CONFUCIANISM AND TOLERATION

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I. What is Confucianism?

In contexts of political philosophy, Confucianism is frequently identified as a culture with a long evolving history in China, with branches in other countries such as Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia that were amalgamated with other local cultures, and now with a broader diaspora. In the diaspora, Confucianism usually is associated with local enclaves of East Asian people situated in other countries like "China towns." All these parts of Confucian culture have been historically evolving and have differed from one another by how they have adapted to the larger cultural contexts. But they have continuity with one another by lineages of interpretation of core texts among the intellectuals and habits of social and ritual formation, such as an emphasis on family and filial piety. In these contexts of political philosophy, it frequently seems beside the point for non-East Asians to claim to be Confucians unless they "go native" in some East Asian culture.[1]

Viewed this way, toleration in Confucianism becomes an historical question. Some cultures named Confucian have been very tolerant of other religious philosophies, of diverse ethnic groups, of differing social practices concerning food, sexuality, and lifestyle issues, and other so-called Confucian cultures have been intolerant in regards such as these.[2] Some Confucian cultures have been tolerant of many variations within what counts as the Confucian culture, others have been more monolithic. Some Confucian cultures have emphasized co-existence with non-Confucian cultures, or at least with some of them, and others have been hostile or anxious to keep a cultural distance. The study of the history of toleration among the many branches of Confucian culture in this sense can be highly instructive, just as the history of toleration among Christian, Buddhist, or Jewish cultures is important to understand.

But this is a fundamentally wrongheaded way to think about Confucianism, especially in relation to large-scale ethical issues such as toleration. First of all, it is

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[1]As the author of *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), I obviously believe that Confucians do not have to be culturally East Asian any more that Platonists have to be culturally Greek. That volume sorts through the issues of what needs to be carried over from one culture to another when a critical philosophy spreads.

[2]For a reflection on Confucian themes filtered through a focus on political contexts of tolerance, see my "Culture, Religion, Nation-States, and Reason in the Politics of Tolerance," in Gerson Moreno-Riano, editor, *Tolerance in the Twenty-First Century: Prospects and Challenges* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 67-80.

an historical mistake. Confucius and his disciples of the first several generations led a reform movement within a culture that they opposed, the chaotic and violent times of the "Spring and Autumn" and the "Warring States" periods. Most of the Confucian thinkers we remember were on the outs with their governments, or at least had testy relationships, as in the case of Wang Yangming. When Confucians such as Wang Chong were well received by the government, they still were vigorously engaged in trying to effect cultural change, for instance the suppression of superstition.

Second, to identify Confucianism with a culture is to ignore, distort, or suppress the dialectical relation that it and most other religious or philosophical worldviews have with the cultures of the societies within which they live. Religious philosophies, not excepting Confucianism, take their bearings from what they consider to be ultimately important and this generates a distinction between the situation and what is ideal relative to that situation.[3] As the Confucians would say, you need to keep in mind what is "all under Heaven."[4] The situations of Confucius's time and our time are very different, as are the situations in East Asia relative to those in the West. A religious "worldview" has to bring some integration to the various domains in the situations of the people who hold them. Because there are so many different situations for Confucianism, there a many variants on Confucian worldviews. But each of those worldviews includes what Peter Berger calls a "sacred canopy" giving some expression or other to what Confucianism takes to be ultimately significant, the boundary conditions for the world.[5] Classical Confucianism expressed these in terms of notions such as Heaven, Earth, and the Human, whereas Neo-Confucianism elaborated these in terms of Principle, Material Force, and sagehood, topics to be revisited below. Although the Confucian family of worldviews involves significant variation because of the differences in the domains for which they provide orientation, they are all Confucian in that the domain of the Confucian sacred canopy has some bearing on at least some of the other domains.[6] In that respect, the affected

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[3]To say that religious philosophies, or religions and their theologies, "take their bearing from what they consider to be ultimately important" is not an innocent observation. It is a surface expression of an extremely complex theory of religion and metaphysics of ultimacy articulated at length in my *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology Volume One* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), *Existence: Philosophical Theology Volume Two* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), and *Religion: Philosophical Theology Volume Three* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015). *Ultimates* develops the metaphysics of ultimacy and the analytical tools of a theory of worldviews. *Religion* explores the relation between a situation and living according to a religious worldview.

[4]See John H. Berthrong's *All Under Heaven: Transforming Paradigms in Confucian-Christian Dialogue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994) for an explication of that phrase in a cross-cultural context.

[5]See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

[6]By "domain" is meant some concrete area of life, such as one's family, job, historical location, health, or communications system, that involves particular orientations; the domains of one's life need to be related to one another by a worldview, and where they are not so related, they

domains in any Confucian worldview have a normative or ideal character that very frequently is in a critical relation to the situation where the worldview obtains.

Third, the mention of worldviews reflects an elaborate theory of religion that among other things articulates the dialectical relation between the religion and the actual situations of culture and personality within which religions are practiced.[7] Among the variables relating religious worldviews and specific situations are six continua.[8] One is the relating of the various domains of the situation to be addressed in the worldview on a continuum from very sacred, as in a sacred canopy, to very mundane, such as preferred breakfast diet. A second is a continuum in the symbols in the sacred canopy from very transcendent to personally intimate. A third is a continuum in the interpretations of the symbols from folk-religion notions to the very sophisticated ideas of philosophers. A fourth is a continuum between a sacred worldview that is highly individuated to a person and the degrees to which this worldview is shared with others; this continuum is integral to issues about religious communities. A fifth is a continuum between worldviews that are very comprehensive in orienting the many domains of a situation to one another and worldviews that connect only a few domains and leave the rest relatively meaningless with respect to one another. A sixth is a continuum of intensity, from very great to barely significant, with which an individual is committed to or inhabits a religious worldview.

To understand Confucianism, then, requires understanding how some Confucians have an operative worldview that interprets nearly all the domains of life as affected by key notions in the Confucian sacred canopy, and others limit those to, say, just family life, being no different at the office or factory from Buddhists, Christians, or militantly secular people. It is "Confucian" all along that continuum. Similarly, some Confucians symbolize what is ultimate in highly transcendent terms whereas others neglect the transcendent in favor of terms that more directly bear upon life in the various domains. Some Confucians operate with very sophisticated notions of Principle, Material Force, and the ideals of humaneness and sagehood, whereas others operate with folk-religion versions of these, often borrowed from Buddhism, Daoism, and shamanism. Some Confucians orient themselves to others as sharing a common Confucian worldview whereas others find few fellows in this regard. Some Confucians take their Confucianism to apply to a great many aspects of life, others to

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are relatively meaningless to one another. People in different situations have different domains, and hence need different worldviews. One domain of life for most people has to do with symbols engaging ultimacy, a sacred canopy. Classical Confucian texts articulate a Confucian sacred canopy that might be common to all the variant Confucian worldview that otherwise are very different because of variations in the domains that the worldviews need to integrate. See my *Ultimates*, chapter 4.

[7]See the three volumes of my *Philosophical Theology* cited in note 3. The whole trilogy fills in the details that turn the relevant categories into a theory of religion supported by evidence from many religions.

[8]These are spelled out at length in *Ultimates*, chapter 4.

only a few domains. Some Confucians are very seriously devoted to being good Confucians whereas others give it lip service to please their parents.[9]

Given variables such as these, it is possible to see how in one and the same social situation, even in the same family, some Confucians can advocate radical revolution against the status quo whereas others just go with the flow and call it Confucianism. Needless to say, Confucianism is itself highly controversial within such internally diverse situations, and the Confucian tradition is replete with "prophetic" Confucians telling others they should be different.

To label a given historical culture as "Confucian" is convenient shorthand for historians but also a dangerous abstraction, ignoring, distorting or suppressing what makes Confucianism interesting as a religion. Sometimes vaguely salient generalizations can be made about societies by religious labels. Samuel Huntington made some good points by contrasting "civilizations," defined each by a dominant religion.[10] David Hall and Roger Ames have stimulated important discussions of comparative cultures by contrasting Confucian with Western thinking.[11] But looked at closely, the living religions are far more variable. Moreover, no religious worldview such as Confucianism at any time is pure from its founders; each is a syncretic amalgam of antecedents, often with different religious labels. Too often in the present situation, Confucianism is identified with a particular historical culture only in order to blame some presently perceived ill upon it, such as the suppression of women and sexual minorities, bigotry regarding other races, or unwillingness to embrace social change.

How then should we approach the question of toleration relative to Confucianism? Any number of ways might produce interesting results. The considerations of this section, however, suggest that we look at the present social situation, relative to issues of toleration, and ask what the sacred canopy of Confucianism might contribute to viable worldviews for those issues. What follows is not an historical analysis of Confucianism and toleration but a normative

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[9]Tu Weiming goes so far as to say that Confucianism involves an existential decision to become a sage which he likens to Kierkegaard's notion of existential decision as a leap of faith. See his *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Boston, MA: Cheng & Tsui, 1998), p. 89. Not all self-proclaimed Confucians are this serious! See Stephen C. Angle's *Sagehood: The Cotemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009) for a careful analysis of the progressive depths of cultivated Confucian sagehood.

[10]Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

[11]This most extraordinary collaboration is found mainly in their four volumes of philosophy of culture: *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), *Thinking Through the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), and *Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999).

philosophical analysis of some of the things Confucianism can and should contribute in the current situation.

II. Toleration, Ingroups, and Outgroups

One way to focus the problems of toleration in the twenty-first century is to see them as issues of ingroups relative to outgroups. Relative to the boundaries of groups, the issues of toleration are double-barreled. Some have to do with the toleration of the outgroups, or some of their traits, or members, or competitive existence. Others have to do with toleration of deviations within the ingroup. The notion of groups with boundaries and internal structures is itself very flexible. Biological and cultural evolutionists call attention to the ways small tribal groups organize themselves so as to be more competitive in the struggle with other groups for survival and flourishing. But groups are defined in many different ways, sometimes overlapping, such as kinship groups, tribal groups, language groups, religious groups, geographical niche groups, social class groups, economic and professional groups, etc. In our common intellectual life it is customary to think of issues of toleration in terms of tolerating members and behaviors of outgroups different from our own ingroup, and in terms of tolerating members of our own ingroup who deviate in some ways from the ingroup's norms. This "us versus them" is a common default framework for thinking about issues of toleration.

Confucian philosophy suggests a different default framework. We can call it a framework of "concentric circles of conditions for flourishing," although this metaphor suggests too much mathematical regularity. The center of gravity for much Confucian social thinking is the idealized family. Individuals learn to achieve personal identity in terms of relating to family members in somewhat ritualized but biologically based roles.[12] Every family depends on a larger social unit, however, within which it flourishes or not. In classical Confucian thinking society was agrarian and the family was conceived to be nested in a village, which was nested in a larger economic region, which was nested in a further hierarchy of levels of organization up to the emperor. And then the empire itself had relations with foreign powers and geophysical circumstances that were conditions for the flourishing of the empire. We should be careful not to think of the family as the most basic *atomic* unit of human life in Confucian thinking, although that has been said. Although individuals are formed in families, their own knowledge, voluntary inclinations, and ritualized behaviors themselves need to flourish. Without those individual traits, family life is not possible; but a dysfunctional family can prevent the flourishing of an individual's inner capacities. One of the classic texts for this motif of Confucian thought is from the Great Learning:

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[12]Tu Weiming develops the idealized "fiduciary community" out of the family model. See his *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (A Revised and Enlarged Editio of *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Chung-yung*; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere; when the will is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified, the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world. From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation.[13]

This passage leaves out many social steps between the family and the emperor. Also, this particular ordering of knowledge, will, and mind has been hotly debated, especially by the tradition following Wang Yangming that disputes the quoted ordering, which comes from Zhuxi.[14] Nowadays, the nests of conditions for social flourishing are much more complicated than the agrarian model and Confucians would have to analyze the levels of causal connection in order to distinguish the circles of dependency in modern social terms. Nevertheless, the principle of ordering of conditions for flourishing is fairly clear.

Relative to toleration, the principle is that anything in the wider environment can be tolerated so long as the narrower environment can flourish. For instance, anything can be tolerated in a local neighborhood so long as the families within it can flourish. But the neighborhood depends on a broader social order that keeps the peace and distributes wealth. Any such broader social order can flourish if the yet broader conditions for high civilization are present, and those conditions can be tolerated if they promote the flourishing of the social order. High civilizations interact and depend on an order of global politics, tolerating whatever is in the global political order so long as the high civilizations flourish.

The principle of toleration works from broader to narrower as well. Anything can be tolerated in the high civilizations so long as it does not prevent or corrupt a global political order. Anything can be tolerated in a broad social order so long as it does not prevent or corrupt the high civilization of which it should be a part. Anything can be tolerated in a neighborhood so long as it does not prevent or corrupt the broader social order. Anything can be tolerated by way of family life that does not prevent or corrupt the neighborhood of families. Anything can be tolerated by way of individual knowledge, inclination and other aspects of personal life that does not prevent or corrupt the functioning of the relevant family.

The phrase "anything can be tolerated" emphasizes the potential for great personal and cultural pluralism in Confucian ideal thinking. For instance, families can tolerate a neighborhood that itself tolerates families of different cultural or racial composition, if that neighborhood allows the families to flourish. But if a family is prevented from flourishing by a neighborhood overly determined by cultures hostile to the family, the family should not tolerate that neighborhood. Similarly, if a

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[13]From the *Great Learning*, translated by Wing-tsit Chan in his edited *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 86-87.

[14]See Wing-tsit Chan's editorial comments in his introduction to *The Great Learning*, *op cit*., pp. 84-85.

neighborhood that otherwise would tolerate families of different cultures is prevented from doing so by some overly exclusive and prejudiced families, those prejudiced families should not be tolerated in the neighborhood.

To be sure, Confucianism sometimes has been a dominant philosophy in societies that have had "us versus them" issues of toleration, societies with feuding families, ethnic bigotry, and the like. To revert to the ingroup-outgroup identification is easy, especially for societies under pressure. The contribution of Confucianism, however, is to remind people that there are more complex ties that bind than would appear when the ingroup-outgroup distinction is given great weight.

This Confucian default model of concentric circles of conditions for flourishing reflects the more general Confucian point that there is value at every level of existence. This default model rejects the model that value is all selfish for oneself or one's ingroup and that other individuals or other groups are valued only instrumentally with regard to one's self or ingroup. In terms of human social life this means valuing the simultaneous flourishing of interconnected levels of personal and social existence. Each level has both internal and external conditions for flourishing. Understanding the complex interactions of these levels of conditions is one of the goals of sagacity. Operating with the concentric circles default model makes it hard to simplify issues of tolerance to ingroup versus outgroup traits because on some level, no group is an outgroup to another but all groups contribute to or inhibit the flourishing of their collective interaction. To put the point another way, no individual is individuated only within a singular ingroup. True individual identity involves individuation through all the levels of conditions for flourishing. The significance of this can be seen from many angles, some of which are explored in what follows.

III. Toleration and Narrative

Another common way of understanding issues of toleration in the twenty-first century is through narratives. Most narratives are stories of conflict, of overcoming obstacles (usually other people), of warfare, feuding, displacement, religious opposition, apostasy, betrayal, competition, domination and submission. In light of these narratives, people make judgments about what should and should not be tolerated. Many people try to make sense of their lives by reducing them to narratives.

But narratives simplify a vast set of conditions to just those elements that are significant for the story line.[15] The people and factors that don't play a role in the narrative line are ignored, dismissed, distorted and made not to count. The vast layering of conditions upon conditions, from personal knowledge and rectification of the will through issues of family, neighborhood, society, the Son of Heaven, and peace in the world, is obscured through the force of a narrative that imposes a simple meaning on the world. Those simple meanings, usually involving conflict, often

[15]For a detailed development of this critique of narrative see my, *Ultimates*, chapter 8, and *Existence*, chapter 9.

prevent clear vision of what should be tolerated and what not, building deep commitments to bigoted approaches to other people and cultures.

Confucianism subordinates narrative to a kind of cosmological vision of the world. The Chinese had their chroniclers, of course, and kept historical records. But they did not get their orientation to life from a grand narrative, such as a creation story with a fall and redemption, or a legend of a promised land, or stories of the gods that give meaning to life. The ancient East Asians believed in lots of gods and supernatural beings in their folk cultures, and sometimes those gods had to be appeased or bought off. But people thought of the gods as just different kinds of beings that inhabit the world. The Confucians were generally very much against supernaturalism.

The Confucian cosmology emphasized constant change with the motive power of Material Force being shaped by the structures of harmony in Principle; or, more anciently the Earthly changes as shaped by Heaven. Conceptions of yang and yin articulated how changes take place and the patterns of the hexagrams of the Yijing mark out types of changes. But by and large these structures of change are not narrative structures. Rather they are structures of the constant interactions of all the manifold things Under Heaven, all interacting in a constant great rush. The Confucian cosmology would not tolerate the dismissal of massive amounts and kinds of changes that would be necessary to take narrative structure to be very important. Social conditions are under constant change, for the Confucians, but more guided by the changes of seasons than any divine narrative. Dynasties rise and fall, and there is always a story in their arising and ceasing, but more like a natural process of emergence, flourishing, and decay than like a singularly unique story defining a people. Orientation for personal identity, for Confucians, was not to find a place in a cosmic or historical drama but to have a place among All Under Heaven. One's sense of place is more determined by directions relative to other people and things than by a place in a story. Social class orientation is determined by relations with other social classes and the interactions among them. Confucian geography has five directions: north, east, south, west, and here. "Here" is a place defined by the concentric circles of conditions relating any "here" to the Ten Thousand Things" in their related sets of causal connections.

Some people claim that Confucians do not have much of a cosmology or metaphysics and rather concentrate mostly on ethics. That claim is false: Confucian ethics takes its orientation from conceptions of institutionalized or ritualized life which in turn are elements within cosmic nature. The Doctrine of the Mean bases human nature directly on Heaven, not on merely anthropological notions. But the claim is right that Confucians do not base their ethics on any kind of divine intentionality or will. The closest thing to that in Confucian thought is reference to the Mandate of Heaven; but this has to do with finding what is appropriate for one to do, not with finding what some cosmic mind wants one to do.

With regard to issues of toleration, then, Confucians would direct attention away from the grudges and enmities that have their base in some real or imagined narrative of cosmic purpose, national identity, tribal or clan conflict, or personal destiny. Rather, all the elements that others might pluck from narratives to say that some

behavior or some person or group of persons ought not be tolerated should be reconsidered as embedded in the vast array of circles of conditions for flourishing. Confucians would remind us that nothing takes its meaning or worth from any one story, or even from a number of stories, but from the infinite density of patterns of yin and yang changes. The structure of that density of patterns is never overall a narrative, because that narrative necessarily excludes all the other narrative perspectives. Rather it is more like the array of overlapping circles of conditions for flourishing, from the inner heart through family, neighborhood, society, civilization, and the struggles of world order up to Heaven itself.

IV. Toleration and Personal Respect

Central to any Confucian approach to issues of tolerance is respect for individuals. The main Confucian word for this respect is humaneness, *ren*. Very much of the whole Confucian cosmology is packed into this complex notion, of which only a few strands can be extracted here. The first thing to note is that every person is regarded as unique, only secondarily as a member of a class. Thus, equality under the law is something that makes Confucians uncomfortable, even when it is seen as necessary as a hedge against inappropriate nepotism. Emphasizing a kind of innate human capacity to empathize with another person as who that person is, the Confucian sensibility services this regard for uniqueness. Selfishness, which diminishes this innate capacity so emphasized by Mencius, amounts to reducing others to roles determined by one's own selfish interests.

The second thing to note about respect, however, is that others are attended to as playing ritualized roles relative to oneself. One learns to respect others in terms of family relations, then neighborhood relations, then the institutionalized relations of a larger society, and so on. Although every person is unique, each other person also has a ritualized relation to oneself that determines in part just how one can indicate respect, as a son respects a mother, a neighbor respects a neighbor, an official respects a higher official. When strangers are encountered, Confucians elaborate rituals of establishing ritual relations. To have no ritual relations with strangers is exceedingly problematic. Bad rituals that prevent ritual relations that respect the uniqueness of others, rituals of racial or sexual bigotry, for instances, are the object of Confucian ire.[16]

The third thing to note about respect is that, like oneself, any other person is at the center of a vast nest of rituals defining his or her place. Everyone lives in a matrix of networks of rituals relating to others in terms of family, friends, socializing, economic matters, and so forth. Only one or a few of those rituals define a relation of this other to oneself. But the other needs to be regarded as at the center of his or her own matrix of ritual networks. If the other is not your father, perhaps he is someone

[16]On the Confucian project of morally criticizing bad rituals and developing new ones, see my, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), especially chapter 2, 3, and 9.

else's father and is in part defined by the paternal roles. This is the Confucian way of handling the point many Western thinkers make by talking about the other as a subject with his or her own perspective on the world. Respect means taking that perspective into account as defining part of the other's uniqueness.

The fourth thing to note is that, like oneself, any other person has to learn to play the roles of his or her ritual matrix. The ritual roles are like dance steps that formally define a channel of behavior relative to others. But how one plays the roles is like how one individuates the dance steps. The rituals that structure social relations are not the forms of the dance steps alone but the actual playing of them. An individual is a player of the ritual roles, not merely the possessor of them. A child can learn to speak dutifully to parents by the age of five. But it takes decades to individuate the filial roles so that it is just oneself, uniquely oneself, who is behaving like a proper child toward one's particular parents in just one's own way. All our roles, however strictly formal, have to be learned and individuated, and many roles are very difficult indeed. From a Confucian point of view, many of the difficulties and struggles in life have to do with finding or inventing roles that relate us meaningfully and justly to other people, and then learning to individuate our playing of the roles so as to be sincere and mature. To respect another person, then, is to be able to address that person as someone struggling to individuate the matrix of ritual networks that constitute his or her unique position. To respect that struggle sometimes requires giving the other the privacy of not having to be fully present in the situation. When and how that privacy is possible depends on the concentric circles of ritualized conditions for the flourishing of the other, of oneself, and of the institutions involved in ritual relations with both.[17]

To respect another person is not necessarily to approve of or like the other person, who might be one's enemy, a villain, and a disaster for all those around. Social life often means opposition to others, opposition while maintaining the possibility for respect for the other as a player struggling to individuate his or her own ritual network.

A deep and important element of toleration, from a Confucian perspective, is to respect others as individuators of the roles in their ritual matrix. This is part of treating them as human beings. If they play some roles that are bad, their playing of those roles perhaps should not be tolerated. Ritual roles that prevent or impede the flourishing of the circles of flourishing should be changed or not allowed. Even when this is so, however, the Confucian approval of intolerance in that instance needs to be consistent with respect for the other as a unique individual struggling to play the roles well.

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[17]Confucian ritual theory provides an alternative to the Western way of thinking about Others in an exclusive subject-object distinction. An important part of ritual theory, often neglected in texts describing rituals, is the importance of learning to play the rituals in a way that individuates the self. See my "Individual and Rituals" in *Moral Cultivation and Confucian Character: Engaging Joel J. Kupperman* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), pp. 151-68.

V. Toleration and Harmony: The Ethical Metaphysics of Principle

In the end, concerns for toleration cannot escape the issues of ethical judgment. Here the Confucian perspective focuses on the metaphysics of Principle, *li*. The slogan, "Principle is One, Its Manifestations Are Many," has been the subject of much controversy in the tradition and here is one practical interpretation of it. Principle in itself is whatever makes a multiplicity of things harmonize together. Given a specific multiplicity, it is the pattern of their harmony. Not all multiplicities can be harmonized, however; for some, there is no pattern according to which they can be together. Harmony itself is valuable.[18] A harmonized multiplicity has the value of getting these things together in the place where they are relative to other things, with this pattern rather than some other. That a thing has value in itself because of its harmonizing of its components a certain way in a certain place does not mean that it is valuable relative to other things. Flourishing germs make a sick patient. A well-organized mob can destroy a neighborhood. A skillful politician can ruin a state.

So the deepest aspirations for Confucian sagacity are the learned abilities to discern how things cohere, how coherence is impeded, how the coherence of one thing is required for the coherence of another, how the coherence of things in conflict with one another might be modified by a background coherence that resolves the conflict. Coherence as such is "one" but the things that cohere are "many." Confucianism has little to appreciate in Aristotelian substance philosophies according to which "things" are what they are by virtue of possessing properties. Substance philosophies exaggerate the sense that things have identities in themselves, and thus facilitate "us versus them" thinking, according to Confucianism. Rather things are structured processes of harmonious behavior that are possible only against the background of other processes of harmonious behavior, which in turn rest in yet other background elements, from the graceful bow in greeting to a friend to the slowly shifting rotation of the heavens. Nothing has its properties except in layers of layers of other coherent contexts. Substance thinking tends to neglect the background requirements, just as narrative thinking tends to neglect what does not count in the story. To encounter another person, then, should not be to treat the person as an individual alone, but as an individual with an inherited DNA, with a history of health and illness, with affectional habits derived from a particular family, with an educational background of a certain sort coming from neighborhood institutions, with an economic status determined by roles in the economic system, with an historical political background, made possible by certain conditions of geography and climate, which in turn are made possible by atmospheric conditions filtering the sun's rays,

[18]The interpretation of Principle as harmony or coherence has been beautifully elaborated by Stephen Angle in his *Sagehood.* The metaphysical thesis that things are harmonies of multiplicities and that harmonies are valuable in themselves is common to Plato and Abhinavagupta as well as to Confucians. I have given extensive defenses of it in my *Ultimates*, *Existence*, and *Religion*, as well as elsewhere.

and so forth. A Confucian mother in Boston buys bananas to put on her children's cereal and sagely reflects how that simple act supposes the existence of the store that stocks bananas, the distribution system by which goods are delivered to the store, the agricultural system in tropical countries where the bananas are grown, the economic system that funds banana production and takes profits for owners who might be quite distant from the growers, the transportation of the bananas by plane from the tropics to Boston, the dependence of non-local food distribution on vast amounts of airplane fuel, the interest this creates in controlling countries with oil production, the implications of a tropical diet in Boston for war and peace, and the effects of global warming on continued food production. Well, she probably does not reflect on all that at once while trying to get the children fed before school. But she does know that this breakfast does not stand by itself and that it is what it is through all those levels of conditioning. Our contemporary understanding of what levels of systems to look for is quite different from what a granddaughter of Confucius might look for. Contemporary science has revealed a vastly more complicated personal, social, and natural world than imagined centuries ago. Who would have thought that the choice to use an aerosol rather than a stick deodorant should be affected by considerations of modification of the ozone layer?

It should be emphasized again that each of these levels of systems of coherence has its own manner of flourishing. There are good and bad diets for growing children, stores that make a reasonable profit selling healthy food and those that make more money from unhealthy food, distribution systems that stock the stores efficiently or not, bananas that are ripe and wholesome, and bananas that are blighted, economic systems that reward the people well and those that are exploitive, international carriers that are well run and those that are dangerous, oil production systems that work well and those that do not, a political situation that coordinates all this, economic practices regarding food and transportation that support the larger natural environment and those that are detrimental, and so on. Rarely can all these be made to flourish together, and incoherences abound. The ordinary situation is that all of these systems are compromised somewhat and we make do with relatively uncoordinated attempts to keep each of the systems going. Wars over oil in the Middle East are not caused entirely by Boston mothers feeding their children bananas. But luxurious expectations of Bostonians about cuisine, a cuisine that is healthy, do have an effect on economic resources and world politics.

A Confucian sensibility regarding life is to see its many levels of reality as implicated in patterns of coherence and incoherence. No action affects only one thing. When something prized fails to flourish, the cause may not be in its own coherence but in the incoherence of conditions behind it. Not all things can be made coherent. Some conflicts cannot be resolved except through violence with serious winners and losers. But Confucians analyze the world in terms of why conflicts arise and what might be done to resolve them.

With regard to toleration, a Confucian would say that any person, any behavior, any culture or social organization has a prima facie right to flourish out of the principle of respect or humaneness. The only question of toleration is what the costs are of those flourishings to other things, where the "costs" are to be understood in

terms of the nesting of conditions within concentric circles or lines of causal implications. The answers to those questions determine whether and how the prima facie right to flourish should justifiably be compromised.

VI. Some Confucian Morals of Toleration

The first Confucian moral is that bigotry in all forms should be rejected. Bigotry is negative thinking and behavior toward persons in a group because of a trait that obtains for all in the group when that trait is falsely believed to be bad. Racism is an obvious example. There is nothing wrong with being a particular race per se. Bigotry against sexual minorities such as lesbians, gays, trangender, and bisexual people is another example. Unless the traits that identify these traits can be shown to be bad per se, there is no ground for any bigotry against them and all should be tolerated, other things being equal. The Confucian insistence on respect of others is the first bulwark against bigotry. Because most forms of bigotry also define the objects of bigotry to be an outgroup to the bigot's ingroup, Confucianism's transformation of ingroup/outgroup distinctions into concentric circles of different kinds of relationship is another hedge against bigotry, although sometimes people in the oppressed group loath themselves and thus are bigoted against themselves.

A second Confucian moral is that all judgments that something or someone ought not be tolerated are context dependent. The importance of flourishing stands on its own as Confucians grasp the togetherness of things according to patterns of Principle; but the flourishing of one thing might cause damage to another, and judgments have to be made as to how to make these things coherent if possible. The kind of flourishing that consists in pursuing one's own interest freely might not be tolerable in times of war when everyone needs to work in concert. On the other hand, war is generally a bad thing precisely because it calls for inhibiting free expressions of interests. Wars, warlike behavior, tempting abundance of armaments and the like should not be tolerated, according to Confucian thinking, unless war is absolutely necessary.

A third Confucian moral regarding toleration is that there should be no fixed rules for what should be tolerated and what not, because what promotes or inhibits relevant flourishing is so context dependent and the context is constantly changing. Rather, constant learning is required for the sageliness to understand the shifting measures of coherence that determine what should and should not be tolerated.

A fourth Confucian moral, contrary to the thought of many scholars who read Confucianism as a version of virtue-ethics, is that sage judgment is neither following rules nor acting out of pre-determined cultivated inclinations. Sage judgment rather requires becoming learned about and attuned with the shifting conditions that bear upon what should and should not be tolerated. Even the Confucians who emphasize the presence of Principle in the inner heart of people say that this is good because it facilitates the recognition of coherence and incoherence in things of the world. Good judgment depends on learning the world more than acting out of character.

A fifth Confucian moral is that we should never allow a complex social ritual, structuring important relations between classes of people determine by itself what

should be tolerated and what not. Most large scale social rituals do advantage some people and disadvantage others. But the Confucian sensibility says that we should constantly be vigilant about whether the rituals at hand are justified in the multiple layers of concentric circles of conditions for flourishing. Confucians know that rituals are absolutely essential for giving meaning to behavior: rituals are semiotic systems. Nevertheless, not all rituals are good, just as not all social systems that are meaningful are good. Central to Confucianism's moral vision is the project of critiquing and repairing inadequate rituals.

Confucianism is sometimes thought to be a socially conservative philosophy because its insistence on attention to and observance of rituals seems to rigidify and give support to bad social structures, such as the suppression of the flourishing of women or sexual minorities. But that criticism makes sense only when we have come to see that the rituals at hand do in fact suppress rather than enhance flourishing. Given what we now understand about ritualized cultures that suppress the flourishing of women or sexual minorities, Confucians in most circumstances should be radical feminists and gay liberationists. When my wife and I first landed in China, she told me immediately that she would not walk eight paces behind me. Right. (I don't know how Mrs. Confucius walked with her husband.) But should I hold the door for my wife? That has been a good topic of liberationist debate during our long marriage and in the long run she prefers that I hold the door.

A sixth Confucian moral relative to tolerance is that the more variety in a coherent harmony, the better. Homogeneity is dull, variety is better. The Confucian themes of harmony and coherence emphasize this density of differences. But variety requires often special conditions to contain cultural differences and sometimes that higher level of coherence is hard to achieve. Other things being equal, the more diversity of family cultures a neighborhood can sustain, the better. Confucianism for a pluralistic, meritocratic, highly mobile, urban culture such as obtains in Boston as well as much of the rest of the world cannot advocate the same social policies it would for a relatively homogeneous agrarian culture. This is a time for vigorous creativity in inventing rituals for making the components of a pluralistic world cohere and flourish.