

A 'CONFUCIAN' INSIGHT ON THE CONTEMPORARY HUMAN CONDITION

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I recently taught an introductory course on East Asian ethics for my group of Arab and Muslim philosophy students at Qatar University. As I am not an expert on Confucianism, I struggled to explain the central concepts of *ren* ('humanity') and *li* ('ritual'). How can a native English speaker understand these ideas, embedded in Chinese language, culture, and thought, to native Arabic speakers, without completely distorting their meaning? Simply translating *li* as 'ritual' misinforms more than it informs. I considered explaining the concept of *li* using the Arabic term *adab*, often translated in English as 'etiquette'. Yet this translation also distorts the meaning of *adab*.

In a general introductory ethics course I am teaching, the American author of the textbook, Louis Pojman, writes on the difference between ethics, law, religion, and etiquette. Ethics is different from etiquette, he claims, because the former is supposed to be universally applicable while the latter is relative to a cultural convention. This reduces the significance of 'etiquette' in relation to 'ethics.' While ethics tells you what is right and wrong, he explains, etiquette is merely the acceptable style of doing things in a community. Meanwhile, according to the author, ethics is different from law, because ethics addresses many things that law does not or cannot enforce.

In my class, we never let the author of the text get away with anything. We interrogate everything. So, we ask for an example of what he is describing: something which is an ethical, but not legal, matter; in contrast to something else, that is 'merely' etiquette. One student's suggestion was cutting the que, in contrast to facing the bottom of your feet toward someone. Cutting the que is unethical, she said, while lifting your foot (while sitting, for instance) so that the bottom of your foot faces someone sitting across from or next to you, is considered extremely rude in Arab culture; but that is merely a matter of etiquette. This generated controversy. Why should cutting the que be 'universally' wrong, while pointing the bottom of our foot at someone is only something, 'Arabs don't like'.

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The controversy was interesting. For in the diverse society of Qatar, cutting the que seems to be more common among those for whom pointing the foot is offensive, and pointing the foot is more common among those for whom cutting the que is an outrage (at least according to the usual complaint from each group). Those in the circle of 'foot pointers' often complain about the 'que-cutters' and their uncivilized manner; while those in the circle of 'que-cutters' complain about the foot pointers. As you might expect, the foot-pointers who are outraged at que cutting largely include western expats and the more 'westernized' or 'modernized' non-westerners. The 'que-cutters' offended by foot-pointing are most often those Arabs and other Asians in the country either less affected by or more resistant to 'modern' influences. Consequently, the suggestion that que-cutting is an ethical issue, while foot pointing is merely a matter of etiquette generated controversy and scrutiny.

Why, then, should the norm against que cutting be deemed universally valid and the norm against foot pointing a 'mere' matter of 'culturally relative' etiquette? One argument was that, while societies without any norm against foot pointing get along fine, no society could function as well without a norm against que-cutting. Starbucks and McDonalds would turn into a free for all melee where only the strongest or loudest would get their Big Mac or cappuccino. Yet the view is naturally different for those of my students still accustomed to taking their coffee in a private *majlis* ('sitting room'), among family and friends, rather than at a public commercial venue among strangers. In that context, there is a different system. That system would also break down if people started pointing their feet at each other and forming a que to place coffee orders.

Therefore, the rationale for claiming that one of these norms is universally valid while the other is merely relative, cannot be that only one is required for the functioning of society. The difference here is just which society requires the norm. The implicit assumption of this argument is that, the continued functioning of the social system operative in the commercial context of a Starbucks or McDonalds is a universally valid value, such that any norm required for that is also universally valid. The continued functioning of the social system operative in the social context of the traditional Arab *majlis*, on the other hand, is only a relative value, so that the norms required to sustain it are relative; that is to say, expendable from a genuinely 'ethical' perspective.

For this reason, 'etiquette' is not a good translation for *adab*. For the former term seems at least to have evolved, in the English language, as a means of defining what its users have deemed as the uniquely privileged, universally valid 'ethical' values, by distinguishing them

from other values deemed merely relative and therefore expendable. Speakers of Arabic did not, at least in a pre-modern context, use the term *adab* to classify something as culturally relative, and therefore of only secondary (if any) significance. The question remains open, how the contemporary understanding of the term may be changing under the influence of modernity and its notion of 'etiquette'. My aim here is not to explore that. Nor is it to explain the 'true' meaning of *adab*.

Instead, I intend to use the Confucian concepts *ren* and *li* to diagnose a global phenomenon, experienced as a problem (or variety of problems). My understanding of the concepts is more informed by their function in describing the problem I observe, however, than by any expertise in Confucianism or Chinese language. That is, in searching around for concrete, familiar examples as means of understanding the terms, the nature of the problem came to mind, and in a clarified articulation. I consequently center on an understanding of the terms that lends them this clarifying function, and which seems to me plausibly consistent with how Confucius would have understood them.

The problem is that while global forces are forcing people from different corners of the world to interact with one another more, there is no common *li* adequate to express our *ren*. Here I assume that, by *ren* ('humanity'), we understand something like the objective basis of a moral status due to the human being as such; something like the universal human nature of the western liberal, or the *fitra* of Islamic thought. I do not mean to assume here that these are all equivalent concepts, but only that they each denote some moral status appropriate to human beings, however the basis of that status is variously understood.

Based on this understanding, I take a key Confucian insight to be that, while human moral status is universal, its expression (that is to say, our acknowledgment of that moral status through social behavior) requires, as a medium, a shared yet decidedly specific system; that is *li*. It was usefully, for me, to take language as a metaphor. We may insist that it is possible to say 'I acknowledge your humanity' in a variety of different languages, and that the meaning would be the same in each case, but we must still concede that it can only be expressed, understood, and therefore realized in some particular language. One cannot speak in no language. Neither can one speak in every language at once. There is no universal language. Each language is specific to itself. Thus, even if there is anything universal, one can only express it through the particular.

The acknowledgement of another's humanity does not only involve speaking the words 'I acknowledge your humanity.' It requires expression through a wide range of behavior:

everything that differentiates how we behave toward a sentient being from how we behave toward a can opener. That means that our behavior toward another human being is as much a form of communication as spoken or written language. Thus, in order to behave toward another human being as human, we must be able to behave in a communicative manner. More precisely, the degree to which we are capable of acknowledging the humanity of another is proportional to the degree to which we can behave in a communicative manner toward her. This, in turn, depends on the degree to which we share a system of representation and interpretation by means of which our behavior toward each can function in a communicative manner. This is how I came to understand the concept of *li*, rightly or wrongly, in the process of preparing to teach it.

Two familiar questions therefore appear parallel. One is whether, underlying the diverse particularities of various languages, there is any universal 'grammar' common and valid for all. The parallel question, then, is whether underlying the various systems of social behavior there is a kind of universal structure by means of which we can identify appropriate means, valid for all cultures, of acknowledging the humanity of others; as distinct from the 'merely' relative elements that are 'valid' only for the specific cultures in which they are normative.

In the history of the classical Islamic tradition, there was a famous debate related to this, recorded between the logician Abu Bishr Matta (d. 940) and the grammarian al-Sirafi (d. 979). Abu Bishr claimed that the science of logic, exemplified by the Aristotelian *Organon*, codified the universal laws of thought, valid for all languages, while the rules of grammar are relative to the specific language in question. Al-Sirafi objected that logic was simply an impoverished version of Greek grammar that the logicians were attempting to impose on the Arabic language.

In relation to this, the *falasifa* (Greek influenced philosophers of classical Islam), advocated an epistemology based on sharply distinguishing demonstration from dialectic as the privileged method of arriving at universally valid knowledge. The difference, according to them, was that demonstration rests ultimately on first principles that are necessarily true and self-evident to every rational person capable of understanding them. Dialectic, on the other hand, eventually rests on premises that are assumed, either on the basis of authority, custom, or for the sake of argument.

The response to that claim to intellectual hegemony would come by first, by revealing the failure of the philosophers' system to meet their own standards; and second, by questioning the very standard itself. Is it even possible for any system of knowledge, thought, and by

extension value and culture, to rest solely on self-evident 'first principles', independent of any axioms that are 'heteronomous' (in Kantian terms) and therefore, from the standpoint of reason ultimately arbitrary? Assume that it is not possible. If it is legitimate to apply the conclusion of Gödel's incompleteness theorem in this context that would seem to be the case. Then we seem to face one of two implications. Either any system representing truth must ultimately rest on 'heteronomous' or 'arbitrary' premises, or truth is simply out of reach of the human intellect (which is to say that from the human standpoint there is, effectively, no truth).

The latter implication, following from the supposition that the arbitrary cannot carry truth, is doubtless what has motivated the perennial search for 'first principles.' This tendency is not only manifest in the epistemic paradigm of the Greek-inspired *falsifa*, and later the European Enlightenment. We also find it, for example, in the early attempts to provide philosophical grounding for what, perhaps, seemed to be an otherwise arbitrary system of ritual and social structure of Brahmanism. Buddhism was just one result of this wider effort to discover autonomous epistemic foundations, either to provide meaning and justification in defense of the Vedic tradition itself, or in opposition to it.

What is unique about Buddhism is the sense in which it seems to approach the very conclusion such efforts are motivated to avoid. That is that since non-arbitrary foundations are impossible, there is no absolute truth (or absolutely no truth). The embrace and acceptance of this conclusion as, paradoxically, the absolute truth (and its therapy), is on some compelling interpretations, the essence of the Buddhist message. This may be a reductive interpretation. Like all rich spiritual or philosophical traditions, Buddhism has been subject to a diverse range of interpretations. Yet the sense that Buddhism invites to a hyper-subjective, individualistic nihilism was strong and prevalent enough in China, to provoke a response that decisively shaped the course of developments in Neo-Confucianism thereafter. What was at stake was nothing less than the *li*, through which alone one can express *ren*: the very social order through which alone one can acknowledge humanity and indeed be human.

Perhaps, then, the very reason it would be inaccurate to understand Buddhism reductively, as simply a philosophy of nihilism, is that since no humanity is possible outside a social order resting, as perhaps it must, on arbitrary foundations, a sustainable Buddhist humanity required interpretations that mitigate the nihilistic conclusion that its premises would, to some, seem to lead. Perhaps its very cognizance of the emptiness at the heart of being explains why Buddhism has given rise to expressions of humanity of the power and beauty it has. Furthermore, any encounter between fundamentally different systems of thought and

culture leads to fears of impending nihilism. For any encounter that calls into question the foundations of a way of life, and threatens thereby to expose them as ultimately arbitrary, opens the door to the nihilistic conclusion.

There is a story from the Qur'an that comes to mind in this regard, from a chapter entitled 'the Cave'. The overarching theme of this chapter, as the title suggests, is the limited and ultimately 'heteronomous' nature of human knowledge. The story I have in mind involves one 'Dhul Qarnain', a leader guided by God, who travelled the world and encountered various people in different conditions. At one point, he meets some people living between two mountains, who as the Qur'an describes, 'scarcely understood a word.' They complain to Dhul Qarnain of the 'Gog and Magog' people, who they say, cause great mischief in the Earth, and plea for him to build a wall separating them from the threat of Gog and Magog. So Dhul Qarnain builds the wall, but then he says:

This is a mercy from my Lord, but when the promise of my Lord comes to pass, He will make it into dust; and the promise of my Lord is true. On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves one on another; and the Trumpet will be blown, and We shall collect them all together (18: 98-99).

That day has not come yet, but walls of various sorts have crumbled throughout human history, making people and their diverse norms spill into each other to various degrees. There is danger and disruption in this, as well as opportunity and development. Perhaps classic Confucians would have focused on the danger, for humanity depends on the integrity of *li*, and the relativism to which cosmopolitan conditions tend threatens that integrity. On the other hand, the pressures they create and the enriched resources they provide, can often lead to new systems of *li*, more conducive to acknowledge and express humanity under the new conditions. They may even lead to new, deeper or more inclusive conceptions of humanity.

On the other hand, there is the danger of an impoverished humanity, and related crises following from that. I suggest that this is a diagnosis of current conditions, which have their philosophical root in the Enlightenment failure to recognize, what I have taken above as a central Confucian insight, that the particularity and heteronomy of *li* does not compromise its legitimacy. That is, the legitimacy of a system of social behavior, values, and meaning, does not depend on its resting on self-evident, autonomous, 'rational' foundations. Secondly, and crucially, historical evidence and philosophical analysis strongly suggest that it is impossible

for any such system to meet that standard and be rich enough to sustain a flourishing sense of shared humanity.

The core of Enlightenment thought has been, not only that a system of values and culture based on purely 'autonomous' and 'rational' foundations is possible, but that the genuine legitimacy of social and moral norms depends on them resting on such foundations. The implication is that it is illegitimate for any society to impose a norm for which it is not able to provide a thoroughly autonomous rational justification. Social orders based on any 'heteronomous' axioms (such as tradition, or the authority of a scripture or leader), are to that extent illegitimate and 'arbitrary.' On this way of thinking, diversity usually is a sign of heteronomy. Opposing social norms cannot all be rational. Thus, whatever is diverse among cultures is relative, arbitrary, and therefore not something a community can legitimately impose on its members. It can have value, at best, only in an aesthetic and not ethical sense (where these are now sharply distinct). At worst, it will be an irrational and harmful fetish, especially if imposed (even if only through 'soft' coercion).

This all follows from the premise that it is universally wrong to impose a norm on any individual, for which no rational justification is given. Consequently, there should be only one universal set of legitimate moral norms for all humanity. The process of 'civilizing' the world, then, is one of removing all 'illegitimate' social norms by reducing them to mere individual preferences in a 'free market of ideas', which may (or may not) be allowed under legitimate norms that will replace them. This process began with direct colonialism, and it continues under global capitalism.

The latter method appears more consistent with the liberal principles assumed to embody the privileged set of 'universal' norms. Nobody is imposing Starbucks and McDonalds on people by force. People around the world have 'voted with their feet' so to speak. In the process, we have adopted the norms that make that system possible. The system's advocates point to this as evidence of its universal status. What better *li* to express a new globalized *ren*, other than the *li* that expresses only that *ren* that we all share, with none of the specific, cultural hang-ups that divide us?

The other side of that, however, is the enforcement of the demand that no social norms be imposed other than those in the 'legitimate' set. This has been a constant feature of the pretext, at least, of nearly every western military action since the end of the Cold War. Communism was also a child of the Enlightenment, and during its time had the upper hand in the context of its claim to be upholding the Enlightenment ideals of pure rationality, against capitalist

instrumentalization of 'reactionary' pre-modern superstitious fetish (i.e. religion and traditional cultural generally).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, western rhetoric in relation to usually the Muslim world has more closely resembled that of the communists. The cause is to free the Muslims. That is, to remove the imposition of any social norm not on the approved list, including most notoriously, those of 'Shariah'. The iconic / ironic photo of the woman in a veil drinking Pepsi typified the problem from the 1990's onward. The norms of liberal capitalism have dominated the globe, but there remain holdouts where other norms survive. The only major disagreement in the west today is whether only the continued enforcement of 'illegitimate' norms is the problem, or whether we must criminalize even the un-coerced, voluntary adherence to any such norm. In America and the UK the consensus so far has been that other 'heteronomous' norms can be adhered to 'privately', so long as it is without the support or reinforcement of any community, and in the face of sufficient alienation and even opposition from the wider society. In France, for example, there is more support for simply criminalizing even private adherence to any unapproved norms.

The problematic ramifications of the situation extend farther than only Muslim minorities (even where they are a numerical majority). It affects the world, and in an arguably more damaging way. For this globalized *li*, which is being imposed everywhere is not sufficient to express our humanity, except in a very impoverished sense. It limits us to only those norms that are necessary for the proper function of the human being as a participant in a global market economy. The norms that a society shares, in providing a means of expressing humanity, also define a sense of what it means to be human. *Li* provides a framework wherein individual members develop can develop a sense of the meaning of life. To deny the legitimacy of any such norms, and then to 'allow' them, or 'guarantee your right' to them, as only subjective individual preferences, is effectively to establish a society in which life is objectively meaningless.

Thus, what we have today is a global *li* that allows for the acknowledgement and expression of a humanity that is only meaningful inasmuch as it involves and facilitates commercial transaction. Outside of that, you are on your own. You are 'free' to give meaning to your life, primarily through consumer choices you make (unless you are fortunate enough to find meaning in your productive role in the economy). There is a common type of meme on social media, which usually employs some serene image of a statue of Buddha, with 'wise words' to the effect that the meaning of life is 'what you make it', or something of similar import. This is more an expression of the values of liberal capitalism than of Buddhism. Its real meaning is

that life is objectively meaningless, and expresses the natural slogan of a system that allows no shared norms outside of those required to maintain the 'free market'.

In conclusion, I will advance a hypothesis and pose a question. The hypothesis is that much of the unique violence occurring in the contemporary world is related to the nihilism brought on by the domination of liberal capitalist *li*, and the resulting relativization and de-legitimation of others. If so, then the need of the day is a thicker system of *li*, capable of facilitating the expression of a sense of humanity rich enough to give people a sense of meaning. The question is whether this is possible in a globalized, cosmopolitan world. Are we destined from now on for a state of skepticism, in the face of the diversity of values, as to the real legitimacy of any (other than perhaps those of paying your bills and keeping the queue)? Or is it that, since we can only defend the possibility of a meaningful humanity by defending the objective validity of some particular system of *li*, our only alternative is to adopt chauvinism and deny the validity of all others? On the other hand, does this mean that a future system of *li*, which could enable us to acknowledge and express a meaningful sense of humanity, must now develop as a global phenomenon, from within humanity as a single community?