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Reflections on "Human Nature and Human Virtue"

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Human Nature and Human Virtue

Some Reflections on Confucius

by Chin-Tai Kim

The topic of human nature can conceivably be addressed from an exclusively empirical point of view. But a comprehensive account of human nature is possible only with an ontology and a cosmology.

A Western Paradigm

Though the Western tradition offers a diversity of views on the topic, it is no exaggeration to say that the Judaeo-Christian view is the dominant one. According to this view, humans are special creatures of a transcendent personal God. God is transcendent, which implies that God is totally independent of all else in essence and existence while everything else absolutely depends on God in essence and existence: God and the world stand in absolute ontological asymmetry with each other. Omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and absolute freedom are God’s chief attributes. The special nature of humans is implied by the statement that humans are created imago dei. This specifically means, humans are given by God finite analogues of divine power, knowledge, goodness and freedom. Reflective human knowledge of human faculties forms the basis for human knowledge of divine nature but this order of human knowing is reversed in the ontological interpretation of them as being grounded in divine dispensation.

Affinity with God is the exclusive human privilege. Humans partake of corporeal nature but their God-given spirituality sets them apart from the rest of the world. God, man, and the corporeal world thus constitute three distinct ontological categories. This categorization even structures much of secular Western philosophy. The supreme obligation for humans consonant with the presupposition is to understand and admit their status as creatures and to heed divine will revealed by natural reason supplemented by revelation. A theological foundation as well as content for ethics is so strongly indicated under the presupposition that arguing for the autonomy of ethics from theology appears to be a difficult task.

Metaphysical Presuppositions of Confucius

The dominant Western monotheistic paradigm sketched above provides a framework for a comparative understanding of non-Western traditions including Confucianism as well as the Western departures from it. The tradition originating with Confucius later came to incorporate many new elements, especially in Neo-Confucianism of the 12th century, which brought to a synthesis elements of Taoism and Buddhism as well as those coming from Confucius. But in this presentation I shall only be referring to elements to be found in an original Confucian text, Analects.

It must be frustrating for Westerners who read Confucian texts with the belief that Confucius knew the pivotal metaphysical significance of his concept of Heaven not to find it as well articulated as they expect. The characteristics of Judaeo-Christian God can hardly be found in Confucius’ account of Heaven. There is no expression in the Confucian texts of a belief in the creation of the world out of nothing. One might say either that Confucius considered the world uncreated and eternal or that its origin did not interest him. Nor is there clear and sufficient textual evidence that he thought of Heaven in anthropomorphic terms.

Among the questions that arise about Confucius’ concept of Heaven none is more fundamental than the question as to whether Heaven for him is a transcendent being or an immanent principle. The fact that Confucius is almost free of anthropomorphic representations of Heaven, combined with the fact that the Taoists, who thought Tao to be the principle immanent in nature, did not engage in a dispute with Confucius about the metaphysical status of Tao though they did about Tao’s character, supports the view that Confucius identified Heaven with Tao. Heaven in this interpretation is not an entity existing apart from nature with idealized human traits; it rather is the essence or power that actualizes itself concretely in nature. If this ontology of immanence is attributed to Confucius, human beings should for him be Heaven’s exemplary manifestations. What constitutes this human privilege is the exclusively human capacity for moral virtue. Human morality in Confucius comes to have a natural foundation rather than a theological one.

Confucius’ concept of Heaven becomes a source of possible philosophical paradoxes. Heaven, conceived in purely ontological terms, is the immanent ground of concrete being and becoming. Heaven can accordingly be understood as the principle, like Spinoza’s God, that specifically manifests itself through the laws of nature and those of human history, which collectively constitute Destiny (ming). This will imply that all things are as they are, and become what they become in accordance with Destiny. We can only speculate as to how rigidly Confucius conceives the laws of Heaven or nature—whether he conceives

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them as inexorable or as allowing exceptions. But such statements of Confucius as that an imperial ruler loses his empire by losing the Mandate of Heaven (t’ien ming) raises a question. The Mandate must be the Heaven-authorized right to rule that is deserved by virtue. The view that Heaven gives a Mandate in turn implies that it is the source of the moral principle that a ruler ought to be virtuous to have the right to rule. Heaven will then be the source of both Destiny and the moral principle. Confucius’ explanation of the fall of an emperor by reference to his loss of the Mandate raises the following question: What makes an emperor lose the Mandate?

Two answers can be conceived. It may be said that Heaven makes an emperor lose his Mandate. Or it may be said that the emperor brings about his own downfall. If the former is the case, the principle, “An emperor ought to be virtuous,” arguably loses validity. The argument is as follows: “Ought” implies “can”: an emperor ought to retain virtue only if he is able. But if Heaven makes an emperor lose virtue, hence forfeit the right to rule, he cannot possibly have kept it. The principle therefore has no validity. If the emperor brings about his own downfall, he must be accorded freedom and ability to retain his virtue so he can be held responsible for forfeiting the right to rule. This will mean that the laws of becoming cannot be inexorable, that not everything occurs by Destiny. Difficulties will remain even if the laws of nature are thought to allow exceptions. Conditions that have not been chosen and cannot be controlled often affect the moral career of individuals. Two persons with equal moral ability may fare unequally because of different circumstances to cope with. Destiny will have its influence whether humans are free and morally able or not.

Though Confucius had no articulated idea of freedom, the structure of his thought requires its admission. Confucius, significantly, kept relatively silent about Destiny and human nature. His silence may imply not only his admission of the impossibility of comprehending Destiny but also his recognition of a conflict between it and the requirement of morality that evidently was his primary concern. His reticence on metaphysical issues such as Destiny versus freedom and his effusiveness on moral matters requires commentary.

There is a Western thinker with whose thought Confucius’ can be fruitfully compared in this context. Immanuel Kant on the one hand affirmed what he called “the fact of practical reason,” namely, the fact that humans have a conception of the Categorical Imperative, the supreme moral law that obligates them. On the other hand, he admitted that the condition under which the moral law can obligate them is that no matter what their empirical circumstances, they are free and able to act in accordance with it. He also admitted that it can never be known whether humans are actually free. Kant’s complex explanation of why this is so need not be gone into here. But, he thinks, there are no known reasons contradicting the supposition that we are free. We can therefore suppose that we are free to comply with the moral law. And since we cannot but act, indeed cannot even exist as human beings, without admitting our obligation to the moral law, we should suppose that we are free. In short, we should conduct our life as if we were free. From the practical point of view, supposing ourselves free, for Kant, is being free. Humans cannot exist only with a theoretical point of view—only with interest in knowing; they must also be agents who project and realize possibilities. The practical point of view is that of an agent—a being who is aware of the necessity of action.

We can with some liberty interpret Confucius in Kantian terms. We are aware of the Mandate of Heaven that obligates us to strive for virtue. Destiny on the other hand ever threatens the impossibility of moral success in individual cases. But since Destiny cannot be known, we can suppose it to allow moral freedom. From the practical point of view, we can and should live as if we were free to follow the Mandate of Heaven. Thus Confucius can be understood to share Kant’s view of the primacy of the practical point of view. The existential exigency of striving for virtue, Confucius might argue, justifies postulating human freedom where Destiny mercifully remains unknown. Confucius can thus be thought to pragmatically suspend speculation about Destiny in the interest of morality. Whether this interpretation is correct or not, the issue of whether Heaven indeed provides the conditions for the fulfillment of its moral decree remains.

Stoicism is another Western analogy. Some Stoics dogmatically advocated fatalism. But there are no thinkers, either coming before or after them, who more rigorously advocated the human obligation to fulfill duties. How can humans be obligated to perform their duties if they are determined not to be able to perform them? The paradox of Stoicism is more serious than Kant’s problem, for the Stoics did not have the benefit of a metaphysics like Kant’s that recognized the ontological duality of humans as noumena and phenomena or an epistemology like his that freed thinking by restricting the domain of possible knowledge. The metaphysics of Confucius resembles Stoicism more than Kant’s in that nature for Confucius comprehends human nature, which Kant denies. Confucius, it turns out, refrained from dogmatic fatalism for a good reason, avoiding generating an outright paradox as the Stoics did.

One may pragmatically suspend belief in absolute Destiny in the interest of morality but no one can really suppress the question as to whether Destiny reigns. Confucius’ autobiographical statement that “At fifty [he] knew the decrees of Heaven (t’ien-ming)” suggests that he attained an understanding of a harmony between Destiny and morality—that he finally understood the course of nature and history to be itself a moral order. The content of this understanding, however, is not spelled out. The suggested morality of Heaven cannot be the same as the morality that Heaven requires humans to attain. Incidentally, the Taoists, unlike Confucius, thought Tao to transcend morality. For them Tao is amoral.

Confucian Ethics and Its Problems

We turn to Confucian ethics after these foundational considerations. A superficial study may generate the impression that Confucian ethics is an unsystematic catalogue of virtues. But an in-depth and sympathetic reading of Confucius reveals its profundity. Confucian ethics recognizes humanity (jen), righteousness (li), propriety (li), and wisdom (chi) as the four
cardinal virtues. We should investigate their mutual relationships. "Jen" has two senses. In a narrower sense it means benevolence, natural altruistic feeling of humans for fellow humans. But in a broader, more fundamental sense, jen is the ideal mode of human existence. To have jen, in this sense, is to be how humans should be. This ontological sense of "jen" is fundamental. If jen is interpreted this way, benevolence in the narrower sense of the term, righteousness, propriety and wisdom become aspects of the ideal mode of human existence.

The coherence of the specific virtues—benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom should become an issue. In the predominantly rationalistic Western tradition, wisdom tends to be valued as the highest virtue. Wisdom is knowledge; it is the achievement of reason. Consider Aristotle. Wisdom, the intellectual virtue, is higher even than moral virtue, which, according to him, can be attained by a training of will even without knowledge. Confucius has no well developed theory of mental faculties but we may allow ourselves to use the concepts of Western faculty psychology as an interpretive device. Righteousness is the other virtue that has the closest connection with wisdom. Righteousness must include an ability to judge right and wrong. All judgments, whatever their objects, must have intellectual components. If so, wisdom must be a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition of righteousness. But wisdom cannot be sufficient because righteousness must also involve a will to act in conformity to moral judgment. Neither wisdom nor righteousness nor their combination, however, can completely constitute humaneness. A benevolent feeling may go against a judgment of right or wrong.

Let us consider an example. An impoverished man has stolen to feed his family. One may judge his act wrong and may even will that he be punished. There is an element missing from this reaction, which is benevolence. Confucius does not reduce moral consciousness to a function of reason and will alone. In the Western ethics of prima facie duties, the man’s situation may be described as an example of a conflict between duties. As a citizen the man has the duty not to steal; as a head of household he has the duty to support his family. One may try to argue for the priority of the one duty to the other and say in this case the duty as a head of household overrides the other duty. Or one may uphold the judgment of right or wrong and dismiss the relevance of a dissonant feeling. Confucius recognizes the significance of a feeling that may contradict judgment and will. Human persons must be those who can integrate intellect, will and affect in moral decision and moral evaluation. If so, is there an effective method to harmonize righteousness and benevolence?

One might think that benevolence generates a principle such that the principle of benevolence can be considered together with and weighed against a principle of right in handling a moral situation. Or one might think that there is a special intuition that can bring the feeling of benevolence and the principle of right to harmony. Confucius takes neither option. Instead he appeals to propriety, li. The concept of propriety emerges as the crucial, integrative one in the ethics of Confucius. Propriety is the distillate of the collective experience of society exemplified in the virtue of legendary sage-emperors like Yao and Shun. The code of li, Confucius believes, optimally integrates reason, will and feeling. This requires some interpretation and elicits criticism.

The frequent reference by Confucius and Confucians to the legendary sage-emperors is a rhetorical expression of a philosophical resolve to trust neither abstract reason nor the will it independently determines nor natural feeling. He would consider inappropriate the question how to generate rules of li from theoretical considerations of righteousness and benevolence. The most trustworthy norms for Confucius are the time-tested norms that tradition honors. A person of jen, then, is one who has thoroughly internalized the rules of li. A thoroughly humane person would react to any moral situation in sincere conformance to the rules of li, with no inner conflicts.

This view raises difficult questions. First, a society may have a plurality of conflicting traditions with conflicting codes of li. The Chinese society of Confucius’ time cannot have been an exception in this regard. Should we say that in such a situation there is no li or that there are many codes of li to choose from? If the former, Confucian ethics cannot stand. If the latter, Confucian ethics will incur the burden of producing a criterion of choice capable of being justified independently of an appeal to tradition. He seems to deny the possibility and desirability of producing such a criterion. The recognition of the need for such a criterion will defeat the thesis that tradition is the arbiter of norms. Second, this thesis has a difficulty at a deeper level. Tradition is formed in time; it is a convergence and congealmement of the experiences of individuals who think, feel and act prior to the formation of a tradition. It is therefore difficult to determine at what historical point a tradition to be henceforth deemed sacrosanct is formed despite continuing challenges. Should we not admit, we may say, a continuing dialectic between the observance of tradition and critical and innovative spirit?

Confucius unfortunately did not develop a position with sufficient elaboration. But there is a line in Analects that is pertinent in this context: “A man who keeps cherishings his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others.” The line raises the following question: How should the continuity of the old with the new be understood? The following answer suggests itself. There are universals exemplified in the past; their apprehension should be the purpose of reviewing it. Universals are timeless, hence neither old nor new, but the way they are exemplified varies from historical context to historical context. The qualified teacher must be one who apprehends the universal exemplified in the past codes of li and understands how the same universal could and should be appropriated in the present. The authority of a code of li then derives not so much from the fact that it is an accepted body of norms found in the tradition with which one identifies as from the fact that an interpretation of the norms discloses that they exemplify principles having universal validity capable of being appropriated also in the present situation.

The ethical thinking of Confucius thus appears to complete a full circle. He locates the ethical ideal of humanity and the motive to pursue it in the immanence of human nature. But, he honestly admits, human nature eludes a theory that can sufficiently ground the ideal. He therefore is led to appeal to history as the
source of justification for ethical norms. But he soon enough realizes that the value of history consists in its exemplification of universals that can be disclosed by interpretation. This implies that a reviewer of the past must bring principles of interpretation to bear on their interpretation. Should not the principles be a product of a theory of human nature?

To answer this question for Confucius: We should reflect upon and rethink the presupposition of this question, namely, that an ultimate justification for human norms can be found. We should admit that neither a purely theoretical justification nor a purely historical justification for human norms is possible. Human nature has uneliminable historical determinants as history is subject to critical interpretation from a point of view that claims independence. This claim in turn is ever threatened by the suspicion that the principles that the claimant deems trans-historically valid are also prejudices rooted in history. One reason why Confucius’ thought offers us such a challenge is that it raises the fundamental question about the nature and structure of interpretation—a question that has begun to be seriously addressed by philosophers in the twentieth century West, though this does not mean that Confucius thematicized hermeneutical problems.

The weight of the above suspicion can be appreciated in light of the fact that a code of li as Confucius understands it presupposes the cross-temporal validity of the politico-social structure he favors. He presupposes the validity of monarchy and of hereditary social stratification though the Chinese society in his time was not as rigidly stratified as the contemporary Indian society with its caste system. The code of li mainly governs the relationships between sovereign and subject, parent and son, brothers, and man and wife. Confucius evidently considered such relationships fixed by nature. Animals too stand in natural relationships. Humans differ from them in that while accepting their natural relationships, they turn them into moral ones. A code of propriety is what regulates and humanizes the relationships initially set by nature. We are reminded here of the controversy among the Athenian thinkers of the fifth century B.C. over the issue of whether human morality is natural or conventional. For Confucius the dichotomy of nature (physis) and convention (nomos) is spurious. The human conception of nature for Confucius must be mediated through culture. Curtailing a lengthy argument, we can say that Confucius presupposed too much. Human history is replete with structural transformations of society in all of its dimensions. The relationships that Confucius deemed natural, arguably, are subject to historical changes. This casts doubts on his implied thesis that there are ethical universals invariant through time and history.

The only correct intellectual resolve we can make in light of this consideration is to continue thinking and conversing about such issues as nature and culture, and universals and their historical exemplifications, maximizing the scope and reflectivity of our thinking and discourse.

Concluding Remarks

Confucius is so distant from such Christian concerns as the original sin, the radical depravity of human nature, the human need for God-initiated salvation, justification by faith, eternal beatitude or damnation. There is no goal of human life for Confucius other than being fully human, that is, attaining jen, while alive, by human efforts. His position radically contrasts with the Judaeo-Christian according to which humans cannot even hope to fully realize their human potential without divine grace. If there is a horizon that encompasses the personal concerns of individuals in the thought of Confucius, it is neither metaphysical nor theological but social. The ultimate fulfillment of jen is the humanization of society. A person cannot successfully attain humanity without sincerely trying to make others humane as Confucius did throughout his mature career albeit to his ultimate frustration. The Kingdom of Heaven for Confucius is nothing other than a thoroughly humane society governed by li. Confucian ethics can be aptly called social humanism. The enormous impact that Confucian thought has had on Eastern societies such as the Chinese, Korean and Japanese, can be explained by its relentless focusing on social ethics. Confucian thought clearly contrasts with Western or Eastern metaphysical or theological schools of thought whose ethics and social philosophy are either insufficiently worked out or which allow too much latitude for a uniform ethics or social philosophy to develop. Yet in his obsession with ethics Confucius neglects the dimension of human thinking where ethics calls for grounding.

Yet Confucius’ greatest challenge to us all, whether we are situated in the West or in the East, is to work out a way to build a humane community. That arguably is possible without a closure on metaphysical issues. And the greatest challenge of our study of Confucius is to rethink different presuppositions and the different views on human nature and ethics they respectively support, though rereading does not mean rejection. We learn once again that human nature and a human conception of it can hardly be distinguished; we also learn that in a world that is rapidly becoming global a reconciliation of conflicting conceptions of human nature and human norms is looming as a pressing and daunting task.

Reflections on "Human Nature and Human Virtue"

The essay by Dr. Kim ranges more widely than its title. He presents his theme first with a sketch of "the Western paradigm" of human nature and virtue and, as he introduces the thought of Confucius, he frequently makes points of comparison. The breadth of his knowledge of western philosophy and theology is impressive! I wish to express my appreciation for the way in which he makes the Chinese Master accessible to the uninitiated like myself. Especially important is Dr. Kim’s stress on questions relating to metaphysics as the foundation for a discussion of human nature.
My own formal introduction to philosophy ended many years ago, so I approach the essay from the viewpoint and limitations of a student of the Bible and traditions flowing from it into Judaism and Christianity. For the sake of brevity, I will omit some subtle distinctions between Jewish and Christian, Catholic and Protestant approaches to the key concepts presented.

**A Western Paradigm**

The “Western paradigm” as an approach to understanding human nature can be described in two ways: philosophical and biblical. Perhaps the brief sketch in Professor Kim’s paper would benefit by a clearer distinction between these. In ancient times, this would be the question: “What does Athens have in common with Jerusalem?”

His description of the relationship between God and creation represents the Judeo-Christian view well, but only a philosopher would describe God’s chief attributes as “omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness and absolute freedom.” Righteousness (rendered as “integrity” in modern terms) and love would be the correlative attributes that form the biblical basis for understanding the human vocation to be in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-28). The other attributes are not neglected by Jewish thinkers, but their abstractness kept Israel’s teachers from dwelling on them at length. But righteous attitudes would be expressed in legislation and in the execution of laws; love, expressing itself in mercy, compassion, patience and forgiveness, became the way in which the sacred Name, revealed to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3:14), was interpreted (Ex 34:6-7). The challenge that follows is for people to imitate God in deeds that manifest the various facets of love.

Biblical discussions of God’s creative wisdom and power lead in many passages to a reflection on divine providence. This is expressed in the compassion of God for various creatures, but especially for human beings.

“(The LORD) gives food to the cattle and to the young ravens when they cry out to him” (Ps. 147:9).

“The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem, The dispersed of Israel he gathers. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Ps.147:2-3).

Created in the divine image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-28), each human being is challenged to imitate God (Lev. 19:2) in the search for holiness as separation from all that is twisted from its true purpose and tainted by sin. The positive effort to show love and compassion for all creatures is second dimension of this challenge. This is accomplished, not in abstract terms, but by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, burying the dead.

Hebrew thought reflects on God, humankind and the corporeal world in the context of commandments that govern our relationship with each “category.” Admitting their status as “creatures” people should strive to bring divine standards of charity into their dealings with neighbor and nature. Thus did Abraham intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah; he admitted, “I am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27), yet he dared to ask: “Should not the Judge of all the world act with justice?” (18:25). Indeed the person of faith applies reason and revelation to the search for accomplishing God’s will. At the same time, however, intimacy with God leads to a certain boldness in prayer. Arguing with God about the meaning and obligations of life is an integral part of growing into the full potential of being human. Of course, for this prayer to be authentic it must include an attitude of careful listening to become ever more attuned to the role of a creature in divine service.

**Metaphysical Presuppositions of Confucius**

Although in another context the “Western paradigm” deserves fuller investigation, Dr. Kim’s outline provides the basis for a comparison with the teachings of Confucius.

Did Confucius identify “Heaven” with the one God? It seems that he taught that “Heaven” is identified with Tao, the creative principle immanent in nature. “It is the essence or power that actualizes itself concretely in nature.” It is not surprising that Confucius did not express belief in “creation of the world out of nothing.” Recall Aristotle’s postulate that the world was eternal, the sophisticated concept of “creatio ex nihilo” is expressed first in 2 Maccabees 7:28. This comes in the exhortation of a pious Jewish woman who exhorts her sons to endure martyrdom. Belief in God the Creator is the foundation for faith in the Pharisee doctrine that the bodies of the dead will rise for judgment, followed by reward or punishment. Principles that undergird the moral order derive from the creation and destiny of each human being. Ethical principles can indeed be developed from a philosophical reflection on human nature and the cardinal virtues (see 4 Maccabees). Faith in divine revelation introduces other compelling reasons for instilling standards of morality.

It seems that for the thinkers of Israel as well as Confucius, the principle of free will is presupposed rather than discussed. The Confucian idea of destiny (ming) might be interpreted in a deterministic way. Yet “the Heaven-authorized right to rule” must be deserved by virtue. The argument for freedom and responsibility is made well in this essay.

The ancient Hebrew teaching of the two ways presents a concrete challenge to the community and all its members. “I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and doom... I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, that you and your descendants may live” (Deut 30:15,19). Only in the second century A.D. does Rabbi Akiba express the paradox of divine omniscience and human free will. “Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given; the world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the abundance of each one’s work” (Mishnah Abot 3:19). Unlike Kant, Akiba and the Jewish tradition postulates the reality of human freedom. Otherwise the idea of morally obliging commandments becomes a mockery.

**Confucian Ethics and Its Problems**

For Confucius, the key principles in the moral order may be considered as the cardinal virtues, the hinges upon which the human response to life turns. These may be compared to the
cardinal virtues of Greeks and Romans: prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. However, there are more points of comparison with the biblical understanding of the fundamental virtues. The brief discussion that follows merely touches on a few similarities and differences in regard to the concepts elucidated by Dr. Kim.

*Jen* is translated “humanity” but the strict definition is “benevolence, natural altruistic feeling of human beings for fellow humans.” This is embodied in the Confucian expression of the golden rule (see note 6 and Matthew 7:12) and leads us to think of the command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). Although the biblical virtue of charity is recognized to be a divine gift (1 Cor 12:31-13:13), it does fulfill in the highest way the human potential in being created according to the divine image. In other words, the challenge to consistent expression of loving deeds may be beyond the limited capacity of people over a lifetime, but the ideal remains ever before them. In the Covenant, God offers the gift that provides strength for successful ordering of human tendencies so that altruistic love does become the pattern of a person’s life.

To reinforce *jen* as benevolence and to bring “the ideal mode of human existence” into actuality, the virtues of righteousness (*i*), propriety (*li*) and wisdom (*chi*) guide the person to overcome selfishness and to treat neighbor properly. The biblical view describes wisdom (*hokmah, sophia*), not as the intellectual virtue, but as the divine attribute that controls the creative power of God and guides its exercise (Prov 8:22-31; Sira 24:1-22). Through creation and the Covenant God bestows wisdom upon human beings so that they can exercise their faculties prudently, ordering all activities toward charity.

Confucius describes righteousness in terms of correct decisions made through rejection of evil and wrong in favor of good and right. In Hebrew thought, the righteousness (*sedeq, sedeqah*) defined as “integrity,” must be completed by judgment/justice (*mishpat*) in particular moments of decision. Divine precepts (*mishpatim*) are the foundation for a person’s choices so that they bring right order into the fabric of daily life. The call to imitate divine righteousness is assisted by decrees revealed in the Law of Israel so that people know the just and honest response to the dilemmas of life.

Confucius moves the presentation of ideals to the intricate situations of life in society by introducing propriety (*li*) as the way to follow the time-tested norms honored by tradition. This attention to particular details in ordering the individual’s life with a community is analogous to the Pharisee elaboration of the oral law as interpretation of the written commandments. The Pharisees were thus able to introduce creative innovations into interpretation of ancient laws. Indeed, as Confucius had recognized centuries earlier, there is a constant tension between the new and the old (“nova et veprena,” Matthew 13:52), observance of tradition and openness to some innovation.

The code of *li* mainly governs the relationships between sovereign and subject, parent and son, brothers, man and wife. The commandments are also comprehensive in governing relationships, subordinating the approach to creatures (human beings, defined as neighbor and self and animals) in the great command to love God with all one’s heart, soul and strength (Deut 6:5).

In contrast to neighboring cultures and to Imperial China, Israel’s teachers stressed that the king was chosen to represent the community before God and to lead people in the service of God. The king was not above the law but should have been the exemplar of fidelity to the commandments. The story of king David’s adultery and “cover-up” by murder (2 Samuel 11:1-27) can be paralleled in many nations. But how many emperors or kings responded in repentance when confronted with their sins? Nathan cleverly brought David to judge an apocryphal case, and then boldly proclaimed: “You are the man!” (2 Sam 12:7). This brought the king to humble submission and repentance. Are there parallels in the annals of other nations?

In ancient Israel, the woman was subordinate to her husband but was his equal in the eyes of their children. The same double standard of sexual morality prevailed both in ancient Israel and in China. In recent decades people sensitive to the rights of women have criticized the injustices of patriarchal societies. Discussion of this topic would require a conference to itself!

Each ancient tradition brings insights that are valuable in the modern discussion of environmental issues and the proper relationship between human beings and animals. That too is beyond the scope of this program, but could be the subject of a fruitful dialogue.

**Concluding Remarks**

The description of “Christian concerns” owes much to a 16th century Reformation approach. This is betrayed by reference to “the radical depravity of human nature.” In the Catholic interpretations of the biblical synthesis, human beings are wounded by the situation inherited from our first parents, but not totally corrupted or depraved. This means that we are still responsible and free to choose good over evil. In any individual choice the person may reject evil effectively and exemplify what it is to be created in the divine image (see Genesis 1:26-28; 9:6). However, in the long run, relying only on our strength, we are bound to fail in some or many instances. This constitutes the “bondage of sin.”

This nuance in understanding “original sin” should allow Catholics to enter into discussion with great thinkers of Eastern religions and philosophies. Indeed, we hold components in our synthesis that are not shared, but many perceptions deriving from the Bible do resonate well with the thought of Confucius. Over the centuries, Christians have framed their perception of reality in dialogue with Greek and Roman thinkers, as Dr. Kim has indicated so well. However, the Hebrew culture is Asian in its roots, and allows us to develop many points that can be the basis for fruitful exploration and exchange with Confucian thought.

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