹⁴*Rogue States, op.cit.*, p.113.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Especially, but not confined to, exemplary groups like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, School of the Americas Watch, and Witness for Peace.

But only if human beings are defined as most fundamentally free, rational, self-interested and autonomous individuals is it possible to feel morally justified in doing nothing with respect to alleviating the unemployment, inadequate housing, lack of health care, poverty, disease and much else that make for wretched lives on the part of far too many of our fellow citizens (i.e., the miseries second-generation rights are intended to obviate), a moral stance taken by not a few U.S. governments, and virtually every national and transnational capitalist corporation – which, again, are legally construed as individuals with regard to first generation rights. When the wretchedness of the poor becomes impossible to ignore for a few moments (e.g., New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina) there was a great deal of sympathetic feelings and offers of aid on the part of most average Americans, but for many in government, media, and the punditocracy, a “blame the victim” argument was regularly put forward despite its clear absurdity.

This, then, all too sketchily, is the dark side conceptually of viewing human beings most basically as individuals, and valuing individual freedom above all else: we too easily lose sight of our sociality, our obligations to others, our common humanity; liberty is purchased at the expense of social justice, and democracy is seen largely as an arena in which competing interest groups do battle. In such an intellectual climate – reinforced by international legal and other institutions dominated by the U.S. – there is little reason to hope that a more equitable distribution of the world’s goods will ever take place, or attendant violence to diminish, or world peace achieved. Harmony will elude us.

Now it might seem that by challenging the concept of individual freedom I am at least implicitly championing a collectivism of some sort, Stalinist or Fascist. But individualism and collectivism do not exhaust our social and political possibilities any more than selfishness and altruism exhaust our moral possibilities. These Manichean splits are modern Western conceits, and basically serve as rhetorical support for maintaining the individualistic status quo. If all challenges to individuals making individual choices in their own self-interest in capitalist societies can be made to appear as subtle endorsements for the gulags, killing fields and labor re-education camps, then obviously we must give three cheers for individualism and capitalism, drowning out all dissent. But if the status quo is grossly unjust, and to the extent the status quo is justified by appeals to individualistic and competitive conceptions of economics, government, democracy, human rights, and morality, to at least that extent do we need to consider other views of what it is to be a human being.

One candidate for such a view, suitably modified for the contemporary world, is that of the classical Confucians, whose texts provide significant conceptual resources for forging new pathways to national and international social justice, and democratic global concord. One of the very strong pulls of individualism is that it seems to preserve, and at times enhance, our unique individuality; none of us wishes to be no more than a face in the crowd. But although the concept of a purely abstract, autonomous, free, self-interested individual self is altogether alien to classical Confucianism, their texts do indeed allow, indeed require, each of us to be unique with respect to others, and to be seen as unique by those others. To elaborate and

defend this claim I must proffer briefly my own reading and interpretation of those texts.

The *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Xunzi* and the *Records of Ritual (Li Ji)* are by no means in full accord on all points, and there are several tensions within each text itself; they nevertheless present an overall coherent view of human beings, and the good life for human beings. This life is an altogether social one, and central to understanding it is to see that Confucian sociality has aesthetic, moral, and spiritual no less than political and economic dimensions, all of which are to be integrated.

None of the early texts address the question of the meaning of life, but they do put forward a vision of being human, and a discipline in which everyone can find meaning in life¹⁷. This meaning will become increasingly apparent to us as we pursue our ultimate goal, namely, developing ourselves most fully as human beings to become *jun zi*, “exemplary persons,” or, at the pinnacle of development, *sheng*, or sages. And for Confucians we can only do this through our interactions with other human beings. Treading this human path (*ren dao*) must be ultimately understood basically as a religious quest, even though the canon speaks not of God, nor of creation, salvation, an immortal soul, or a transcendental realm of being; and no prophecies will be found in its pages either. It is nevertheless a truly religious path, yet at the same time a humanistically oriented one; for Confucius, we are irreducibly social, as he makes clear in the *Analects*: “I cannot run with the birds and beasts. Am I not one among the people of their world? If not them, with whom can I associate?” (18:6)

Thus the Confucian self is not a free, autonomous individual, but is to be seen relationally: I am a son, husband, father, grandfather, teacher, student, friend, colleague, neighbor, and more. I live, rather than “play” these roles, and when all of them have been specified, and their interrelationships made manifest, I have been fairly thoroughly uniquely individuated, but with very little left over with which to piece together an autonomous individual self, free to rationally conclude mutually advantageous contracts with other rational individuals each seeking their own self-interest.

While this view may seem initially strange, it is actually straightforward: in order to *be* a friend, neighbor, or lover, for example, I must *have* a friend, neighbor, or lover. Other persons are not merely accidental or incidental to my goal of fully developing as a human being, they are essential to it; indeed they confer unique personhood on me, for to the extent that I define myself as a teacher, students are necessary to my life, not incidental to it. Note in this regard also, that, again, while Confucianism should be seen as fundamentally religious, there are no solitary monks or nuns, anchorites or anchoresses, or hermits to be found in the tradition.

Our first and most basic role, one that significantly defines us in part throughout our lives, is as children; familial deference/reverence (*xiao*) is one of the highest excellences in Confucianism.

¹⁷This distinction was first made, I believe, by Kurt Baier in “The Meaning of Life,” in Morris Weitz, ed., *Twentieth Century Philosophy: The Analytic Tradition*. CollierMacmillan, 1966.

From our beginning roles as children – and as siblings, playmates, and pupils – we mature to become parents ourselves, and assume many other roles and responsibilities as well, all of which are reciprocal relationships, best generalized as holding between benefactors and beneficiaries. Each of us moves regularly from benefactor to beneficiary and back again, depending on the other(s) with whom we are interacting, when, and under what conditions. When young, I was largely beneficiary of my parents; when they were aged and infirm, I became their benefactor, and the converse holds for my children. I am benefactor to my friend when she needs my help, beneficiary when I need hers. I am a student of my teachers, teacher of my students, colleague of my colleagues. Taken together, the manifold roles we live define us as persons. And the ways in which we meet the obligations attendant on these relational roles, and the ways others meet similar obligations toward us, are both the ways whereby we achieve dignity, satisfaction, and meaning in life.

From this emphasis on familial deference it should be clear that at the heart of Confucian society is indeed the family, the locus of where, how, and why we develop into full human beings. There have been several communitarian movements opposed to individualism in the West, but they have tended to focus on larger ways of circumscribing the communities: on the basis of religion, or of national citizenship, ethnicity, language, and so forth. Only in Confucianism is the family the center of the communitarianism which then extends outward.¹⁸

A central government is also important to the good society, because there are necessary ingredients of human flourishing – especially economic – which the family (and local community) cannot secure on their own. The early Confucians saw the state not as in any way in opposition to the family, but rather saw both as complementary; stated in contemporary democratic terms, if we wish to live in a state that insists I meet my fatherly responsibilities, it should insure that I have the wherewithal – i.e., an education, job, etc. – to do so, and not simply decry my laziness or stupidity for failing to do so – “blame the victim” again. Similarly, this state must assume responsibility for the well-being of those who have no family networks for support. In his essay “The Regulations of a King,” Xunzi instructed the ruler as follows:

In the case of those who belong to the five incapacitated [i.e., handicapped] groups, the government should gather them together, look after them and give them whatever work they are able to do. Employ them, provide them with food and clothing, and take care to see that none are left out.¹⁹ And he further instructs the ruler to:

¹⁸Indeed, in several of the utopian communitarian societies, like the Oneida community or the Shakers, the family as generally defined was *disvalued*. For a discussion of how family values can be liberatory rather than suffocating and oppressive, see “Humane Family Values,” by Michelle Switzer and Henry Rosemont, Jr., unpublished manuscript.

¹⁹Translation somewhat modified from Burton Watson, *Hsun Tzu: Basic Writings*. Columbia University Press, 1963, p.35.

Select those who are worthy and good for office, promote the kind and respectful, encourage filiality and fraternity, look after orphans, widows, and the poor; then the people will feel safe and at ease with their government²⁰.

These are remarkable passages. Xunzi is insisting that the government provide extensive social security and welfare services to the needy – well over two millennia ago.

Further, he requires it for just those people who could not pose any threat to the government; he is not merely urging the king to buy off potential troublemakers. And even more remarkable, by requiring the government to find jobs for all who can hold them, Xunzi displays an insight uncommon even today: welfare cannot be effective if it simply keeps people as beneficiaries; to live with dignity, everyone must also be able to acquire the wherewithal to be benefactor as well, they must have something to give to their community.

The ideal Confucian society is thus basically communally oriented, with customs, tradition, rituals, ceremonies and manners serving as the binding force of and between our many relationships to one another. This, then, in woefully brief compass, is Confucian humanism in action as I read the early texts: interacting with others as benefactors and beneficiaries in an intergenerational context. Confucius himself was absolutely clear on this point, for when a disciple asked him what he would most like to do, he said:

I would like to bring peace and contentment to the aged, to share relationships of trust and confidence with friends, and to love and protect the young (5:26)
 Much more, of course, needs to be said about the early Confucian view of what it is to be a human being, but I believe much more *can* be said. The concept of the family can be retained, for example, while making women equals to men, and it can be enhanced by allowing two (or more) nurturers of the same sex to be responsible for child-rearing and care of the elderly – both with state help. Neither sexism, racism, nor homophobia are logical implications of the Confucian family and larger political system.²¹ It must be noted that if the goal of human life is to develop one's humanity to the utmost, and to help others do the same, then we have a clear criterion for measuring the worth and quality of our interactions in the families and communities to which we belong; we are not merely to accept them as unalterable givens. Rather must we consistently ask to what extent our interactions and communities conduce to everyone's efforts to realize (make real)²² their potential? That is to say, while deference and loyalty were given great weight, and had to be learned and practiced,

²⁰*Ibid.*, p.37. I have dealt at length with the significance of these and other views of Xunzi's in my "State & Society in the *Xunzi*: A Philosophical Commentary," in *Virtue, Nature and Agency in the Xunzi*, ed. T.C. Kline, III & Philip J. Ivanhoe. Hackett Pub. Co., 2000.

²¹ For further argumentation, see my "Classical Confucian & Contemporary Feminist Perspectives on the Self," in *Culture & Self*, ed. Douglas Allen, Westview, 1997. See also the essays gathered by Chenyang Li in *The Sage & The Second Sex*. Open Court Pub. Co., 2000.

²²See the Introduction to the *Analects*, *op. cit.*, p.55.

remonstrance was obligatory when things were not going well. As the Master said, “To see what it is appropriate to do, and not do it, is cowardice.”(2.24).

It is clear that persons living in accord with a role ethics will take second generation social, economic and cultural rights very seriously, while necessarily remaining sensitive to the civil and political, all in the effort to achieve harmony. That is to say, immediate concern for securing and implementing second generation rights would not, in a Confucian role ethics, come at the expense of first generation civil and political rights. If you and I can only flourish as we help each other realize our full humanity as benefactors and beneficiaries, why would I want to silence you, not let you choose your other friends, or follow whichever faith tradition inspires you? That is to say, with role-bearing persons as our philosophical foundation, moving from second to first generation rights is conceptually and attitudinally straightforward: if my flourishing is dependent on your flourishing, why would I want to degrade you, stifle your creativity, or ignore your poverty or other afflictions?

But the converse does not hold. It requires a cognitive (and affective) shift to move from respecting civil and political rights passively to actively helping others obtain the benefits attendant on respecting social, economic and cultural rights. And the history of the U.S. provides little grounds for expecting the shifts to take place: It is now 220 years since civil and political rights became the law of the land, yet over 20% of American children are growing up in families whose income is below the poverty line, three million people are estimated as being homeless, and over two million are in prison. Many millions remain without health care even as Republicans regather to overturn the recent health care bill that provided for many of the nation’s poor. Private pension plans are being unilaterally abolished and abandoned, while at the same time the wealthiest 5% have enjoyed three substantial tax cuts beginning in 2001²³. Thus far those cuts have already given roughly \$93,500 to every millionaire (about \$215 to middle income folk, and of course nothing at all to those at the bottom of the economic ladder).²⁴ And to protect and increase that wealth, the government has more than doubled its defense budget from 1998 to 2010 despite the earlier end of the Cold War with the breakup of the Soviet Union.²⁵

To redress these immoral imbalances at home, and to cease being a terror in the politics among nations abroad, US citizens must begin to see, feel, and believe themselves to be more basically socially dependent beings than independent, isolated individuals, and that view must gain more currency in other countries as well. Each of these views can become self-fulfilling prophecies, so we must ask which of them is more conducive to a more peaceful and just world.

I opt for the Confucian model of role-bearing persons interacting cooperatively, because with it the goal of human concord – harmony – stands a better chance of

²³Sources for all these figures are in my “Two Loci of Authority,” in *Confucian Cultures of Authority*, ed. Peter Hershock & Roger T. Ames. SUNY Press, 2006.

²⁴*Providence Sunday Journal*, Jan. 29, 2006, p.A4.

²⁵Nicolas J.S. Davies, “The U.S. Military Budget & the Threat to China,” *Z Magazine*, Jan., 2011.

being realized than the rights-bearing, competitive because self-seeking individual does. And harmony should indeed be a goal, because the positive elements of individualism – especially our unique personhood – need not be sacrificed in the struggle to achieve the goal. As Confucius said, “The exemplary person (*junzi*) seeks harmony (*he*), not sameness.” (13.23)

Think of music, as Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi often do in the early texts. Each part must retain its distinct features if the goal (realizing the piece of music) is to be achieved: sopranos, altos, tenors and basses must all be true to themselves, so to speak, in order for the chorale to be a beautiful piece of music. This is what harmony means, it is not a metaphoric stretch.

Or think of food (as the Master and his followers also did frequently) To make an appetizing dish, as my colleague Roger Ames has often noted in this regard, a number of different ingredients must be combined in such a way as to retain their distinctive flavors while yet blending together -- in harmony – to produce a palate appealing dish, as discussed, for example, the early text *Spring & Autumn Annals of Master Lu*:

In combining your ingredients to achieve a harmony (*he*), you have to use the sweet, sour, bitter, acrid, and the salty, and you have to mix them in an appropriate sequence and proportion. Bringing the various ingredients together is an extremely subtle art in which each of them has its own expression.²⁶

In the same way, if we wish to bring harmony to our families, so must each of us utilize our unique talents and abilities within the unique set of roles we live as benefactor here and beneficiary there, and then come to extend ourselves beyond the family to larger communities, the nation, the world – which is ultimately a path of spiritual self-cultivation.²⁷ Obviously we cannot do any of these things if we are only faceless parts of some collective. But, keeping the imagery of the family clearly in mind, neither as children, parents, grandparents or other close relatives can or should we devote much time and energy to looking after our own interest, but trust others to look after ours as we look after theirs.

It must be noted that harmony can only be achieved against the background of an agreed-upon goal: the masterful performance of a motet or symphony, the creation of the gustatory delight, the flourishing of the family. Other goals can also be reached most successfully against the background of the concept of harmony, including goals in which cultural values figure prominently. In recent work Charles Ess, for example, has noted that with the goal of establishing an internationally acceptable information ethics, privacy concerns are of great importance, yet there are major conceptual differences between how privacy is seen in China and the US – which could be expected -- but more than that, he found significant differences between the US and

²⁶Roger regularly used recipes as examples of harmony while yet preserving the uniqueness of the components in his lectures, and it was he who was responsible for inserting this quote into n.216 of our *Analects* translation (pp.254-58).

²⁷For elaboration, see my *Rationality & Religious Experience*. Open Court Pub. Co., 2001.

Norway on the issue. Yet, although for different reasons, all three countries have signed on to the relevant protocols. He then compares the differing conceptions of privacy in China, Hong Kong, and Germany – where concord was also reached – and sums up his analysis as follows:

This interpretive . . . pluralism . . . holds together through a shared focus on “privacy” despite what remain deep and irreducible cultural differences with regard to the meaning of “privacy,” as interpreted through the very different lenses of what each culture presumes about human beings . . . and with regard to the rationale for and implementation of data privacy protection laws.

In doing so, this interpretive pluralism thus preserves distinctive cultures, histories and traditions of both East and West – while articulating shared (but not always identical) points of ethical agreement needed for a global Information Ethics intended for an interconnected and interdependent global society.²⁸

The claim that Ess is making mirrors one of my own exactly, namely, that harmony can be achieved when goals (goods) can be agreed upon and their achievement objectively ascertained, despite significantly differing value orderings definitive of the several cultures involved in the dialogic process. And if much can be accomplished even with very different conceptions of what it is to be a human being, and given the centrality of the United States in all international affairs, how much more cross-cultural harmony might be achieved if rights-bearing individuals in the US began to give pride of place to their role-bearing brethren. That is to say, while there are differing orderings of values among nations with respect to matters of freedom, poverty, law, and much else, everyone knows what it is to be a son or a daughter, and why grandmothers should, *ceteris paribus*, be listened to.

Much more needs to be said about the adaptability of a Confucian role ethics to a global context, but it just might bring the peoples of the world closer together, both within and between nation states.²⁹

An idealistic vision perhaps, but the realities of the world today are sufficiently ugly that a strong sense of idealism seems to be rationally and morally obligatory, and the Confucian vision, especially as it leads us spiritually outward from the family to encompass the whole human race past, present and future,³⁰ has strong resonances – another musical term – with significant strains of Western thought as well, and hence need not be considered altogether a foreign import. The 17th Century – pre-Enlightenment – metaphysical poet and Anglican cleric John Donne wrote in his most famous meditation:

²⁸“Ethical Pluralism & Global Information Ethics.” In Luciano Floridi and Julian Savulescu, eds., “Information Ethics: Agents, Artifacts, & New Cultural Perspectives,” a special issue of *Ethics & Information Technology*, forthcoming. I am grateful to Ess for sharing his manuscript with me.

²⁹Roger Ames and I have been the development of a role ethics in the “Introduction” to our translation of *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*. University of Hawai’i Press, 2010.

³⁰See n.27.

No man is an island, entire unto itself. . . .
Any man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in Mankind.
And therefore do not send to know for whom the Bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.³¹

I have often quoted these lines, for they evidence a paradigmatically Confucian sensibility. As everyone is aware, the concept of ritual propriety – the *li* – is central for the philosophy of Confucius, and he makes clear why it is: “Achieving harmony (*he*) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety.” (1.15)

And it may be the most important function of taking seriously the early Confucian texts today – not alone in China -- in our search for a better world.³²

³¹*No man is an island*, ed. Rivers Scott. The Folio Society, 1997. Meditation XVII, p. 75

³²Parts of this essay have been published in different venues in recent years.