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Abstract

This paper proposes a Confucian social model by comparing political authority to parental authority, specifically drawing on Diana Baumrind's three types: permissive, overbearing, and authoritative. While contemporary democratic politics often aligns liberal and conservative government models with "nurturing parent" and "strict father" archetypes, a truly authoritative model remains largely elusive. We argue for a social model rooted in the moral principles and ethical reciprocity articulated in the *Analects of Confucius*. Distinct from Western concepts of individual rights, Confucianism emphasizes the relational virtue of yielding with propriety and fostering harmonious social interactions. This study explores the inherent origins and societal functions of Confucian virtues, demonstrating how traditional family management principles can be effectively extended to broader societal governance. Viewed as a form of political pragmatism, Confucianism cultivates leadership through alignment with the Way of nature. It operates as a comprehensive social propriety, nurturing virtue and personal character, promoting traditional values within families and among friends, and encouraging the diligent fulfillment of civic duties. Ultimately, Confucianism offers a compelling authoritative model applicable to both family and government.

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Introduction

Politics has long been considered an art of governance, with philosophers traditionally drawing parallels between political and parental authority. This analogy posits that government should guide its citizens, expecting their cooperation akin to children's obedience to parents. Confucianism offers a prime example of this perspective; Confucius envisioned government as a family, with leaders responsible for the people's welfare just as parents care for their children. His ideal state featured benevolent and just leaders guiding loyal and respectful citizens, promoting propriety and education to foster harmony and prosperity. Ancient Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle shared this foundational premise, viewing the state as a natural extension of the family. Plato advocated for an ideal state ruled by a philosopher-king, acting as a paternal guardian, while Aristotle contended that the state serves as a natural community aiming to promote the common good.

Following these ancients, Thomas Hobbes also regarded government as a necessary parental authority. He posited that without it, the state of nature devolves into a state of war, where inherently selfish individuals cooperate only under coercion. Hobbes therefore argued for absolute governmental power to maintain order, demanding unquestioning citizen obedience. In contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, while maintaining the parental analogy, assumed humans are naturally good and cooperative but corrupted by society. He consequently argued that government should act as a benevolent parent, shielding citizens from societal ills. Though advocating for citizen conformity, Rousseau also maintained the importance of public voice in governance.

From a contemporary liberal perspective, equating political authority with parental authority can easily be misconstrued as paternalism or autocracy. An autocratic government is typically

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characterized by absolute power held by a single party or a small group. Conversely, democracy grants citizens a voice in state governance through free elections, operating as a system of checks and balances where various parties or factions limit each other's power across divided branches. Interestingly, even democracy relates to parental authority in a different sense: two (or more) distinct models, typically liberal and conservative, represented by their respective parties, often vie for control, turning politics into a perceived game of power.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Diana Baumrind [1] developed influential parenting models of permissive, overbearing[1], and authoritative through her developmental psychology research. Her studies revealed that children raised by authoritative parents tended to exhibit greater self-confidence, independence, and success in relationships and academics, whereas both permissive and overbearing styles correlated with adverse developmental outcomes. Expanding on this, George Lakoff [2], in his 1996 work, argued that liberal and conservative political ideologies are rooted in distinct moral frameworks derived from parenting models: the Nurturing Parent (NP) and the Strict Father (SF). The NP fosters growth through love and support, while the SF emphasizes discipline and control. These translate directly into differing political views: NP (liberal) frames policies around collective equality and social justice, while SF (conservative) advocates for individualism and limited government. Despite seeming counterintuitive to democratic ideals of "rule by the people," Lakoff's theories have significantly influenced political discourse.

Generally, robust family education cultivates good citizens, who in turn contribute to a thriving society and provide effective public officials. It is plausible that Baumrind's parenting theory influenced Lakoff's political frameworks, given their shared emphasis on education, both familial and public, as crucial for developing exemplary citizens and responsible politicians. When compared, Lakoff's NP and SF models align with Baumrind's permissive and overbearing parental styles, respectively. Thus, these two parental styles within a family context can be seen as mirroring the liberal and conservative approaches to government management in a typical partisan system.

Notably, both Lakoff's and Baumrind's theories primarily focus on the management and education styles of authority, rather than defining the disposition of leadership through inherent virtue and character. This raises a critical question: if the family analogy is extended to governance, should the roles and responsibilities of political authority remain rigidly consistent, or is there merit in a more dynamic approach? Specifically, is there an alternative model for government management and citizen education, one that consistently embodies Baumrind's authoritative parenting ideal? Rather than permissive and overbearing approaches alternating control, such a model would operate as a cooperative family unit, where all parties embrace designated roles and responsibilities. In this framework, education is paramount for a productive and prosperous society. Indeed, within the Confucian tradition, governance is intrinsically linked to education. It is therefore imperative to revisit the *Analects of Confucius* [3]. This paper will first examine how the family is managed and educated in Confucianism, then transition to its broader social and political applications.

1. The Relational Parenting Model

The *Analects*, a foundational text compiled by his disciples over two millennia ago, contains the core teachings of Confucius. Many of its passages address family education, a central Confucian topic. Confucius revolutionized learning by pioneering schools accessible to all social strata, believing education was essential for cultivating virtue and character. His teachings primarily focused on developing personal character and rectifying social behavior.

Early in the *Analects* [4], Confucius articulates the essence of his philosophy:

[1] "Study and practice it when the time is right. Is it not a joy? Have friends coming to visit from afar. Is it not a pleasure? People do not recognize (you), and it does not bother you. Are you not a person of virtue?"

[1] "Authoritarian" in Baumrind's original term.

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This passage encapsulates the core of Confucian study and practice: the pursuit of social propriety to become a person of virtue (君子). For instance, "People do not recognize you, and it does not bother you" highlights the importance of humility and inner sincerity in adhering to propriety. Cultivating consistency between one's inner character and outward actions is fundamental to achieving virtue.

The essence of Confucian propriety is rooted in its ethical foundation for family and social relationships. The phrase about welcoming friends from afar implicitly outlines three structural layers of social connection: the individual as the inner core, family and friends as the intermediate layer, and broader society as the outer layer. In an ideal Confucian society, individuals are encouraged to first cultivate their own virtue, then through continuous learning and practice, positively influence those immediately around them, and by extension, the wider community.

Confucianism is fundamentally a philosophy of social relationism. Confucius believed the parent-child relationship to be society's most fundamental bond, positing that parents should love and care for their children, while children, in turn, should respect and obey their parents. Within a relationist system, an individual is not an autonomous and separate entity; rather, they exist as an interdependent nexus connected to others. A family, for example, is entirely relational, comprising self and other members. Similarly, a community functions as an extensive, interwoven network of families. Consequently, one's identity within the Confucian framework is largely defined by one's relationships with family, friends, and colleagues.

1.1. *The Filial Virtue*

For children in a society guided by propriety, filial piety is the most essential virtue.

[1–6] Confucius said, "A young man should be filial to his parents at home and be fraternal to elders outside the home. He should be discreet and sincere, showing care for others and be devoted to practicing the ritual of propriety. Upon fulfilling these duties, he is encouraged to study arts and literature."

Confucius's statement sets the tone for his teaching by addressing the educational needs of youth, guiding them to become integral members of their families and society. Once the basics of propriety are mastered, students are encouraged to pursue other curricula, such as the Confucian Six Arts[2]. But what constitutes the true essence of filial piety? One of his students posed this very question:

[2–7] Zi You asked about filial virtue. Confucius said, "Nowadays, filial virtue is said to be able to feed your parents. But everyone can do this for even horses and dogs. Without reverence, how can you tell the difference?"

Here, Confucius emphasizes that reverence is the core principle of filial piety, and propriety its function. Filial piety demands not just outward actions but also an inner disposition, setting clear expectations for both manner and heart. Confucius further clarified the practice of this virtue when another student inquired:

[2–8] Zi Xia asked about the act of filial virtue. Confucius said, "Your look is the tough part. Whenever physical tasks come up, the young do their duty; whenever food and drink are available, the elders are first offered. Is that to be considered filial virtue?"

The true challenge of being filial lies in acting with genuine sincerity. One's facial expression can reveal whether service stems from a willing heart, just as one's posture indicates respectful service to parents and sovereign. So, how does a truly filial son act within the family?

[5–11] Confucius said, "Virtuous indeed is Min Zi Qian! People all agree with what his parents and brothers said of him."

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[2] The six Confucian arts were rituals, music, archery, riding, calligraphy, and algebra. Passage [1-6] served as the guideline for Di Zi Gui, a classic for youth education published in the Qing dynasty.

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The *Analects* praises several filial and fraternal role models, with Min Zi Qian being a notable example. Min lost his mother young, and his father later remarried. Min soon had two younger half-brothers. However, Min's stepmother famously treated the three boys unequally, denying Min a warm coat made with actual cotton filling during winter. When his father discovered this, he intended to divorce her, but Min famously disagreed, stating, "One son dresses thinly with a mother in the house, and three will live in the cold without." This anecdote vividly illustrates how a virtuous person prioritizes the family's collective well-being above their own individual comfort.

The essence of filial piety is relationist, involving serving one's parents and being obedient within tradition. From a modern political and social perspective, where individual equality is paramount, this concept might initially appear archaic or foreign. However, by temporarily setting aside contemporary beliefs, we can recognize that social inequality among individuals is, in fact, the natural premise for the Confucian institution. Confucians are expected to obey their parents not because they are inherently unequal, but because they do not regard their parents as peers in status or role. While this might sound paternalistic and hierarchical, implying a one-way submission of the junior to the senior, it is not. Confucianism outlines a comprehensive set of virtues and norms that apply equally to those in authority, including elders, parents, and even rulers. Thus, Confucianism is best understood as a philosophy of two-way ethics, emphasizing mutual self-restraint among all involved, even between unequal parties.

1.2. The Practice of Expediency

Filial piety, however, does not imply blind obedience to one's parents. The ethical relationship between parents and children in Confucianism is founded on reciprocity and the harmony of yin and yang. In this dynamic, parents provide their children with love, care, and education, while children, in turn, offer their parents respect, obedience, and support. Furthermore, parents are expected to set a virtuous example, which children are then expected to emulate. This raises a critical question: while loyalty to parents or superiors is deemed virtuous, what if their conduct is not virtuous?

Confucius addresses this dilemma directly:

[2–12] “A person of virtue is not a tool.”

A person of virtue is meant to be a leader of propriety and civil duty, not merely a specialized instrument or craftsman. A tool, by its very design, performs a singular function and, in the worst case, can be exploited by lesser individuals (小人). Such a limited, exploitable existence is fundamentally antithetical to the Confucian ideal of being both virtuous and capable.

In his teaching, Confucius did not prescribe fixed rules but instead encouraged his students to adapt to specific circumstances. Consequently, his philosophy implies that one should not be rigidly "fettered by rules." For example, while filial piety demands obedience to parents, what should one do if faced with parental abuse? The *Family Sayings of Confucius* recounts the story of Zeng Shen, renowned for his filial piety. Once, while working, Shen accidentally hoed off a melon seedling. His father severely beat him with a large stick, causing him to pass out. Upon waking, Shen immediately apologized to his father, then went to his room to play the lute, signaling his well-being. Confucius, upon hearing this, was displeased, despite Shen's belief that he had acted correctly. Confucius then recounted the story of Sage Shun in a similar situation, advising Shen: "If you see your father carrying a big stick, you must run. Endangering your life is not filial, as you cannot serve your parents when you are dead or disabled; nor is it virtuous, as you would allow your father to commit a crime." This episode highlights Confucius's unique approach to teaching and applying virtue with nuanced wisdom.

[4–12] Sima Niu asked what a man of virtue was. Confucius said, "A man of virtue is free from anxiety and fear." Niu said, "Free from anxiety and fear, is this all it takes to be a man of virtue?" Confucius said, "Reflect within yourself and find nothing to be guilty of. How can you have anxiety or fear?"

Sima Niu had an elder brother who led a rebellion in the state of Song, against whom Niu had sworn an oath. When the rebellion was crushed, his brother fled to Wei, where Niu resided.

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Subsequently, Niu left Wei for Qi, but his brother followed him there, prompting Niu to leave Qi again. Given these circumstances, Niu would likely have been in a constant state of anxiety and fear upon arriving at Confucius's school. Here, Confucius provided a unique definition of a person of virtue specifically to calm and comfort him. While Niu might have felt shame concerning his brother's actions, Confucius emphasized that Niu himself had nothing to feel guilty about. This interaction demonstrates how the virtue of a benevolent person, in Confucian thought, can be adapted to specific circumstances, always underpinned by propriety.

Traditionally, a master was regarded and acted as a father figure. In the preceding passage, Confucius clearly provided his students with paternal care, guidance, and support. Indeed, Confucius's teaching on virtue ethics profoundly shaped his followers' learning approach. This concept is further reinforced when Confucius states:

[1–4] "It is virtuous to live the way of benevolence. If you choose to live in a place without benevolence, how can you learn the way?"

Confucius consistently emphasized the practice of virtue and living a life of benevolence. It naturally follows that one would seek to associate with virtuous individuals, thereby emulating and learning from them.

Philosopher Roger Ames [5] characterizes the Confucian person of virtue as "the authoritative man," an individual who achieves order and harmony in society through his actions and words. This authoritative figure is not an authoritarian who imposes his will, but rather someone whose cultivated character and virtuous disposition command respect and emulation. Ames's definition underscores the critical role of virtue and character in leadership, enabling him to guide others toward improvement. An exemplary Confucian, therefore, can be directly viewed as the authoritative parent in Baumrind's model.

2. The Relational Social Model

Filial piety naturally extends into the broader concept of loyalty, a universal virtue across cultures. To cultivate this virtue, a youth is consistently encouraged to learn and practice propriety. As Confucius states:

[6,7] "(Men of virtue) follow the Tao, submit to the virtue of propriety, commit to benevolence, and polish skills in arts."

In this context, men of virtue are individuals who aspire to live in accordance with the Tao (the Way of nature), ground their relationships in propriety, guide their ethics with benevolence, and hone their abilities through the Confucian Six Arts.

The family functions as society's foundational unit. Traditionally, it is considered both the model for government and the incubator of social virtues. Within the Confucian social model, managing a family and governing a state share the same ethical virtues and psychological principles. Given that filial piety is the fundamental family value, how does it apply to governance? Confucius explicitly addresses this connection:

[2–21] Someone asked, "Why are you not serving in government?" Confucius said, "The *Book of History* said, 'Filial virtue is to serve your parents and care for your siblings. Apply it to the service of the government.' Since this service also serves the government, why must holding office be regarded as serving in government?"

The *Analects* also includes the sayings of Confucius's disciples. The following statement from You Zi makes a strong argument for the direct application of filial piety in governance:

[1,2] You Zi said, "Virtuous people grow from the root. Once the root is established, its propriety comes along the way. Once having developed filial and fraternal virtues, one is rarely inclined to offend his superiors. Those not inclined to offend their superiors are never seen with the intention to revolt. Are the filial and fraternal virtues not the root of all appropriate behaviors!"

2.1. Ren and Relationship

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The *Analects* covers a wide range of topics, including social propriety, ethics, politics, and education. Among these, *ren* (often translated as benevolence) stands as a central theme, serving as the ethical foundation for propriety in both family and social life. As the most fundamental and highest virtue in Confucianism, *ren* is considered the very bedrock of a good society.

Ren has been translated into English using various terms such as "goodness," "benevolence," "love," "altruism," and "humaneness." Its translation is particularly challenging because the *Analects* offers no single, fixed definition. Instead, when his students inquired about *ren*, Confucius consistently provided varied, context-specific answers. Scholars interpret this as a reflection of Confucius's unique teaching style, which tailored responses to each student's personality and their individual journey of ethical self-improvement.

The character for *ren* (仁) visually comprises two components: the word for human (人) and the number two (二). This graphic design inherently conveys its fundamental meaning: the essence of interaction "between two people," signifying human relationships or "co-humanity" within social interaction. This etymological insight reinforces the idea that Confucianism is indeed an ethical relationism.

To clarify the "Tao and virtue" mentioned in statement [6,7], Confucius identifies them as *ren*. In his teaching, *ren* is the essence, and propriety is its function. A more theoretical approach to grasping this concept is to differentiate between its general and specific aspects. In its general sense, *ren* represents the innate source of all Confucian ethical values, encompassing virtues like benevolence, brotherhood, propriety, intelligence, sincerity, trust, and filial piety. Later Confucians elevated *ren* above all other virtues, recognizing it as the most fundamental.

Confucius believed that everyone is capable of *ren*, and that personal growth and social harmony can be achieved through the learning and practice of propriety. As You Zi articulated in [1,2], an individual's growth follows a natural progression, beginning with filial piety, learned in childhood within the family. What we acquire in early childhood profoundly shapes us as adults in our social lives; we might say we inherit filial piety from our parents' examples, just as they learned from theirs. However, the question remains: How does this initial adoption of virtue occur, or from where does it originate? This is where the concept of specific *ren* becomes relevant. *Ren* is presumed to originate from nature, derived from its inherent patterns and processes. Thus, it can also be referred to as the Way of nature in Confucianism. This concept of *ren* was then expanded and generalized to encompass all appropriate behaviors, as seen in You Zi's argument [1,2].

Building healthy social relationships is fundamental to *ren*, and its significance extends even beyond immediate lived reality, as illustrated by the following passage:

[11,12] Ji Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. Confucius said, "When you cannot serve the living, how can you serve the dead?" Ji Lu said, "May I ask about death?" Confucius said, "When you cannot understand life, how can you understand death?"

The Buddhist parable of Kisa Gotami, a desperate mother who sought to revive her deceased child by collecting a mustard seed from a family untouched by death, is famous. While the typical Western interpretation emphasizes the liberating realization of universal suffering, Roger Ames interprets it differently within the Confucian tradition. For Ames, the Buddha's true intention was for Gotami to rekindle her relationships through her visits to neighbors and thereby move forward with her life, rather than to find a definitive truth about death. Through this lens, the Buddhist teaching is re-interpreted through a Confucian ethos: one cannot understand death until one understands life. The focus remains on engagement with the living world and its relationships.

Richard Sennett [6] has recently identified a decline in public life in modern cities. He defines the "public realm" as communal spaces where people gather with a sense of community. This realm, essential for a healthy democracy, is, he argues, degrading society through its decline. Sennett traces this erosion of civic engagement from the 19th century to the present, attributing it to the rise of individualism and private spheres, compounded by urban design that hinders social interaction.

Sennett proposes several solutions for reviving the public realm, including creating more public spaces like squares, parks, and libraries, and making cities more walkable and bikeable to facilitate

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greater interaction among residents. Ultimately, his aim is to cultivate a society of virtuous individuals who assume personal responsibility towards family, friends, neighbors, and the environment, a vision echoed by David Brooks [7] in his latest work. This directly concurs with Confucius's emphasis on cultivating familial virtues, practicing social relationism, and promoting traditional culture with a deliberate de-emphasis on individualism.

2.2. Family and Beyond

From an individualistic perspective, Confucian relationism is often misinterpreted as collectivism, a philosophy that typically defines individuals as metaphysical equals. In practice, however, Confucian social management centers on five distinct relationships, each corresponding to and regulated by a primary virtue: ruler-minister (based on loyalty); father-son (based on family devotion); husband-wife (based on distinct roles and responsibilities); elder brother-younger brother (based on order); and friends-you (based on trust). This framework is powerfully articulated in the following passage:

[1–7] Zi Xia said, "(In seeking marriage,) you aim for virtue, not looks. Serving your parents, you make all your effort. Serving your sovereign, you give the devotion of your life. Socializing with your friends, you stay true to your words. If you have done these and someone says that you are not schooled, I must call you the learned (in propriety)."

Confucius contended that parents should teach their children and set a good example by cultivating these relational virtues and family values. He viewed the family as the basic unit of a healthy society and prioritized its bonds, even in instances of social conflict.

Consider this exchange, which highlights the primacy of family bonds:

[13–18] Duke Ye of Chu said to Confucius, "There were righteous men in my village. When a father stole a sheep, the son testified against him." Confucius said, "The righteous men in my village are different from this. Father covers up the wrongs of his son, and the son covers up the wrongs of his father. Righteousness is in the cover-ups."

This dialogue emphasizes that family relationships hold paramount importance. One can imagine the societal breakdown if family members routinely testified against one another. Confucius, who served as the minister of justice in the state of Lu, saw his mission as revitalizing the ancient tradition of propriety. In a truly healthy society, people would adhere to traditional rituals in daily life, thereby negating the need for legal disputes or court litigation, as he indicated:

[12,13] "In legal hearing, I am no better than anyone else. It is necessary to lead the people so they have no litigation."

In familial and social life, sincerity is key to building trust and fostering strong relationships. Confucius elaborates on this through a vivid metaphor:

[2–22] "Be human without trust, and I do not know how it can be. When the pin is missing from the yoke of a large carriage or the collar of a small carriage, how can it go?"

While the *Tao Te Ching* [8] describes an ideal society as a "small village of few folks" with minimal social engagement, theoretically possible but practically improbable given that humans are inherently social animals, Confucius did not advocate for Laozi's vision of a Taoist utopia. Instead, he actively promoted social engagement and the virtue of trust between individuals. Here, the "pin" serves as a powerful metaphor: the virtue of trust, facilitating connection in social engagement, is as crucial as the connecting components that make a carriage functional.

3. The Relational Governing Model

In Confucianism, the ethical relationship between ruler and subject directly mirrors the family model. Rulers are expected to be benevolent and just, while subjects are to be loyal and supportive. This dynamic implies that leaders should govern with the well-being of the people at heart, fostering reciprocal respect and support from their populace.

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3.1. Governance is Order

What constitutes effective governance? Rulers and lords frequently sought Confucius's counsel on this matter.

[11,12] Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about governance. Confucius said, "Governance is when the ruler is a ruler, the minister is a minister, just like family when the father is a father, the son is a son."

Confucius's answer was remarkably direct and profound. It implies that when every individual fulfills their proper role within the family and society according to tradition, states and families will naturally achieve order and harmony. Some inquiries to Confucius were more specific:

[2–20] Ji Kang Zi asked, "How do I encourage the people to be reverent and loyal (to me)?" Confucius said, "Lead them with dignity, and they will be reverent. Be filial (to your elders) and caring (to the young), and they will be loyal. Promote the virtuous and able, and teach the incompetent, and they will be encouraged."

Confucianism posits a two-way ethical practice of propriety, not a unidirectional control of the weak by the powerful. Individuals are expected to be obedient to parents at home and loyal to superiors at work, just as they are to love their children and care for subordinates. These seemingly unequal, yet inherently reciprocal, familial and social relationships form the structural foundations of the Confucian institution, thereby bringing order to society. This principle is clearly discernible from the advice Confucius offered to the ruling class in his dialogues. What, then, is the specific Confucian virtue for rulers? Confucius offered a compelling analogy:

[1,2] "Lead the people by virtue, and you are like the North Star, which holds its position, and all other stars turn toward it."

Confucius lived towards the end of the Spring and Autumn period, a chaotic era when China had fragmented into numerous warring states. The ruling class contended fiercely for control, and state princes waged personal wars for hegemony, often raising vast armies and committing mass atrocities. Traditional values and rituals had collapsed, causing immense suffering among the populace. Scholars were deeply concerned with the reasons for this breakdown, how order could be restored, and the overarching meaning of these events, leading to a flourishing of diverse philosophical schools in search of answers. While many advocated new and drastic approaches to consolidate state power and restore social order, Confucius, by contrast, sought solutions in history. Reverence for the past lay at the core of his thought. He recalled a golden age during the reign of the great sage kings, a time of perfect social order. He believed that if the social elites took the lead in reviving the virtues and practices of that era, they could restore the traditional way of life and rebuild a harmonious and prosperous society. To achieve this, lessons from history had to be learned, which is why learning is the very first value introduced in the *Analects*.

Following a short-lived political career, Confucius, at the age of 55, embarked on a fourteen-year journey from state to state, attempting to persuade rulers to adopt his traditional approach to governance. In the passage above, he offered an analogy of celestial order: a social hierarchy sustained by the institution of virtue and propriety, which he believed could maintain stability and build a healthy, enduring society.

3.2. Propriety is Tradition

Confucius reasoned that the ethical relationship between ruler and subject was reciprocal and complementary, akin to yin and yang. Rulers provide their subjects with security and prosperity, and subjects, in turn, offer loyalty and support. Crucially, rulers are expected to set a virtuous example for their subjects, who then emulate their leaders' conduct. This reciprocal dynamic is highlighted in a discussion with Duke Ding:

[3–19] Duke Ding asked, "A ruler employs his ministers, and ministers serve their ruler. How does it operate?" Confucius replied, "The prince of state employs his ministers with propriety; the ministers serve their prince with devotion."

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This exchange explicitly compares a one-way versus a two-way ethical relationship between superiors and subordinates. The essence of Confucian propriety in this context is inherently two-way, acknowledging inequality while fundamentally upholding reciprocity. Here, the ruler treats ministers with the propriety of forbearance, while subordinates serve superiors with the propriety of loyalty.

Confucius believed that rituals and traditions provide a strong foundation for society. They are seen as wisdom accumulated through generations, evolving over time. Consequently, he advocated that policies should be formulated based on reason and historical experience rather than solely on religious ideology or metaphysical principles. In a time characterized by broken rituals and propriety, Confucius sought solutions in the past, meticulously studying the periods of benevolent rule by the sage kings. He reasoned that if the aristocracy adopted the practices and values of their ancestors, they could mend their fractured society. Hence, the veneration of ancestors was a central principle in Confucius's teaching. By this reasoning, learning lessons from history is paramount. This approach is logical because studying a common body of traditional knowledge and cultivating shared virtues and propriety in social practice can unify people through a shared cultural inheritance.

As Confucius succinctly put it:

[2–11] "Studying the past is to understand the present. It can be our teacher."

Indeed, knowledge of the past serves as both a teacher and a valuable reference for present innovations and future development. This principle strongly supported Confucius's overarching mission to revive the ancient form of propriety.

3.3. Guide with Virtue vs. Rule with Law

According to political scientist Francis Fukuyama, a major ideological conflict distinguishing democracy from autocracy lies in the concepts of "rule of law" versus "rule by law" in governance. Confucius, however, offered a distinct perspective:

[2,3] "Govern the people by edicts and keep them in order with punishment, and they will comply but with no sense of shame; guide the people with virtue and keep them in order with propriety, and they will have a sense of shame and self-regulate."

While active good behavior and passive social conformity may appear identical in public, their underlying psychology differs significantly. From a psychological perspective, virtuous behavior stems naturally from internalized rituals and conscience, leading to a sense of contentment. Conversely, behavior driven solely by fear of punishment leads to oppression and insecurity. Confucius's argument here draws a stark comparison between a society governed purely by legal statute and one guided by Confucian rituals of propriety. This crucial aspect of Confucian social psychology often appears misunderstood or controversial among contemporary elites. It is important to note that Confucius was not dismissing the necessity or function of legal law; rather, he was emphasizing the superiority and his strong preference for public education and the social practice of propriety's rituals. From the Confucian perspective of personal cultivation, propriety is essential for developing good character, mature social skills, and becoming fully human according to tradition. Consequently, when society is led by individuals steeped in Confucian principles, day-to-day order can be maintained through rituals, allowing conflicts to be avoided or adjudicated through propriety in daily life without recourse to legal intervention.

By contrast, Legalism, another school of classical Chinese thought emerging during the Warring States period, solely emphasized deterrence and punishment through law. This approach bears some resemblance to modern governance, which, even with its degree of individual freedom, rationally or ideologically judges actions as right or wrong. This comparison highlights the institutional distinction between "rule by law" (prone to tyranny) and "rule of law" (which tends to generate conflicts between the people and their government, as laws inherently restrict individual freedom, even with constitutional guarantees). Unlike Confucianism, Legalism (and for that matter, both autocracy and democracy as systems) was not primarily concerned with virtue or personal character,

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which Confucianism considered the fundamental root of an individual's social behavior, whether good or bad. Fundamentally, Confucianism aims to prevent conflicts between the people and their government by implementing propriety as a primary guiding force.

3.4. Lead by Example

The essence of Confucius's political leadership lies in elites leading by example through propriety, a virtue of authority shared by both government and family.

[6–13] Confucius said, "When you are upright, people follow without being given an order; when you are not upright, people will not follow even when orders are given."

Becoming a leader of *ren* is simple in concept but profoundly challenging, even for the revered sage kings, as the following passage illustrates. It fundamentally involves transforming oneself such that others are inspired to transform in kind. This requires a combination of self-cultivation on the part of elites and their positive influence on society.

[14–42] Zi Lu asked how to be a man of virtue. Confucius said, "Cultivate yourself to be reverent." Zi Lu asked again, "Is that it?" Confucius replied, "Cultivate yourself and make others around you content." Again, "Is that it?" Again, "Cultivate yourself and make the hundred surnames content. Cultivating themselves and making the people content, Yao and Shun were yet found deficient."

Confucius meticulously specified and cautioned against superficial approaches to the social practice of propriety in leadership:

[2–8] Confucius said, "Deference without propriety is wearisome. Caution without propriety is timid. Bravery without propriety is chaos. Honesty without propriety is deadly. When the social elites faithfully lead by example (in propriety), the people will prosper as virtues prevail. Therefore, when the tradition is not abandoned, the people do not fiddle."

Propriety (and its associated rituals) is a primary subject of Confucius's teaching. It extends beyond merely being "proper" in social interactions; it is the social expression of the virtue *ren*. An individual who has internalized propriety is considered truly cultured. In the first four sentences of the quote above, Confucius articulates how propriety regulates other virtues in social practice. He then stresses the critical importance for the ruling class to lead the people by example in observing propriety. When the traditional virtue of *ren* and its functional expressions in rituals and propriety prevail in society, the "hundred surnames" (the common people) will naturally adhere to virtuous traditions in their daily lives. Confucius further summarized his definition of leadership in governance:

[15–33] "When you have seen the way of governance but cannot guard it with your virtue, you will lose it even as you have it. When you have seen it and can guard it with your virtue but do not exercise it with dignity, the hundred surnames will not revere you. When you have seen it, guarded it with your virtue, and exercised it with dignity, but do not move the masses with propriety, you are still not good enough."

In Confucius's estimation, a benevolent ruler should possess an intelligent mind, a virtuous character, a diligent work ethic, and a willingness to lead through the rituals of propriety. To Confucius, leadership is inherently a relationship. The ideal system of governance is an institution of two-way propriety between ruler and subject, a stark contrast to modern societies, which are legally ruled either by one-party autocracies or by contending multi-party democracies.

3.5. Meritocracy

A notable difference between Confucianism and liberalism lies in their approaches to leadership selection.

[2–19] Duke Ai of Lu asked, "What is to be done to ensure the people's submission?" Confucius replied, "Promote the upright to overcome the crooked, and the people will submit. Promote the crooked to overcome the upright, and the people will not submit."

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Confucius is widely credited with originating the idea of political meritocracy within the traditional context. This stems from his emphasis on promoting the virtuous and able into public service, a practice consistent with the way of the ancient sage kings. Here, Confucius stressed the critical role of the ruling class in state governance: rulers needed to promote virtuous individuals (even if personally disliked) over lesser men (who might be personal favorites). Once virtuous individuals were placed in leadership positions, the people would naturally follow. The following anecdote illustrates how Confucius applied and taught this principle of meritocracy:

[5,6] Yuan Si was hired as a manager for Confucius's family. The Master gave him nine hundred measures of grain, and Si declined them. Confucius said, "Do not decline them. Could you not give them away to the neighbors in your village?"

The amount of grain represented Yuan Si's designated salary. While Si's initial inclination was modesty, Confucius acted on the principle that accepting due compensation is proper. This interaction subtly demonstrates that effective leadership also involves using appropriate encouragement, akin to positive reinforcement, to uphold good conduct and order.

Confucius actively encouraged his disciples to serve in government, leveraging their strengths, such as traditional virtues, social skills, and intellect, regardless of their inherited social status. The notion of meritocracy is further reinforced by Confucius's acceptance of any student willing to learn, irrespective of their upbringing or social class. This inclusive approach arguably inspired the eventual advent of imperial examinations and bureaucracies, which, hundreds of years later during the Han dynasty, became open to those who passed rigorous tests on Confucian texts.

3.6. Pragmatism and Capitalism

Confucius's teaching is sometimes referred to as the philosophy of the middle way or the Doctrine of the Mean.

[6–29] Confucius said, "The middle-common (pragmatic) way, being a means of exercising virtues, is at its perfection! We have missed this for so long."

Aiming for the middle signifies hitting the target, demonstrating pragmatic utility. This principle applies equally to social elites and commoners in their daily affairs. It expresses Confucius's desire to revitalize ancient propriety among the elites and extend its practice to broader society. Essentially, it paves a pragmatic path for the virtuous to lead by example through propriety, without resorting to forceful enforcement on the common people. This is a public policy implemented through Confucius's Silver Rule, thereby aligning with the timeless Way of nature.

From a conventional understanding of social ethics, the middle way can also be interpreted as a blended approach to exercising virtues such as intelligence, benevolence, and bravery. In practice, it offers no fixed rules for how to apply virtues, as scenarios constantly evolve. One does not always need to provide an assertive answer or justification. The typical approach to reaching an agreement is to seek a pragmatic middle ground that all involved parties can accept, a common method of conflict resolution extending beyond Confucianism.

The compatibility of Confucianism with capitalism has been a subject of extensive debate in Confucian studies. While capitalism emphasizes individual competition and the accumulation of material wealth, Confucius certainly believed that individuals should subordinate personal interests to the common good, and he did not consider material wealth the most important thing in life.

[7–16] Confucius said, "I have coarse food for a meal, water for a drink, and my bent arm for a pillow. And I have joy in my life. Without being virtuous, wealth and honors to me are like drifting clouds."

This might suggest that virtuous people should forgo material profit or benefit, faithfully adhering to the way of propriety in Confucius's teaching.

[4–16] Confucius said, "Men of virtue are well versed in propriety; lesser men are well versed in profit."

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However, Confucius also championed self-governance, education, hard work, and self-improvement, all of which can lead to a better life for both individuals and society. These beliefs suggest he would have supported capitalism's potential to promote economic growth and social mobility. Contrary to sociologist Max Weber's thesis, Confucians did not reject the idea or desire for profit. In the *Analects*, Confucius even encouraged his students to get paid for public service and advised them on career advancement [4]. What Confucius truly meant by the aforementioned statement is that virtuous people prioritize virtue over profit. One chooses virtue over profit only when acquiring that profit would be unvirtuous; otherwise, material gain can be embraced with pleasure.

[7–12] Confucius said, "If wealth can be pursued in some way, even if I should become a groom with a whip in hand, I would (love to) do so. However, the pursuit may be in vain, and I go after what I love."

The question of whether Confucius or Confucians would approve of capitalism has been posed by many economists and sociologists, including Weber. From a Confucian perspective, getting rich is fundamentally amoral, neither inherently good nor bad. The emphasis is on "Get rich first and learn propriety later." This represents a Confucian approach to governing the people, as recorded in the following conversation, and it perfectly applies to modern China:

[9–13] When Confucius came to Wei, Ran You was his driver. Confucius said, "There are so many people here." Ran You said, "For they are commoners, what should be done here?" "Make them rich," said the Master. "Once they become rich, what next?" "Make them learn."

Confucius's reasoning for such a view on capitalism is pragmatic: while getting rich is amoral, being wealthy can serve as a material prerequisite for the practice of propriety.

[10–14] Confucius said, "To be poor and not resentful is hard. To be wealthy and not presumptuous is easy."

It makes pragmatic sense to allow people to become prosperous first and then guide them to learn rituals and propriety. This explains why Confucius said that commoners might "be made to work but not to understand." While this might sound politically incorrect today, it reflects a socially pragmatic stance. A free market with competition is often considered the spirit of both capitalism and democracy. What, then, was Confucius's view on competition?

[3–7] Confucius said, "A man of virtue usually does not contend. [If he does] It must be in archery! He bows in deference and ascends to the match. He descends off the match and enjoys a drink with fellow contenders. It is the contending within men's virtue of non-contending."

What is the "way of nature" in Confucian and Taoist traditions? Laozi implied it is "do nothing unto others" or "not contending" in social relationships [9], essentially defining it as a social act of non-doing. By recognizing how nature behaves, Laozi proposed that human conduct should follow the Way of nature, which, in his view, meant doing absolutely nothing to others within the territorial confines of "a small village of few folks." While non-contending, or yielding, forms a precept upon which Confucian propriety is built, Confucius shared this definition of "not contending" while allowing for an element of expediency. He promoted competition in certain areas, such as sports, and presumably extended this to technology and the economy.

3.7. Honesty and Trust

Honesty, or sincerity, is paramount for cultivating trust in all social relationships, including those involving political leadership. Consider this crucial dialogue:

[7–12] Zi Gong asked what constitutes governance. Confucius said, "Sufficient food, strong army, and public trust." Zi Gong said, "Suppose you had no choice but to give up one of the three. Which one would you let go of first?" Master said, "Army." Zi Gong said, "What if you had to give up one of the remaining two? Which one would it be?" Master said, "Food. From the beginning of humanity, death has come to all people. A government without the peoples' trust will not stand."

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Singapore is widely recognized for its successful economic development and social progress. Political scientist Kishore Mahbubani [10] argues that good governance and strong leadership have been the cornerstones of Singapore's rapid growth and modernization. Mahbubani characterizes Singapore's governance using the acronym MPH, representing meritocracy, pragmatism, and honesty rooted in traditional values.

From a political science perspective, Singapore is variously characterized as a parliamentary democracy or authoritarian. From a comparative philosophical viewpoint, Singapore could be seen as a unique Legalistic system guided by Confucian values, resembling an authoritative political system within its distinct partisan structure.

3.8. On Partisanship

While the political party emerged from the European Enlightenment, partisanship, or tribalism, has existed since the dawn of political institutions. Partisanship describes the human tendency to favor one's own party or group over others. In a democracy, it can be seen as potentially ensuring free speech, diversity of opinion, and a system of checks and balances. However, it can also be detrimental, leading to gridlock, extremism, and a decline in public trust in government. Confucius certainly held an opinion on this matter:

[15–22] "Virtuous people are dignified and not contentious. They socialize without joining political tribes."

This statement is paramount for understanding Confucian guidance applicable to modern partisan systems, whether democratic or autocratic. Partisan politics are often intrinsically linked to tribalism, frequently guided by quasi-religious worldviews. From a contemporary perspective, Confucius would likely not have opposed religious and metaphysical beliefs themselves, but he would have disagreed with individuals who coalesce into political parties or associations based on such divergent views.

Confucius argued against joining a political "tribe" and collective competition in social life because political parties and alliances often possess ideologies that are inherently set against one another, frequently due to conflicting worldviews. They thus function as pseudo-religious organizations characterized by in-group loyalty and out-group hostility. While disagreements among individuals can generally be resolved with relative ease and rarely have significant, prolonged social impacts, clashes between political tribes are far more intractable and can lead to profound and enduring domestic and international consequences. A social conflict between two individuals is typically viewed as impropriety; a political struggle between two opposing parties, by contrast, is almost always regarded as heroic within at least one of the involved parties. Such partisanship fundamentally contradicts the ethical principle of Confucianism. However, this presumed Confucian anticipation of modern mores does not fully align with contemporary institutions of governance, let alone our modern way of life, where religious freedom, freedom of association, and fairness in political competition are considered fundamental human rights and paramount moral values in many societies.

Which system fosters better governance: partisanship with its checks and balances, or cooperation between impartial politicians? The essence of partisanship is division into factional and uncompromising extremes, such as liberals and conservatives. Minimizing this division requires nothing less than the virtue of self-restraint, particularly in speech.

[2–16] Confucius said, "Criticizing other teachings is quite harmful."

The Spring and Autumn period witnessed the emergence of the Hundred Schools of Thought. While Confucius likely deemed many of these schools erroneous, he rarely mentioned or criticized them in the *Analects*. It was simply against the traditional propriety to engage in quarrels and contentiousness. In reality, contention without compromise and cooperation in partisan politics achieves nothing but personal conflict and tribal clashes.

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3.9. Tao is Not to Contend and Impose

Confucius left many profound questions for contemplation in the *Analects*.

[13] Confucius said, "If a prince applies rectification of behavior in public service, where is the rectification in governance? If he cannot apply rectification, how can he rectify the people?"

This is a politically charged statement that has not been widely comprehended. Confucius seemingly suggests that there is no true "rectification" (or governance, for that matter) if such an act literally means rectifying others. In Confucius's teaching, rectification of behavior primarily refers to self-rectification or self-cultivation. Specifically, it means to yield, not to impose upon others. When one yields, one does not actively govern or directly instruct in an authoritarian manner. Hence, the only feasible "rectifying" that can occur in governance or teaching is to rectify oneself, thereby inspiring others to follow suit. This is precisely why Confucius repeatedly emphasized that the ruling class must lead by example in adhering to propriety. Therefore, Confucianism can be understood as a pragmatism of self-governance in social administration. It represents a unique way to lead by not dominating or coercing. In a sense, Confucius's approach to governance shares a philosophical resonance with Laozi's Taoist concept of "doing nothing unto others," neither actively governing nor overtly teaching [11]. We find a similar argument or question grappling with the ethical paradox of governance in another passage:

[4–13] Confucius said, "Can the ritual of propriety be the way of state governance? Where is it? Without applying propriety in governance, how can propriety be implemented?"

Leadership is a universal value in social life. The principles of self-rectification and leading by example in governance remain relevant to modern politics, including both democratic rule of law and autocratic rule by law, two popular yet antagonistic Western partisan systems. What, then, differentiates Confucian-style leadership from these modern partisan approaches? It is the virtue of yielding and the ethical principle that Confucian propriety advocates against the two-way infighting or one-way oppression inherent in partisanship.

These two political arguments by Confucius have been widely and diversely interpreted in the literature. By and large, Confucianism is a life philosophy centered on cultivating oneself by following the Tao, the Way of nature, rather than actively changing others or striving to change the world. The Tao, in ancient intellectual tradition, can be considered nature's "first principle." From Confucius's perspective, a virtuous life finds its completeness upon attaining the Tao.

[4–8] "If I hear (attain) the Tao in the morning, I can die in the evening (with content)."

In Confucius's teaching, all the relational virtues can be reduced to one axiom. One of his disciples indeed posed this very question:

[15–24] Zi Gong asked, "Is there a single word that can guide us for our whole life?" Confucius said, "It has to be 'forbearance.' What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others."

Confucianism fundamentally addresses the social ethics of human relationships through reciprocity. We can rephrase Confucius's answer as the well-known Silver Rule: Do not do to others what you do not wish others to do to you[3].

Concluding Remarks

Sages have often compared political authority to parental authority. Drawing on Baumrind's three types of parental authority: permissive, overbearing, and authoritative, we can broadly identify corresponding types of government. Lakoff, for instance, characterizes liberal and conservative authorities as the "nurturing parent" and the "strict father," respectively, loosely aligning with Baumrind's permissive and overbearing styles. In this analogy, the authoritative model in government directly corresponds to the authoritative parent in the family. While an authoritative political system is difficult to discern in democracies, where politics is often dominated by liberal and

[3] In contrast to the golden rule that focuses on “do”: Do to others what you wish others to do to you.

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conservative parties, it can exist within an autocratic system where a single party maintains firm control. In practice, however, autocracy risks becoming tyrannical due to a lack of a free press and the absence of checks and balances provided by partisan divisions.

Confucianism offers a compelling model for the authoritative figure in both family and government. Its philosophy fundamentally centers on the cultivation of ethical virtue (particularly yielding) and the fostering of reciprocal social relationships. It embodies a form of social propriety that operates through personal character development, the learning and promotion of traditional values within family and among friends, and the diligent fulfillment of civic duties. Fundamentally, it represents a political pragmatism focused on cultivating leadership through adherence to the Way of nature.

How, then, might we define the Confucian ideal government? It is an institution that operates akin to a family, guided by the traditional rituals of social propriety, governed by self-cultivated authoritative elites who avoid joining political parties, and supported by a well-educated populace. How do people perceive such an authoritative person?

[9–19] Zi Xia said, "Men of virtue give three impressions. From a distance, they look dignified; by their side, they are cordial; in conversation, they are strict."

The appearance of a virtuous person, such as the Master, evidently varied in the eyes of his followers, who saw him as both civil and gentle, yet capable of bringing discipline to administration and education. For Confucian leaders, politics is profoundly an art of relationship.

Appendix 1 From *ren* to *yi*

Ren is considered the *Tao* (Way) and the primal virtue in Confucius's ethics, mentioned over a hundred times in the *Analects*. A quintessential example appears in this dialogue:

[1–12] Yan Yuan asked what *ren* was. Confucius said, "*Ren* is to restrain oneself and return to the ritual of propriety. Once (people) begin self-restraining and returning to the traditional propriety, China returns to being the kingdom of *ren*. The practice of *ren* concerns self. Does it also concern others?"

As discussed in the main text, *ren* can be understood from two perspectives: general and specific. Specific *ren* constitutes the ethical essence of the act of propriety: to yield or be deferential according to prescribed social forms. This individual act of propriety is thus an expression of specific *ren*. This aspect of *ren* primarily concerns individuals and can only be achieved through learning and self-cultivation, as opposed to imposition from others. Any form of external imposition, whether through direct teaching or governance, runs counter to the spirit of *ren*.

However, *ren* also inherently concerns others. China could not become the "kingdom of *ren*" if only one individual cultivated this virtue. While one might follow propriety after understanding it, what about those who do not yet comprehend its importance? This is precisely what Confucius implied in his rhetorical question to Yan Yuan, an encouragement echoed elsewhere:

[15–36] Confucius said, "In practicing the virtue of *ren*, you do not yield (even) to your teacher."

While acting with *ren* generally implies yielding through propriety, Confucius's statement that one "does not yield at times" presumably means one should not compromise or defer to others when it comes to the unwavering pursuit of one's own self-cultivation of this virtue. Furthermore, in its general sense, *ren* can be seen as interchangeable with the virtue of *yi*, which means "to do the right thing" in social practice. Hence, when practicing *yi*, one does not yield, as it is inherently about upholding what is ethically correct.

Yi (义) is a vital term in Confucius's teaching, often interpreted as acts of loyalty, duty, brotherhood, heroism, love, charity, helping others, or simply "doing the right thing." While commonly translated as "righteousness" or "justice" (正义) in literature, the latter can be a rough interpretation, as it is an imported Western ideal in Mandarin and not directly found in classical Confucian texts. The Mandate of Heaven (天命) in Confucian tradition is perhaps the closest equivalent to the Western concept of justice, presumably originating from a metaphysical or

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supernatural realm. Generally, *yi* can be interpreted as duty and the ethically correct action to take. Consequently, it frequently interchanges with the general sense of *ren* and other virtues within the tradition.

[4–10] Confucius said, "When men of virtue approach the kingdom under the sky, their service is neither for nor against (anyone). They do so by following the mandate of heaven."

In contrast to Taoists, who committed to self-isolation from society, Confucians actively engaged with society and sought to transform one profoundly marked by the total loss of propriety (i.e., the collapse of rituals and the breakdown of music). This was an improbable political task, as Confucians did not inherently possess political power. Instead, they sought to first inspire the powerful ruling class to change themselves, and then lead the people to change. In this context, *yi* is interpreted as the Mandate of Heaven, as it demands specific action from men of virtue, making it more prescriptive than a general sense of duty or "doing the right thing."

Appendix 2 The Confucian model in additional modern perspectives

1. Opposition to authoritarianism

Virtuous leaders, characterized by self-rectification, non-imposition, leading by example, caring for others, and a willingness to listen to opposition, are authoritative, not authoritarian. This crucial distinction is best encapsulated in a key response from Confucius:

[13–15] Duke Ding asked, "... A single precept can break a state. Is there such a thing?" Confucius replied, "There is no such precept, but something is close to it. There is a saying, 'I take no pleasure in being a ruler, except that no one can oppose what I say.' If a ruler's words are good, is it not also good that no one opposes them? But if the words are no good and no one opposes them, is this not almost a single precept to destroy his state?"

2. Free speech and self-regulation

[15–23] Confucius said, "Virtuous people do not promote a man because of his words, and do not dismiss words because of the man."

Confucius would likely not advocate for limiting freedom of speech, but he certainly desired his students to exercise prudence and self-regulation in their discourse. Specifically, he taught that one should assess an individual's true character and merit based on their actions, not merely their words. Conversely, he also stressed that one should not disregard a person's words and opinions simply due to their personal identity or background.

3. On equality

Confucius indeed believed that everyone possessed an equal opportunity to become a person of virtue. However, his perspective on social equality diverged from modern egalitarian ideals. Based on an individual's attitude towards learning and inherent understanding, he categorized people into four distinct groups:

[9–16] "Those who are born knowing it are superior. Those who study to know it are less superior. Those who are bewildered and turn to study it are less inferior. Those who are bewildered and do not even study are considered to be the most inferior."

The crucial question arises: "What is 'it'?" While some interpret "it" as the Tao or fundamental principles, the precise meaning remains open to scholarly debate. However, it's known that Confucius allegedly acknowledged Laozi as "superior" in understanding, viewing himself as "less superior," suggesting "it" refers to a profound philosophical or intuitive grasp of the Way.

Furthermore, Confucius made a statement that, when viewed through a modern lens, appears controversial and politically incorrect for its seeming offense to commoners:

[8,9] Confucius said, "The commoners may be made to follow a path of action, but they may not be made to understand it."

This statement, though potentially jarring to contemporary ears, aligns with Confucius's teaching style, which focused on instructing those genuinely eager to learn. As noted elsewhere, "it

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is hard to be poor and not resentful, and easy to be wealthy and not presumptuous." The immediate and pressing need for the "hundred surnames" (the common people) was to alleviate poverty. Therefore, Confucius here must be referring to the elites' role in providing practical guidance and setting virtuous examples for society, allowing the people to prosper through action even before they fully grasp the intricate philosophical underpinnings of propriety. The implication is that practical well-being often precedes a deeper intellectual or ethical understanding for the broader populace.

4. On popularity and publicity

Confucius would likely concur with the idea that the people should have a voice in governance, yet he would not necessarily support the notion that everyone holds an equal vote in political matters. His perspective on public opinion is illustrated in this exchange:

[13–24] Zi Gong asked, "One is loved by all the people in his village. What do you think of this person?" Confucius said, "Not so good." "Another is hated by all the people in his village. What do you think of that person?" "Not so good, either. A good person is loved by the good people in the village and hated by those bad."

This dialogue underscores that being virtuous is not about popularity. Confucius further elaborates on this caution against unquestioning public sentiment:

[15–28] Confucius said, "When the multitude hates it, it must be examined. When the multitude favors it, it must be examined."

Evidently, to Confucius, virtue is neither about widespread publicity nor mere popularity.

5. On privacy and social distance

[11–20] Zi Zhang asked about the art of friendship. Confucius said, "Do not get too intimate (with friends), and do not enter their private room either."

Zi Zhang was characterized among the disciples as having an "excessive" personality and being "expansive" in managing social relationships. Here, Confucius sought to temper Zi Zhang's tendency towards widespread intimacy, particularly in the context of friendship. The art of social relationships was also discussed in the context of political association:

[2–14] Confucius said, "Virtuous men are congenial and not collusive. Lesser men are collusive and not congenial."

This is a rephrasing of Confucius's broader comparisons between virtuous and lesser individuals in social relationships, aligning with the idea that "Men of virtue socialize without joining political tribes." The distinction between being congenial and collusive can be understood in terms of appropriate social distance, a concept not explicitly labeled as an ethical subject in the *Analects*, yet implicitly addressed. Its implications extend beyond mere personal intimacy, as in the original text. Confucius likely implied a fundamental difference in the common goals shared by virtuous individuals versus lesser individuals. From a modern perspective, virtuous individuals aim to benefit their state or society, whereas lesser individuals act primarily for themselves or their specific political factions.

6. On tax and spending

Confucianism can be understood as leaning towards fiscal conservatism in its approach to governance. This perspective is clearly illustrated in the following dialogue:

[9–12] Duke Ai asked You Ruo, "This year, the harvest is low, and there are insufficient revenues to run the state. What should I do?" You Ruo said, "Why not try a 10% tax?" The duke answered, "I cannot make do with a 20% tax. How could I do with 10%?" You Ruo said, "When the people have enough, how can the prince not have enough? When the people do not have enough, how can the prince have enough?"

In this exchange, a disciple offers a perspective on governance that directly opposes that of the prince. You Ruo implicitly links the well-being of the ruler to that of the people, suggesting a shared prosperity. The prince, by contrast, operates from a mindset of extracting from his populace, placing

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his own needs above theirs. This highlights a fundamental Confucian principle: the ruler's prosperity is intrinsically tied to the people's welfare.

7. On foreign policy

In a world often marked by conflict, foreign policy remains a top priority. Confucius presented a unique approach to this issue, deeply connected to his philosophy of governance:

[13–16] Duke Ye of Chu asked about governance. Confucius said, "To make those near you happy and those far away come to you."

Governing a state, in the Confucian view, is analogous to managing a family. It does not involve actively expanding control. Instead, a state should lead by example through its propriety and prosperity, thereby inspiring admiration from others. When a state is well-governed and its people are prosperous, immigrants will naturally be drawn to it. For Confucius, governance was ultimately about cultivating virtue and culture to exert positive influence. Mencius later adopted and expanded upon this leadership philosophy, stating: "Do not reject those who come to you; do not chase those who leave you."

The *Analects* records a significant debate between Confucius and two of his students, who served as house ministers for the powerful Ji clan after their graduation. The clan chief intended to invade Zhuan Yu, a small state located within Lu, perceiving it as a threat to a nearby city. Confucius, believing his students were failing in their ministerial duties, presented the following argument against such a strategic move. This passage clearly illuminates his foreign policy stance and ethics of war:

[1–16] ... Confucius said, "... Zhuan Yu was given the duty of sacrificial rituals on Mount Dong Meng by the former kings in ancient times. Moreover, it is located within the state and has served as our altar to the soil and grain. Why should it be attacked? ... I have heard that a state or a family is not worried about being small compared with others as long as it is sovereign and not worried about being weak as long as it is secure. A sovereign has no trouble with being weak; harmony makes the size (of a state) irrelevant; being secure means the state will not be overthrown. Following this logic, if distant subjects are not submissive, you cultivate your virtue and culture to draw them in. Once they come, you keep them content..."

Confucius thus explicitly argued against preemptive military campaigns and the active enlargement of sovereignty. His foreign policy principles directly stemmed from his domestic state model, which prioritized elites demonstrating virtues of propriety and thus inspiring others through attraction rather than coercion.

8. On revolution

Readers of the *Analects* might question why Confucius never explicitly advocated for overthrowing corrupt and oppressive governments to establish his own, especially given that revolution has been an integral part of the human experience since the beginning of civilizations. Confucius would assert that such an act violates propriety, while Laozi would contend it goes against the Way of nature. It is crucial to bear in mind that both would equally condemn tyranny and oppression. Beyond this, they would also agree that merely changing a ruler or a ruling party would not fundamentally alter the character of society.

Consider Confucius's subtle commentary on ancient music:

[3–25] Confucius said of the song of Shao, "A perfection of the beautiful and the good." He said of the song of Wu, "A perfection of the beautiful and not quite of the good."

The song of Shao lauded Sage King Shun (2294-2184 BCE), who remains a quintessential role model for rulers in China. Conversely, the song of Wu celebrated King Wu (?-1043 BCE) of the Zhou dynasty, who led a bloody revolution to overthrow the preceding Shang dynasty. The implicit philosophical question here is whether it is justified, in terms of propriety, to rebel against a ruler who oppresses his people. While Confucius delivered his answer through aesthetic judgment of the music, this profound philosophical dilemma regarding justified rebellion remains a complex, unresolved issue in intellectual tradition.

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This Confucian observation shares striking political insight with the Irish statesman Edmund Burke, who served in the British Parliament in the 1700s. Burke is considered one of the most influential figures in the development of modern conservatism. Like Confucius, he was a strong defender of tradition and custom, preferring practical experience and reason over abstract principles or ideology for policy-making. Burke's politically pragmatic opposition to the French Revolution stemmed from his argument that the French people should have gradually reformed their government rather than violently overthrow it. He viewed revolution as a dangerous social experiment inevitably resulting in bloodshed and chaos.

Similarly, Confucius did not perceive revolution as a viable solution for social progress. He fundamentally valued leadership rooted in propriety and prioritized public education as the primary means of building a prosperous and harmonious society.

[8–10] Confucius said, "People who like being brave while suffering poverty will cause disorder. (Rulers) who treat people without the virtue of *ren*, and when the people's suffering reaches an extreme, there will be rebellion."

Confucius thus identified two core causes for social disorder: poverty and oppression. While there will always be individuals who are impoverished and courageous, and an upper class that is greedy and oppressive, Confucius transcends a simple liberal-conservative dichotomy. Though he might appear conservative in advocating for ancient propriety and opposing revolution, his identification of the roots of rebellion also aligns with liberal concerns for social justice. Ultimately, he was neither purely one nor the other; instead, he adopted a pragmatic approach, consistently advocating for order and harmony. From the perspective of civilization, liberal innovation might best apply to arts and technologies, while conservative preservation should be applied to the Tao in humanity. This nuanced view can underpin Confucius's pragmatic political approach to societal development and well-being.

Chinese history since Confucius vividly demonstrates that the tradition of propriety has endured among the common people for generations, while ruling classes have been continuously replaced over millennia. This starkly contrasts the longevity of cultural traditions with the fragility of rulers. As the saying goes, "The weak and tender outlive the strong and rigid." Consequently, we arrive at another justification, perhaps from a historical perspective, for why Confucius argued for the painstaking ethical reform of the ruling classes through virtue and propriety rather than advocating for a swift change of rulers. From Confucius's teaching, the compelling conclusion is that it is not about merely changing leaders; it is always about fundamentally changing the way of leadership.

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