

# Recent Approaches to Confucian Filial Morality<sup>1</sup>

Forthcoming in *Philosophy Compass*

Hagop Sarkissian  
Department of Philosophy  
The City University of New York  
Graduate Center | Baruch College

**ABSTRACT:** A hallmark of Confucian morality is its emphasis on duties to family and kin as weighty features of moral life. The virtue of ‘filiality’ or ‘filial piety’ (*xiao* 孝), for example, is one of the most important in the Confucian canon. This aspect of Confucianism has been of renewed interest recently. On the one hand, some have claimed that, precisely because it acknowledges the importance of kin duties, Confucianism should be seen as an ethics rooted in human nature that remains a viable system of morality today. On the other hand, some have argued that the extreme emphasis on filial duties is precisely the aspect of Confucian moral philosophy that ought to be jettisoned in favor of greater impartialism; without mitigating its emphasis on filial piety, Confucianism risks irrelevance to modern concerns. In this paper, I will outline the nature of filial morality in the Confucian tradition and discuss these recent contributions to the literature.



A hallmark of Confucian morality is its emphasis on duties to family and kin as weighty features of moral life. The virtue of ‘filiality’ or ‘filial piety’ (*xiao* 孝), for example, is one of the most important in the Confucian canon. This aspect of Confucianism has been of renewed interest recently. On the one hand, some have claimed that, precisely because it acknowledges the importance of kin duties, Confucianism should be seen as an ethics rooted in human nature that remains a viable system of morality today. On the other hand, some have argued that the extreme emphasis on filial duties is precisely the aspect of Confucian moral philosophy that ought to be jettisoned in favor of greater impartialism; without mitigating its emphasis on filial piety, Confucianism risks irrelevance to modern concerns. In this paper, I will outline the nature of filial morality in the Confucian tradition and discuss these recent contributions to the literature.

## I – Confucian Filial Morality

Since classical times, filial morality has been a topic of sustained reflection in the Confucian tradition. Important Confucian practices, such as ancestor worship, mourning rites, and the centrality of the virtue of *xiao* (孝) in the Confucian tradition, often translated as filial piety or filiality, is one of its most distinctive features (Wong, ‘Chinese ethics,’). This is reflected in Chinese culture generally. In the words of Chenyang Li, “one cannot understand traditional Chinese culture without understanding the role of filial morality” (Li, 219). Similarly, Hsieh Yu-Wei has claimed that “one can hardly understand Chinese ethics, and to some extent even Chinese political activities, if he cannot grasp the true import of this filial doctrine with its practical application in Chinese society” (Hsieh, 172). Such statements are ubiquitous in the secondary literature.

---

<sup>1</sup> Penultimate draft. Please cite the published version in *Philosophy Compass*.

Why such weightiness? Much of the rationale stems from the family's role in cultivating morally relevant emotions and honing one's moral faculties. For the Confucians, one's earliest preferences and dispositions, cares and concerns, likes and dislikes, are all shaped profoundly by one's familial environment. "Among babes in arms there are none that do not know how to love their parents. When they grow older, there are none that do not know to revere their elder brothers" (Mengzi 7A17, Van Norden *Mengzi* 175). Moreover, it is in the family that one's basic moral intuitions are forged. One's foundational moral experiences are likely to occur under the supervision and guidance of one's immediate family members. In such episodes, one is taught what is right or appropriate to feel in a range of situations central to social life, and how one ought to respond. The family is the first unit to introduce normative notions into an individual's psychological fabric, forming the basic dispositions and patterns of reflection and response that will color the rest of the person's moral phenomenology (Sarkissian). If the family does not discharge this role with appropriate concern and devotion, then others would stand very little chance of doing so.

Moreover, families are naturally hierarchical. The parent/child dyad is perhaps the most salient, but in traditional Confucian morality all family members would be related in a hierarchical fashion: wives are subordinate to husbands, children are subordinate to their parents, and younger siblings are subordinate to elder siblings. Individuals within a family find themselves fitting into certain roles with attendant duties, obligations, and spheres of influence, allowing them to relate to one another in predictable ways. These require the cultivation of virtues such as dutifulness or conscientiousness (*zhong* 忠), respect (*jing* 敬), and benevolence (*hui* 惠). Families thus prepare one to enter society with an understanding of one's place within the broader social framework, as a person nested within networks of such dyadic relationship sets with attendant duties and qualities of character.

Because such relationships have reciprocal ties and responsibilities, natural love of kin is enhanced and strengthened through a desire to repay those who benefit us. Parents and elder siblings have obligations to nurture the younger members of the family, yet they in turn must be devoted and obedient. Children may remonstrate with their parents when appropriate, but if their counsel falls on deaf ears they must desist and obey without resentment (*Analects* 4.18). As parents age their children must care for them both out of love and a sense of gratitude for the care they have received. At a bare minimum, one must fully requite one's parents for the care provided during one's infancy and early childhood. For example, Confucius is exasperated by the attitude of his student Zai Wo, who does not want to observe the traditional three-year mourning period: "That's his lack of humanity. Until they are three, children are constantly nursed in their parents' arms—it's why a three year mourning period is standard everywhere. Didn't Zai Wo receive three years' nurturing from his parents?" (*Analects* 17.21). (Elsewhere, in *Analects* 5.10, Confucius compares Zai Wo to a wall of dung.) Indeed, a filial son must cleave to the ways of his father during the entirety of the three-year mourning period and only then consider departing from his example (*Analects* 1.11). And merely conforming to the duties without the right emotions would fall far short of the demands of Confucian morality; instead all of this must be done with the correct feeling and spirit—gladly, caringly, and respectfully (*Analects* 2.7, 2.8).

Caring for parents is one filial duty among many. Bearing offspring, for example, was thought to be a filial obligation. In *Mencius* 4A26 we are told that "among the three unfilial things, to have no posterity is the worst" (Van Norden, *Mengzi*, 100). Leaving no progeny was tantamount to clan betrayal; without posterity, sacrifices to ancestral spirits would cease (Ivanhoe, 300). Being filial also means freeing one's parents from any source of

anxiety save their health and vitality (*Analects* 2.6). This would include avoiding travel when possible and, should it prove necessary, keeping to a fixed itinerary (*Analects* 4.19). Parents give one life and are the source of Controversially, both Confucius and Mencius maintain that, in at least some cases, filial morality requires one to favor one's family even when doing so necessitates concealing their misdeeds, such as criminal behavior. In a conversation with Confucius (*Analects* 13.18), the Duke of She praises one of his subjects for turning in his father for stealing a sheep. The Duke says this man is nicknamed "Upright Gong", presumably for this unwavering commitment to justice. Confucius's riposte is telling: "Among my people, those we consider 'upright' are different from this; fathers cover up for sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. 'Uprightness' is to be found in this" (Slingerland, 147). Similar passages can be found in the *Mencius*. In one passage (7A35) Mencius is presented with the following hypothetical case: suppose that the father of the venerated sage king Shun were to commit murder—would Shun use his power to shield his father from prosecution? Mencius claims that Shun could neither allow his father to stand trial nor actively block his prosecution. Instead, Shun would abdicate the throne and secretly flee to the coast with his father, living out his years in happiness and without regret. Elsewhere (5A3), Mencius approves of Shun granting his morally depraved brother a fief and enriching him for the sole reason that doing so discharged Shun's filial obligation to ennoble his own family.

Finally, even though the virtue of benevolence or humankindness (*ren* 仁)—a comprehensive virtue indicating a strong sense of compassion and identification with others—is consistently ranked as the highest in the Confucian canon, the tradition's strong emphasis on filiality has engendered considerable debate as to which of these virtues ought to be considered primary or more important. Some passages support the idea that *xiao* has primacy over *ren*, as it is an aspect of personhood that must be developed for the virtue of *ren* to become possible. We noted above, for example, that Confucius took Zai Wo's objection to the three-year mourning period—a key component of practicing filiality—as signaling his lack of the humankindness. Elsewhere, Confucius notes that filial love and brotherly respect are the roots of humankindness (*Analects* 1.2), and that filial piety should be practiced at home before one can extend one's moral concern to others (1.6). Similarly, in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (another canonical Confucian text), we are told that *ren*'s greatest application lies in being affectionate toward relatives (Chan, *Source Book*, 104). Indeed, in the *Classic of Filial Piety*, filial piety is seen as the root of all other virtues, whereas the comprehensive virtue of *ren* does not seem to figure into the discussion at all (Chan, 'Xiao before ren?', 159). It is easy to see why such passages have led some scholars to think that *ren* and *xiao* should be seen as having equal footing, perhaps as complementary virtues. Alan Chan provides a detailed analysis of the *ren-xiao* debate in the Confucian tradition. In it, he quotes the 2<sup>nd</sup> century scholar Yan Du's reflections on it at great length. Yan argues that *ren* and *xiao* were equally emphasized in the classical canon, emphasizing that "it is not as if they had a different weight that one could use to determine with certainty which one stands before the other". Instead, Yan offers a more nuanced interpretation, such that both are paramount, yet with different domains of application: whereas "*ren* brings relief to the world" and is "far-reaching", *xiao* "gathers virtue in oneself" and "is directed at a few"—namely, one's kin (Chan, 'Xiao before ren?', 160).

Preferential treatment of kin is a feature of many ethical traditions. That we have special relationships with family members, that such relationships demand much of us, and that they shape our notions of what's right and wrong are by no means exclusive to

Confucianism. Nonetheless, the centrality of the family and related moral virtues in Confucianism is extraordinary, to the point that some can find it undesirable or alienating.<sup>2</sup> This can be true even for those who find much of value in the Confucian tradition. Bertrand Russell, for example, once commented that “filial piety, and the strength of the family generally, are perhaps the weakest point in Confucian ethics, the only point where the system departs seriously from common sense” (Russell, 41).<sup>3</sup>

## II – Kin Selection and Human Nature

It is not surprising, then, that recent research on Confucian morality has sought to cast filial devotion in a positive light. David Wong, for example, has argued that one of the strengths of Confucian ethics lies in its sensitivity to the way that families shape the identities of its members, enabling them to experience the sort of commitment, care and devotion necessary for an ethic to evolve at all. “The requisite self knowledge and ability to respond rightly to particular situations can be acquired only in the context of the daily practices and institutions that shape our lives, and the family is the first and most influential” (Wong, *Universalism*, 257). The feelings of gratitude and devotion that arise in the family rank among the strongest of human motivations; any ethic that asks us to set them aside in favor of a strict impartialism (a feature of many modern moral theories) risks irrelevance. Thus, the Confucian conception of ethics “is much more suited to human nature” and “much more likely to be realized in human beings as they are” (262).

Recently, such appeals to human nature have been extended, and some have found support for Confucian filial morality in evolutionary biology—specifically, in the form of kin selection theory. Kin selection theory, for example, predicts that as a result of natural selection individuals will be more altruistic to kin than non-kin, that strength of altruism will co-vary with closeness of relation. How does it work?<sup>4</sup> Imagine there is a gene that causes its bearer to behave altruistically toward other organisms, allotting food and other resources to them. However, this ‘altruist’ is discriminating in his love; he only shares resources with relatives. By doing so, he increases their fitness, enhancing their chances of survival and procreation. These relatives are genetically related to the altruist, so odds are that at least some of them will have the altruistic gene as well. Hence, even if the altruist lowers his own fitness through allotting resources to kin, his altruistic trait will likely pass on to future generations.<sup>5</sup>

If such preferential altruism has an innate basis, Confucian filial morality might seem less of a cultural relic and more of a naturalistic ethic rooted in (and responsive to) deep-seated aspects of human psychology. When Mencius says that exemplary moral persons put their families first and only then treat others benevolently (7A45), he can be seen as giving expression to a universal and compelling aspect of human nature and not simply a peculiar feature of his own moral tradition. Donald Munro argues along these lines. Appealing to evolutionary biology, Munro argues that “kin preference is part of our nature and cannot be ignored” (Munro, 14), that “any ethics... that tells me to ignore the preferential affection I have for my close kin and neighbors has a good chance of alienating me. It may cause me to

---

<sup>2</sup> For related discussion, see Wong’s *Natural Moralities*, especially pp. 16-20, and 82-92.

<sup>3</sup> I became aware of Russell’s comments through Li’s ‘Shifting perspectives’. Russell later concedes that filial piety is a lesser evil than its counterpart virtue in the West—namely, patriotism (Russell, 42). Of course, some may find Russell’s understanding of Confucianism to be questionable, and thus his admiration of it misguided.

<sup>4</sup> My account here is indebted to Samir Okasha’s in ‘Biological altruism’ (Okasha).

<sup>5</sup> It is not clear that donating resources to others is necessarily fitness decreasing behavior. After all, it may convey status and magnanimity, or it may indebt others to oneself.

ignore it. It is not a useful tenet of ethics” (9). If impartialist theories of ethics require us to jettison preferential treatment of kin, and if this runs contrary to human nature, Confucianism filial morality might be seen as enjoying a competitive advantage in the marketplace of moral theories.

There are analogues of Munro’s argument in related debates about the limits of morality’s demands. Consider, for example, Peter Singer’s “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, where he argues that our duties to others should show no regard for their proximity to us; we should not discount the interests of others merely because they are (geographically or psychologically) distant from us (Singer). Our duties to those overseas are just as weighty as to those down the road, across the hall, or under the same roof. They all count equally; each has the same moral pull. Many find Singer’s argument forceful. Others find it unworkable. John Arthur, for example, argues that moral codes ought to work for people as they are or as they can (reasonably) be expected to be. They “must rest on realistic, accurate assumptions about human beings and our life in this world” (Arthur, 837). According to Arthur, one’s sense of entitlement to what one has (fairly) earned or acquired constitutes just such a realistic assumption. Without such entitlement, and without the ability to discriminate among the targets of one’s beneficence, one might lose motivation to exert oneself for others, or resent those who do. Worse still, one might simply disregard such a morality. Confucians have their own sense of entitlement—that of putting one’s family foremost in one’s moral concerns—and so imperatives to treat kin and non-kin alike, to work as hard or care as much for stranger as for son, are considered unrealistic. In Munro’s words, they have no “reasonable chance of long term success” (Munro, 8).

### **III – Psychological Realism and the Moral Marketplace**

Many philosophers are sympathetic to the idea that ethics ought to be responsive to claims about human psychology. Here, Munro finds himself in good company. Nonetheless, it’s not clear how a commitment to being realistic about human psychology can significantly shape or restrict the content of moral theories, or single out some as more realistic than others. Owen Flanagan, for example, has argued that ethical prescriptions and demands ought to be responsive to facts about creatures like us; it must be possible for us to adopt them either as we are or as we might reasonably expect ourselves to be (Flanagan). However, for Flanagan, this commitment to being realistic about human psychology leaves much of normative ethics wholly unscathed. Confucianism would certainly not run afoul of Flanagan’s ‘Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism’, but neither would any major theory of ethics, whether universalist or particularist, consequentialist or deontological. The marketplace of moral theories would remain as crowded as ever.

Of course, contemporary advocates of Confucianism might have some more robust principle in mind. Perhaps ethical theories should make prescriptions and demands that are not only reasonably possible for us to adopt, but that also take advantage of certain strong psychological tendencies—such as our preference for kin—and marshal them toward moral aims. This seems to be the rationale within Confucianism: cultivate moral emotions in the family, where they naturally arise, and then extend them to others in an ever broadening circle of moral concern. If one can learn to be devoted, reverential, and respectful within the family, then one already has a head start on the moral life. Confucius at times suggests that having the virtue of filial piety will be sufficient in properly shaping one’s entire moral sense (e.g. *Analects* 1.2).

But how strong or powerful are such filial sentiments? The strength of filial devotion (indeed, of any psychological tendency) will vary both within and across

populations. Cultures shape which preferences (or values) are weighty, and the attractiveness of Confucianism for any particular individuals or groups today will hinge on its coherence with their pre-existing values. All cultures value families, so Confucianism has many potential targets. Yet few emphasize family values to the extent that Chinese culture does. For example, in a large study of American high school students' attitudes toward family obligations, only Latin American students exhibited the same degree of commitment as Chinese students to assisting, respecting, and supporting family members (Fulgini, Tseng and Lam). Other studies have shown that individuals in Chinese cultures are much better at remembering personality traits they associate with family members than their Western counterparts; in fact, Chinese subjects are just as adept at remembering traits associated with their mothers as with themselves (Zhu and Han). Moreover, whereas both Chinese and Western subjects show increased ventral medial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC) activation when thinking of traits related to self as opposed to strangers, only Chinese subjects show similar levels of activity when thinking of their mothers (Zhu, Zhang, Fan and Han). Such cognitive differences between the way individuals from Western cultures and East Asian cultures understand themselves and their relationship with kin are pervasive (see, e.g., Heine; Markus and Kitayama; Nisbett). The stringent demands of Confucian filial morality might seem unattractive in cultures that place great value in individualism, personal autonomy, and self-expression.

Finally, we should note that the demands of a partialist ethic like Confucianism are not always (or even comparatively) easy to meet. They, too, can be demanding and alienating. While we often give of ourselves to our close relations happily, filial obligations can also be taxing, burdensome, even overwhelming. What if our kin are prickly, selfish, or grating? What if they abuse their special relationship with us and take liberties with our goodwill? What if we've had to learn to flourish in spite of their existence, rather than because of it? Many of us enjoy healthy relationships with family members and feel grateful for the ways in which our families have come to shape who we are. But families, too, can be dysfunctional, impeding one's flourishing.

#### **IV – Intra-Confucian Debate**

Thus far, kin preference has been treated as central to Confucian morality. However Confucian scholars, both past and present, have disagreed about the extent to which affection for kin—natural though it may be—should be considered virtuous. For example, in the classical period, the Confucian philosopher Xunzi agreed with his predecessors Confucius and Mencius that preference for kin came to us naturally, yet he denied that such natural preferences constituted part of morality. Eric Hutton notes that for Xunzi, “love of parents can be a far cry from virtue, if it is accompanied by a total lack of constraints on the way to go about manifesting the love” (Hutton, 231). Natural affection for family can be morally worthless without instruction on how to form and channel it properly. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Confucian scholars made more biting attacks. In his famous *Da Tongshu* (*Book of Great Unity*), Kang Youwei censured the traditional family as divisive and incompatible with a harmonious society. Instead, he envisioned a future where the veneration of ancestors is abandoned and family lineages abolished (Kang). Similarly, proponents of the May Fourth movement such as Chen Duxiu faulted Confucianism's emphases on filiality and hierarchy as chief causes of China's stagnation. These aspects of Confucianism (together with its emphasis on rituals and roles) supported a servile,

conservative, and retrogressive outlook, which needed to be supplanted by a more cosmopolitan, utilitarian, egalitarian and progressive worldview.

Among contemporary scholars, many have brought Confucian filial morality under critical scrutiny, claiming that it leads to partialism and corruption. David Hall and Roger Ames note that Confucianism's fine distinctions between filiality, paternal affection, fraternity, camaraderie, and so on, are indicative of the tradition's "unquestionable richness" when it comes to discussions of human affection and love (Hall and Ames, 121). Growing up in nested family relationships is a critical factor, they argue, for a person to develop the requisite appropriateness in personal judgments that is indicative of virtue. Nonetheless, they argue that "no specific formal structure, even family, is necessary" for such development to occur, and that "the family is perhaps regarded as a contingent institution that could, under different conditions, be replaced by a different, more appropriate, more meaningful communal organization" (120-121). They conclude with some sobering remarks, arguing that Confucian morality, with its "graduated love and responsibility" and "intense family loyalties" leads inevitably to provincialism and parochialism. "Chinese culture has traditionally been plagued with abuses that arise because of the fine line that keeps social order beginning at home separate from nepotism, personal loyalties from special privilege, deference to excellence from elitism, appropriate respect from graft" (308). Indeed, they take filial devotion to be one of the 'failings' at the heart of Confucius's teachings.

More recently, Liu Qingping has argued, in a series of articles, that Confucian philosophy rests on a paradox: on the one hand privileging family relations, on the other hand advocating concern for all. Liu argues that Confucianism puts filial piety in "paramount position", as it is the "fundamental spirit running through the whole framework of Confucianism" (Liu, *Filiality versus sociality*, 240). To move ahead, Confucianism ought to put a more universal ethic at its core and jettison its emphasis on kin relations, leading way to a new brand of Post-Confucianism, which would value universal love well ahead of filial love.<sup>6</sup> As evidence for this claim, Liu argues that when one finds conflicts between family values and other values in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, family seems to regularly trump. Consider the cases mentioned in Section I, above. Shun is praised for abdicating the throne in order to happily flee with his murderous father and provide him an enjoyable life on the coast, evading prosecution by the authorities. He is similarly praised for his filiality in giving his disreputable brother a fiefdom. In both of these cases, Liu argues, we see a conflict of values at play, with filial duties trumping. Shun ignores both criminal justice and his responsibility to his subjects to flee with his father, and disregards considerations of merit in giving his brother a fiefdom.

Ivanhoe expresses similar sentiments, arguing that there can be no good reason to preserve filial piety in such a strong form (Ivanhoe, 310). Shun could have acted far worse, of course. He might have abused his royal power to shield his father from prosecution without relinquishing the throne, or given his brother full reign over the fief (in fact, an administrator is put in charge so as to prevent his brother from meddling in the affairs of his jurisdiction). Nonetheless, Shun abandons his people and enriches his brother solely for the sake of filial morality. (This is a familiar trope throughout the history of China. On the one hand, emperors "were supposed to be moral exemplars, and filial piety was viewed as a

---

<sup>6</sup> Liu's criticisms have set off a flurry of responses and counter-responses. See, for example, the symposiums held on this topic in Issues 7.1 and 7.2 of the *Journal Dao*. For a collection of articles in Chinese see Guo Qiyong's 儒家倫理爭鳴集—以“親親互隱”爲中心 (*A Debate in Confucian Morality Focused on Mutual Concealment Among Kin*).

fundamental moral virtue”; on the other hand, emperors often made decisions on the basis of filial obligations that proved dangerous and “could be a threat to the state” (Ebrey, 122). Shun’s actions are in line with other sections of the *Mencius* claiming no greater virtue or service than honoring one’s parents (e.g. 4A19, 5A4). Liu argues persuasively that Confucianism “will naturally tolerate and even endorse such actions as bending the law for the benefit of relatives and appointing people by nepotism” even though they might “injure social justice and the public interest” (Liu, Confucianism and corruption, 7). Perhaps most damningly, Liu argues that such preferential treatment of kin runs against Confucian doctrine itself, especially pertaining to humane governance and beneficent rule. In the opening lines of the *Mencius*, for example, Mencius tells the King of Liang that were he to seek benefit for himself others would model his behavior, leading to a chain of partialism and factionalism, imperiling the state. “If Your Majesty says, ‘How can I profit my state?’ the Chief Counselors will say, ‘How can I profit my clan?’ and the nobles and commoners will say, ‘How can I profit my self?’ Superiors and subordinates will seize profit from each other, and the state will be endangered” (*Mencius* 1A1, Van Norden 1).

The sheep stealing case (which Liu also cites) is less compelling as an example of filiality leading to unethical behavior. It is perhaps unremarkable that a son should cover for his father in such a situation. Many of us might behave similarly. As Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames note, “calling in the police is not what we would do *first*, but only as a last resort; initially at least we would almost surely try other means to remedy the problem” (Rosemont and Ames, 11). Bryan Van Norden asks us to bear in mind that “in Kongzi’s era, the primary owners of sheep were the extremely wealthy, and the punishment for stealing is likely to have been, at the least, permanently tattooing ‘thief’ on the criminal’s face or amputating his foot or hand” (Van Norden, On “humane love” and “kinship love”, 126). Most of us could not bear to expose our immediate family members to such brutal punishments. Indeed, if turning in one’s family members were taken as an austere rule, if a community emphasized public justice over family obligation in such a strict manner, developing the sort of close ties and channels of trust that are central features of familial life would seem unworkable. Still, we might be willing to ponder about the morality of such concealment, something Confucius himself seems not to do.

Finally, there is poor Zai Wo, who claims, not unreasonably, that the austere demands of the traditional three year mourning period (social isolation, rudimentary clothing and food, no leisurely pursuits) might impede personal development or render one unable to discharge one’s other obligations. Moreover, he makes a levelheaded counter-proposal: “After the lapse of a year the old grain has been used up, while the new grain has ripened... One year is surely long enough” (*Analects* 17.21, Slingerland 209). Zai Wo is not alone in this regard; the three-year mourning period is questioned elsewhere in the *Analects* (14.40) and in the *Mencius* (3A2). More trenchant criticisms are found in the writings of Mozi, a later contemporary of Confucius who found family partialism and ritual extravagance to be among the greatest sources of factionalism and strife (see, e.g. Fraser). Many today would sympathize. It seems hard to see how such a harsh and protracted interruption of one’s life can be justified, even on grounds of reciprocity. Here, we are perhaps reminded that, even if we embrace preference for kin, “not everything that we think of doing for those close to us is essential for maintaining a healthy relationship with them. Nor is everything that they might ask of us essential” (Wong, Universalism, 266). Thinking of family obligations in the context of other obligations (to ourselves and to others) can serve to identify what is

essential from what is excessive. In this light, the three year mourning period seems less essential and more excessive.

On the one hand, then, it seems difficult to disagree with Liu when he asserts that within the Confucian ethical framework, “so long as one’s actions comply with the highest principles of filial duty and are an attempt to achieve the end of serving one’s parents, they will be naturally and necessarily right and good, no matter whether they violate other principles or standards of human action” (Liu, *Filiality versus sociality*, 239). On the other hand, the details in the cases above suggest that even while filial duties are doubtlessly weighty in Confucian life, they do not always trump or silence other considerations. Rather, it seems as though competing values—filial love, the welfare of the people, criminal justice, impartiality—are all given some place in the final decision. Many of Liu’s critics have argued as much. Stephen Angle, commenting on Shun’s handling of his brother, finds that the competing considerations of filial love, compassion for the people of the fiefdom, and equitable treatment of criminals are all given expression. Shun enfeoffs his brother and discharges his filial obligations, yet he also punishes him by giving him no political power. Moreover, he appoints officials to administer the fiefdom, thereby preserving benevolent government. For Angle, what we see here is that “a *prima facie* conflict has been imaginatively resolved without any cause for regret and without the perceived foregoing of any genuine value... thanks to Shun’s imaginative solution to what would otherwise have produced a conflict between humaneness and appropriateness, both values received maximal expression” (Angle, 37). David Wong takes this commitment to balancing and harmonizing competing values and considerations as a central feature of Confucian ethics. Confucians are “willing to articulate their teachings in the form of principles, but such principles seem to function as designators of values or general considerations that ought to be given weight in judgments about what to do”; when rules and values conflict in particular circumstances “there are no ‘super-principles’ to supply ready answers” (Wong, ‘Comparative philosophy,’). We see echoes of this theme in the work of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century scholar Yan Du, who mentions that “*xiao* and *ren* are so great that it is difficult [for a person] to be complete in both; the nature of things tends to favor one side over the other... it is rare that both are equally represented” (Chan, ‘*Xiao* before *ren*?,’ 160).

Even so, doubts linger as to how the victims in the cases above, along with their families, would react to their mistreatment—indeed, how they *ought* to react. Shouldn’t they pursue justice? Wouldn’t filial morality demand that they seek some avenues of redress? Put another way, won’t Shun’s preferential treatment of his own family in the cases above lead to partialism and strife, just as Mencius himself suggests? It is impossible to reconstruct the details of these cases and therefore difficult to come to a sensible way of responding to such questions. Nonetheless, they might give us pause in thinking that balancing and harmonizing competing values can be accomplished without significant moral costs.

That this millennia-old discussion on filial morality continues to stir up rigorous debate today speaks to the centrality of this issue in moral life. As persons we each must find ways to fulfill our responsibilities to those nearest to us while maintaining considerations of fairness and justice for others. Engaging with the Confucians in this debate reminds us that ethical theory and moral practice do not always align, or align easily.

## Works Cited

- Angle, Stephen C., No supreme principle: Confucianism's harmonization of multiple values, *Dao*, 7:1 (2008): 35.
- Arthur, John. 'Famine relief and the ideal moral code.' *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues* Eds. Cahn, S. M. and P. Markie. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Chan, Alan. K.L. 'Does *xiao* come before *ren*?' *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History* Eds. Chan, A. K. L. and S.-h. Tan. London: Routledge, 2004. 154
- Chan, Wing-tsit, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press Princeton, 1963.
- Ebrey, Patricia. 'Imperial filial piety as a political problem.' *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History* Eds. Chan, A. K. L. and S.-h. Tan. London: Routledge, 2004. 122
- Flanagan, Owen, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Fraser, Chris. 'Mohism.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Fall 2009.edition. Ed. Zalta, E. N., 2009. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/mohism/>>.
- Fulgini, Andrew J., Vivian Tseng, and May Lam, Attitudes toward family obligations among American adolescents with Asian, Latin American, and European backgrounds, *Child Development*, 70:4 (1999): 1030.
- Hall, David, and Roger Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.
- Heine, S. J., Self as cultural product: an examination of East Asian and North American selves, *Journal of Personality*, 69:6 (2001): 881.
- Hsieh, Y. W. 'Filial piety and Chinese society.' *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* Ed. Moore, C. A. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967. 167
- Hutton, Eric. 'Does Xunzi have a consistent theory of human nature?' *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi* Eds. Kline, T. C. and P. J. Ivanhoe. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000. 220
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 'Filial piety as a virtue.' *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* Eds. Walker, R. L. and P. J. Ivanhoe. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 297
- Kang, Youwei, *大同書 (Book of Great Unity)*. Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 1935.
- Li, Chenyang, Shifting perspectives: filial morality revisited, *Philosophy East & West*, 47:2 (1997): 211.
- Liu, Qingping, Confucianism and corruption: an analysis of Shun's two actions described by Mencius, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 6:1 (2007): 1.
- , Filiality versus sociality and individuality: on Confucianism as "consanguinitism", *Philosophy East & West*, 53:2 (2003): 234.
- Markus, H. R., and S. Kitayama, Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation, *Psychological Review*, 98:2 (1991): 224.
- Munro, Donald J., *A Chinese Ethics for the New Century: The Ch'ien Mu Lectures in History and Culture, and Other Essays on Science and Confucian Ethics*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005.
- Nisbett, Richard E, *The Geography of Thought*. New York: The Free Press, 2003.
- Okasha, Samir. 'Biological altruism.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Winter.edition. Ed. Zalta, E. N., 2008. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/altruism-biological/>>.
- Rosemont, Henry, and Roger T. Ames, Family reverence (*xiao* 孝) as the source of consummatory conduct (*ren* 仁), *Dao*, 7:1 (2008): 9.
- Russell, Bertrand, *The Problem of China*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1922.

- Sarkissian, Hagop, Confucius and the effortless life of virtue, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 27:1 (2010): 1.
- Singer, Peter, Famine, affluence, and morality, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1:1 (1972): 229.
- Slingerland, Edward G., *Confucius Analects* Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2003.
- Van Norden, Bryan W., *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2008.
- , On “humane love” and “kinship love”, *Dao*, 7:2 (2008): 125.
- Wong, David B. 'Chinese ethics.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Fall 2008.edition. Ed. Zalta, E. N., 2008. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/ethics-chinese/>>.
- . 'Comparative philosophy: Chinese and Western.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Spring 2008.edition. Ed. Zalta, E. N., 2008. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/comparphil-chives/>>.
- , Universalism versus love with distinctions: an ancient debate revived, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 16:3-4 (1989): 251.
- Zhu, Y., and S. Han, Cultural differences in the self: from philosophy to psychology and neuroscience, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2:5 (2008): 1799.
- Zhu, Y., L. Zhang, J. Fan, and S. Han, Neural basis of cultural influence on self-representation, *Neuroimage*, 34:3 (2007): 1310.