

# Why the Military Needs Confucian Virtues

## Prof. Marcus Hedahl

Philosophers don't always make the best officer candidates. I learned this the hard way during basic training asking why we were required to shine our shoes. Now, I understood the importance of habitual action, how easy it is for the brain to reinforce patterns of behavior, that shining my shoes today meant that I was more likely to do so tomorrow. I understood that shining our shoes is something that connects us with military members in the past, and I understood the importance of attention to detail in countless military tasks. But I saw no need in an age of studying cyber-security and quantum physics to hold onto any and all connection with every military tradition, and I also knew that we were intelligent enough to distinguish between contexts. We didn't iron a crease in our jeans when we went out on a pass (or at least most of us didn't, there were a few cowboy-boot wearing squadron-mates I fondly remember insisting on always ironing a firm crease in their Wranglers—always Wranglers—before going anywhere off base). But those were the reasons given to shine our shoes: virtue, habit, tradition, and of course, the reason one hears in military training when all else fails, “Because we say so.” But those reasons never spoke to me. Or, more accurately, none of those reasons *except* the last one spoke to me. When the motivation to take an action is based solely on punishment avoidance, however, that motivation often evaporates as soon as the training (and associated threat) is over. So, on my very first trip to the uniform store as a freshly minted 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, I bought a pair of corfam glossy dress shoes, and I didn't shine my uniform shoes for several years. I took pride in that fact as an independent thinker—or more accurately, I took pride in that fact until one day I read *The Analects* by Confucius, and I learned the real reason to shine my shoes that had so eluded me in the past.

Now, Confucian philosophy can often feel like a difficult theory to grasp. This is in no small part because Confucian thought has been used for a wide variety of different purposes. At different times, Confucius (551–479 BCE) has been portrayed as a teacher, an advisor, an editor, a philosopher, a reformer, and a prophet—the name has even been used as shorthand code for a particular, traditional way of life. Interestingly, even the name ‘Confucius’ can be controversial. In Mandarin, it combines his surname Kong (孔) with the suffix *fuzi* (夫子), an honorific for “Master.” Scholars writing in English today therefore generally refer to him as ‘Kongzi’ or literally “Master Kong,” a name much more similar to the Mandarin original. People are, however, much more likely to be familiar with the moniker of ‘Confucius,’ a result of the initial European translation of the *Analects* into Latin. In Latin, the name results from: Cong (family name) + Fu (from Master) + Us - the last syllable being a common Latin suffix (think of Marc-us Aureli-us).<sup>1</sup> The moniker ‘Confucius’ has remained prevalent in English in no small part because of the gravitas the Latinization of the name bestows on him, a fact that is simultaneously appropriate, given the significance and wide-ranging influence of his philosophy, and a bit problematic, because the moniker brings with it the tacit suggestion that to be significant, one must be part of a traditional lineage stemming from Greece and Rome. (It would be a bit like if an Army colleague on a joint assignment remarked that you were really intelligent, so you must have participated in the U.S. Military Academy exchange program—you would feel complimented by the assessment of your intellectual acumen, but would likely be more than a bit insulted at the suggestion that military intellect has to be related in some way to West Point.) In recognition of this historical dichotomy, the rest of this piece refers to the philosopher as ‘Kongzi’ and the philosophy as ‘Confucian.’ Hopefully doing so can serve as a useful reminder of the fact that when we come to study theories outside of our own familiarity, we generally tend to frame them through a lens of understanding we already possess.

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<sup>1</sup> Ivanhoe, Phillip & Van Norden, Bryan (2001) “Introduction,” Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, Hackett Publishing Company.

While doing so risks some of the difficulties just considered, it will be useful for our purposes to understand Kongzi's theory in relationship to another theory we've already studied: Aristotle's. We will focus on one key similarity and two important differences. Like Aristotle, Kongzi offers a virtue theoretical account of ethics, taking the kind of dispositions we possess to act in certain ways to be more fundamental and more significant to the study of ethics than are our deliberations about particular actions. In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle claims that just as the appearance of a single swallow does not make it spring, neither does one right action make one virtuous (Ch 7).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in Book 1 of *The Analects*, Kongzi considers how cultivating patterns of good behavior opens up the possibility of adhering to the most befitting modes of being and acting in the world while curtailing a myriad of inappropriate ways of doing so.<sup>3</sup> To develop these patterns and to navigate life and its challenges well, the exemplary person studies and builds up the *roots* of their behavior rather than particular actions themselves. According to Kongzi, "Once the roots are established, the appropriate way to live comes to life" (1.2) Unlike Aristotle, however, Kongzi offers a virtue theory much more expansive and imbedded within a particular social structure. He takes much more of our daily activity to be constitutive of our virtue and vice. Moreover, Kongzi's virtue theory is more embedded within our collective practices; it highlights the importance of playing one's part well within an embedded social structure practice.

Before considering those differences, it will be worth pausing a moment to understand the limits of that contrast, for it would be a mistake to claim outright that Aristotle fails to offer an expansive account of the virtues or that he simply ignores the social aspects of a life well lived. In addition to the kind of virtues one might expect to see on any list – courage, temperance, pride, practical wisdom, and justice – Aristotle includes other virtues that may surprise a first-time reader. *Wit* is a key example. After some reflection, however, the inclusion of wit into the list of necessary virtues might strike us as much more reasonable, for while one it would be hard to imagine a great military leader never passing up a chance to display their buffoonery for a laugh, it would be almost equally impossible to imagine an exemplary leader who could never tell a joke or lighten the mood in tense situations. A person without wit, expressed in at the right times, in the right manner, and for the right reasons would often fail to demonstrate the other virtues: They would fail to be generous and beneficent, they would often fail in their duty to help others. Moreover, it would also be a mistake to believe that Aristotle doesn't care deeply about the social aspects of a life well lived. Aristotle famously claimed that human beings were fundamentally "*zoon politikon*," i.e. social animals (NE Book I, Ch 5), and that a virtuous community was important for at least two reasons. First, virtue is largely a product of the habits inculcated in us through education (NE Book 1 Ch3). Moreover, Aristotle even believed a person could not lead a flourishing, fulfilling life if they didn't have the good fortune to live in a flourishing, fulfilling community (NE Book IX Ch1). Aristotle's account of virtues is itself a fairly broad account situated within a social context.

Nonetheless, Kongzi offers an even more expansive account of the virtues and one that focuses even more squarely on the social dimensions of our dispositions. The Confucian virtue of righteousness (*yi* 義), is perhaps the easiest place to start and explain this. This is a virtue of stewardship: it requires the ability to be uncorrupted when being entrusted to act for the good of another, to include the public good. In such cases, the exemplary person must be able to ignore the trappings of wealth and rank such positions often bring with them, even if doing so means eating fewer fine foods, drinking only water, or sleeping with only one's bent arm as a pillow (7.16). The virtuous subordinate displays righteousness (*yi* 義) when telling their superior a hard truth even if doing so could have negative consequences for themselves. The virtuous leader

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<sup>2</sup> All citations of Aristotle are from Aristotle (340 BCE) *Nicomachean Ethics*, R. Crisp (Trans), Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> All citations of Kongzi are from Kongzi (Confucius) (500 BCE) "The Analytics," E. Singerland (Trans.) in P. Ivanhoe & B. Van Norden (Eds.) (2001) *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Hackett Publishing Company.

displays righteousness (*yi* 義) when they seek out to improve the limitations even of the subordinates with which they have the friendliest relationships, and when they seek to recognize the noble features present even with those under their command that are most likely to cause them trouble. We recognize the lack of righteousness (*yi* 義) most acutely when noticing the corresponding vices created from its absence: when one is too quick to kiss up the chain of command and kick down it. In short, righteousness requires a level of unselfishness rooted in steadfastness in the face of temptation when entrusted with the ability to act for the good of another. It is the fundamental virtue of one who takes an oath to defend the public good and the public order.<sup>4</sup>

One might initially wonder why that kind of virtue, one that most Western ethicists would consider only for those who occupy very specific roles, would occupy such a central place in all of Confucian ethics. The answer can be found by considering the central place role-based morality has within Kongzi's theory, a pride of place that can be seen by considering the virtue of principled ritual etiquette (*li* 禮).<sup>5</sup> Kongzi believed that a central part of virtuous behavior is tied up in the psychology of ritual, rituals that help dictate how social structures regulate individual action. In other words, the manner in which we act in rituals within a given role is taken to be central to becoming an exemplary person. For Kongzi, these rituals were not merely the kind of rare events one might initially suspect are deserving of the solemnity of the term 'ritual;' these are not merely infrequent observations like wedding ceremonies and funeral rites. For Kongzi, rituals included a wide variety of everyday activities: The way a person receives guests (*Analytics* 10.3), the manner in which they carry out daily prayers (*Analytics* 10.8 & 15.1), even the demeanor with which they play the chimes (*Analytics* 14.39). In all these cases, Kongzi stressed the psychological states the practitioner uses to perform these tasks, for the performance of ritual without reverence (*jing* 敬) is to be condemned (*Analects* 3.26). These rituals—a near constant part of our daily lives—are meant to remind each of us and reinforce within each of us how to play our particular role well within a larger collective endeavor.

This kind of attention to ritual might seem outdated if we focus on some of the particular, perhaps antiquated, rituals Kongzi used as examples, but once we recognize the way in which such rituals are ubiquitous to life in the military, such attention to principled ritual etiquette might not only start to seem less anachronistic, it might even start to seem essential. For these kinds of military rituals are everywhere: revelry, retreat, salutes, callsigns, the grog bowl, challenge coins, the Crown of Neptune, "Taps", Battlefield crosses, calling minutes, change of command ceremonies, attention on deck, the way you enter a superior's room or office, the way you engage with a superior, a peer, or a subordinate. For Kongzi, all of these interactions allow one to develop the attitudes and affects essential for the dispositions required to play one's part well. They help lay the foundation of a ritual psychology in which proper performance was the key to reforming our desires and beginning to develop the right kind of moral dispositions. Consider a Midshipman or officer you hold in high esteem. Chances are they have an almost effortless way of dealing with subordinates that is amicable and sympathetic without undermining either the significance of their rank differences or the importance of accomplishing the mission. They likely approach their superiors (especially those in their chain of command) with deference without becoming anything close to docile, passive, or meek. They have a way of demonstrating what Kongzi told us, that when it comes to the countless ritual encounters we have every day, it is harmonious ease which is to be valued. (*Analytics* 1.12)

For Kongzi, even the virtue of benevolence (*ren* 仁), is heavily influenced by this notion of role morality, for while Kongzi sometimes equates benevolence with a general "caring for others" (*Analects* 12.22), in most contexts benevolence (*ren* 仁) requires much more specific behaviors. Examples include treating people on

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<sup>4</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mark, "Confucius", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

<sup>5</sup> Rosemont, Henry Jr. and Roger T. Ames (2016) *Confucian Role Ethics: A Moral Vision for the 21st Century?* Göttingen: V & R Unipress and Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

the street as important guests and attending to them as if they were attendants at a sacrifice (*Analects* 12.2), rejecting the use of clever speech while helping others (*Analects* 1.3), and being respectful where one dwells, reverent where one works, and loyal whenever one deals with others (*Analects* 13.19). Benevolence entails a kind of unselfishness in the Confucian system, not because you put the needs of others above your own, but because it involves forming moral judgments from a combined perspective of one's self and others.<sup>6</sup> In very important ways, benevolence (*ren* 仁) for Kongzi involves acting *together*. In providing charity to another, for example, one should look at the act as connecting two people in a dyad. This perspective requires not only that the one giving charity should refrain from looking down on the person requiring help, they should actually look to the one in need with *gratitude*, for those in need are simultaneously helping those who offer them aid, by providing them with the opportunity to become better people. This kind of attitude, while perhaps less familiar to those not in uniform, is much more common in military settings, captured in countless military maxims like “leaders eat last”—the best, most virtuous leaders are often the ones who recognize that a hierarchy's true value comes from those at its lower ranks, not its higher ones.<sup>7</sup>

We can see the significance of the expansive and socially embedded nature of Confucian virtues better by considering the case of former Secretary of the Navy Thomas B. Modly. On April 2, 2020 Secretary Modly fired Captain Brett Crozier from command of the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* after Captain Crozier had sent an email criticizing the Navy's management of a COVID-19 outbreak aboard the *Roosevelt*.<sup>8</sup> This email was sent to Crozier's immediate supervisor and two other admirals in Crozier's chain-of-command, with copies sent to seven fellow Navy Captains not directly involved in Crozier's chain of command.<sup>9</sup> In order to analyze the aspects of this case most commonly considered, the appropriateness of Crozier decision to send the original e-mail or of Modly's choice to immediately relieve Crozier of command against the advice of the Chief of Naval Operations, we would require a whole host of information about the conditions on the *Roosevelt*, the best scientific information available at the time, and the previous steps taken by Captain Crozier, Secretary Modly, and countless others. Such information is not required, however, to consider Secretary Modly's actions on April 6, when he gave a speech over the *Roosevelt*'s IMC<sup>10</sup> in which he implied that Captain Crozier must have been either “naive or stupid” and that the crew were failing to “[keep] their sh\*t together”—even acting cowardly, (at one point using the phrase ‘f@#&’ing scared’).<sup>11</sup> Crozier himself quickly recognized his error, resigning his position the next day, later claiming that he spoke to the crew “as if [he] was their commander, or their shipmate, rather than their Secretary.” This was a self-realized failure to embody Confucian virtues, virtues that require not only certain actions and dispositions but a wide-range of demeanors based on the particular roles we inhabit at different points of our lives—even different points of the day—virtues that are necessary for each of us to be able to play our particular role well within larger collective endeavors.<sup>12</sup>

Kongzi's virtue theory is not just helpful for understanding the role of ritual and demeanor in the military, the expansive and socially embedded nature of virtues in Confucian theory is particular important in responding to one of the most pressing objections against virtue theory: that people routinely underestimate

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<sup>6</sup> Hall, David & Roger T. Ames (1987) *Thinking through Confucius*, State University of New York Press.

<sup>7</sup> Sinek, Simon (2017) *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, Penguin Publishing Group.

<sup>8</sup> Welna, David (2020) “USS *Roosevelt* Commander Removed After Criticizing Handling of Coronavirus Outbreak,” npr.com, April 2.

<sup>9</sup> Lamothe, Dan, Boburg, Shawn (2020) “How an outbreak on the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* became a defining moment for the U.S. military,” *The Washington Post*, April 17.

<sup>10</sup> ‘IMC’ or ‘1st Main Circuit’ is the name for the shipboard public address circuit on U.S. Navy and Coast Guard vessels.

<sup>11</sup> (2020) “Transcript: Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly addresses USS *Theodore Roosevelt* crew about 'stupid' ousted captain,” CNN.com, April 6.

<sup>12</sup> Harkins, Gina (2020) “Modly's final message to the fleet: I lost situational awareness” Military.com, April 8.

the extent to which minor situational variables influence morally significant behavior.<sup>13</sup> In Stanley Milgram's infamous studies we considered in Block I, for example, the vast majority of subjects were willing to administer dangerous lethal shocks merely they were told to do so by an experimenter.<sup>14</sup> During Zimbardo's equally infamous Stanford prison experiment, the treatment of make-believe prison guards quickly turned sadistic, forcing the study to shut down mere days into experiment.<sup>15</sup> In a third often-cited experiment, whether seminary students were willing to help a needy bystander on their way to a lecture on the Good Samaritan hinged greatly on how pressed they felt for time.<sup>16</sup> How likely you are to help out one in need turns to hinge rather dramatically on the particular situation in which you find yourself, including your current mood.<sup>17</sup> As many have argued, it's difficult to reconcile ethical appeals to extremely stable unqualified character traits like virtues with the empirical fact that our interactions with others are often considerably altered by small details of the situations in which we find ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

Now, this may well be a problem for any virtue theory that locates the possibility for virtuous actions less expansively than Kongzi does. For if you say that one can demonstrate virtue by refusing to obey an unjust authority, by maintaining empathy and professionalism in the face of a sadistic culture, and by helping others even when maintaining a near singular focus on more self-regarding tasks, then the challenge becomes how to explain the ways in which these minor and apparently ethically insignificant background conditions often have far more impact on virtuous behavior than does the way one would act in other, slightly different contexts. That problem dissolves, however, if one contends that virtue *also requires* attention to the ways in which even extremely subtle exercises of your authority can make people more comfortable with morally inappropriate behavior than they otherwise would be, attention to the ways in which subtle changes made by those at all levels of institutions will make immoral behavior more or less likely, and attention to the ways in which even the tone of voice used to expressed urgency or concern could make praiseworthy behavior more or less likely. Kongzi's insight is to highlight this deep interconnectedness of our social behavior. We are inextricably implicated in the actions of others, so even minor tweaks in our individual moral behavior—even changing our facial expressions, posture, and other seemingly minor details of comportment—can lead to major payoffs in the moral actions of others.<sup>19</sup> The actions of one of us—even things as minor as one's tone of voice—become the background conditions for the actions of countless others. The fact that we routinely underestimate the way in which minor situational cues influence moral behavior doesn't *undermine* the importance of virtues. On the contrary, according to Kongzi that fact *reinforces* the need for an understanding of virtue that reaches into the vast majority of our daily interactions.

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<sup>13</sup> The next three paragraphs are a brief summation of: Sarkissian, Hagop (2010) "Minor Tweaks, Major Payoffs: The problems and promise of situationism in Moral Philosophy," *Philosopher's Imprint*, 10 (9):2.

<sup>14</sup> Milgram, Stanley (1963) "Behavioral study of obedience". *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(4): 371–378.

<sup>15</sup> Zimbardo, Phillip, Haney, C., Banks, W.C., & Jaffe, D. (1973) "The mind is a formidable jailer: A Pirandellian prison". *The New York Times Magazine*: 38–60.

<sup>16</sup> Darley, John & Batson, C. Daniel (1973) "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27: 100–108.

<sup>17</sup> Flanagan, Owen (1991). *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*, Harvard University Press: 281.

<sup>18</sup> The literature on what is often referred to as the "situationist objection" is both sizable and growing. It would be far too long a list to consider it all here, but the list would include: Doris, John (2002) *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Webber, Jonathan (2006) "Virtue, character and situation," *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 3(2): 193; Prinz, Jesse (2009) "The normativity challenge: Cultural psychology provides the real threat to virtue ethics," *The Journal of Ethics*, 13(2–3):117–44; Harman, Gilbert (2000) "The nonexistence of character traits," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 100(2): 223–226.

<sup>19</sup> Sarkissian, Hagop (2010) "Minor Tweaks, Major Payoffs: The problems and promise of situationism in Moral Philosophy," *Philosophers Imprint*, 10 (9):2.

With this understanding of Kongzi's virtue theory, we can return to consider again my one-time disdain for shining shoes. We can notice, for instance, that the act of shining one's shoes is first and foremost a ritual: It's an activity performed regularly that must be done in a certain way: the polish, the brush, the water, cotton balls—each has their place and proper function. It allows us the chance to approach this perpetual task as a chore or burden (as I once did) or as a chance for reflection on the days that have passed and the days to come. It provides the opportunity to remind us of our social placement, both as a member of the armed forces, and as someone who has gone through however many iterations of our common rites and rituals with our fellow servicemembers. In other words, it offers the chance to cultivate humility, for the military is one of the few places in which those with great authority would be seen as in some way deficient if they viewed themselves as too important, too high-ranking, or even too busy to shine their own shoes.

These kinds of Confucian rituals thereby offer us a key insight into the ways that individuals are bound together with the different levels of society with which they interact. In the context of ritual practice, you are cultivating ways of monitoring yourself, but you are doing so in a way that opens up the possibility of monitoring by others. By *integrating* social and self-monitoring, Confucian ethics helps to internalize values in ways that will extend beyond the context in which they are first inculcated. This minor change in appearance and behavior shapes how others are likely to interact with you, in a way that, in turn, has the ability to shape *their* behavior, either towards virtue or vice. “Never trust a person who doesn't shine their own shoes,” a fictionalized character based on Senator John McCain (USNA Class of 1958) once advised.<sup>20</sup> We now know the reason why: Such a person would pass up a routine opportunity to practice reflection, humility, principled ritual etiquette (*li* 禮), reverence (*jing* 敬), righteousness (*yi* 義), and benevolence (*ren* 仁).

This is why the military focuses so much on the virtues involved in the way we interact with one another, that's why we care so much about the character traits that are on public display: These character traits don't just make more excellent individuals, they don't even just make *each of us* more excellent, these kinds of activities help make *us* more excellent *together*. So, while some might try to reduce ethics to nothing more than the bumper sticker slogan of “doing the right thing when no one else is looking”—something that is merely a part of a life well lived—Kongzi helps us realize that doing the right thing when *everyone else* is looking is another essential aspect of the ethics, one that requires much, much more of us than we might have initially suspected.

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<sup>20</sup> Freeland, Jonathan (2008) “From West Wing to the real thing” *The Guardian*, Feb 21. This phrase was uttered by Senator Arnold Vinick in *The West Wing* Episode “In the Room.”