

# Virtues and Roles in Early Confucian Ethics

## *Abstract*

Many passages in early Confucian texts such as the *Analects* and *Mengzi* are focused on virtue, recommending qualities like humanness (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), and trustworthiness (*xin* 信). Still others emphasize roles: what it means to be a good son, a good ruler, a good friend, a good teacher, or a good student. How are these teachings about virtues and roles related? In the past decade there has been a growing debate between two interpretations of early Confucian ethics, one that sees virtues as fundamental, and the other of which starts from roles. Recently there have been two new contributions to the debate: *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism* (2013), edited by Stephen C. Angle and Michael Slote, which develops the virtue ethical interpretation, and Henry Rosemont, Jr.'s *Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion* (2015), which defends the role-based interpretation. This paper lays out the main contours of the debate between Virtue Ethical Confucianism and Confucian Role Ethics, as well as examines the distinctive contributions of these two new works.

## *Keywords*

role ethics, virtue ethics, early Confucianism, comparative philosophy, comparative methodology, relational self.

In early Confucian texts, we find a great deal of discussion of qualities we might label as »virtues.« The virtue of *ren* 仁, »humaneness« or »benevolence,« is mentioned over one hundred times in the *Analects*, and Confucius also recommends to his students attributes like ritual propriety (*li* 禮), trustworthiness (*xin* 信), wisdom (*zhi* 知), dutifulness (*zhong* 忠), righteousness (*yi* 義), respectfulness (*jing* 敬), uprightness (*zhi* 直), reverence (*gong* 恭), courage (*yong* 勇), diligence (*min* 敏), carefulness (*shen* 慎), deference (*rang* 讓), courteousness

(*wen* 溫), kindness (*hui* 惠), magnanimity (*kuan* 寬), resoluteness (*gang* 剛), and reticence (*na* 訥). Confucius' follower Mencius focuses on four of these virtues – *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* – and argues that their »sprouts« are contained in all human beings.

Still other passages in these texts stress the importance of roles: being a good son, a good ruler, a good friend, a good teacher, or a good student. When Confucius is asked about the key to good governance, he says, »Let the lord be a true lord, the ministers true ministers, the fathers true fathers, and the sons true sons« (12.11). Roles are also highlighted in Mencius' teaching of the »five relationships« (*wulun* 五倫): between father and child, ruler and minister, husband and wife, elder and younger sibling, and friend and friend. It is instruction in the proper ways of relating to one another, according to Mencius, which prevents us from falling into an animal-like state where we are driven by our basest desires.

How are these teachings about virtues and roles related? If virtue is the main currency of early Confucian ethics, then the issue of how to be a good father, good son, etc., while obviously important to thinkers like Confucius and Mencius, is a less fundamental consideration. The virtue of *ren* is significant regardless of whether you are a ruler, a teacher, or a friend; the more *ren* you are the more you are able to fulfill any of these roles. Roles are important insofar as they allow you to cultivate virtue in your everyday life, but fulfillment of the roles is not the ultimate good for human beings (Ivanhoe 2008: 39).<sup>1</sup> You are not defined by your roles, but by whether or not you have *ren* and the other qualities that Confucius emphasizes.

If roles are fundamental, however, then the point is not to cultivate character traits that are largely similar for everyone, but rather to master specific role-behavior. The roles themselves provide the normative standards of a society, and virtues such as *ren* may vary substantially depending on which role you are playing. On this understanding, the focus of ethics is not on the general character of the agent, but rather on the interaction of two or more people at a specific time and place (Rosemont 2015: 105).<sup>2</sup> You are not the virtues you

<sup>1</sup> P. J. Ivanhoe, »The Shade of Confucius: Social Roles, Ethical Theory, and the Self,« in M. Chandler, and R. Littlejohn (eds.), *Polishing the Chinese Mirror: Essays in Honor of Henry Rosemont, Jr.*, New York: Global Scholarly, 2008, pp. 34–49.

<sup>2</sup> H. J. Rosemont, Jr., *Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015.

possess; rather, we are defined by the relationships that bind together our families and communities.

In the last few years, English-language scholarship on early Confucian ethics has seen a debate between two competing interpretations, one that sees virtues as fundamental, the other of which starts from roles. The essays found in the recent collection *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, edited by Stephen C. Angle and Michael Slote, generally employ the first approach, following on the work of a growing number of scholars in recent years.<sup>3</sup> The role-based interpretation is in turn defended by Henry Rosemont, Jr., in his new book *Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion*. This interpretation is rooted in Rosemont's 1991 essay »Rights-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons« and in his more recent collaborative work with Roger Ames, as well as in the latter's earlier work with David L. Hall. Ames' widely discussed recent work *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* defends a similar view.<sup>4</sup>

According to Virtue Ethical Confucianism (VEC), early Confucian and Aristotelian ethics are similar in structure, in that both offer an account of the virtues and how they are cultivated (Slingerland 2001). Yet there are enough interesting differences between Confucian and Western forms of virtue ethics that the two traditions can challenge and enrich one another. Consider the Confucian emphasis on filial piety (*xiao* 孝), which VEC takes to be an admirable character trait whose cultivation is part of the good life for the individual and

---

<sup>3</sup> S. C. Angle and M. Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, New York: Routledge, 2013. See also P. J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000; M. Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; E. Slingerland, »Virtue Ethics, the *Analects*, and the Problem of Commensurability,« *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 29, 2001, pp. 97–125; B. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007; and J. Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue*, New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> H. Rosemont, Jr., »Rights-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons,« in M. I. Bockover (ed.), *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibility: Essays Dedicated to Herbert Fin-garette*, La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991, pp. 71–101; R. T. Ames, and H. Rosemont Jr., »Were the Early Confucians Virtuous?« in C. Fraser, D. Robins, and T. O'Leary (eds.), *Ethics in Early China: An Anthology*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011, pp. 17–39; D. L. Hall and R. T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987; and R. T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011.

the community (Ivanhoe 2007: 305).<sup>5</sup> Confucius thinks of filial piety as the root of other virtues, the first place where we learn the appropriate ways of feeling toward other humans, and its scope extends well beyond a son's relationship with his father, also applying to one's teachers, elders, and authority figures, and generally, in one's relations towards other people (Ivanhoe 2008: 39 n.16). Since Western virtue ethicists have devoted much less attention to familial relationships, the Confucian regard for filial piety can contribute a new dimension to the discussion.

For Confucian Role Ethics (CRE), the Confucian tradition is unique and cannot be understood through the predominant Western ethical theories. Though the early Confucians are perhaps closer to virtue ethicists than they are to deontologists and utilitarians, what makes them *sui generis* is that they do not begin from an abstract consideration of the nature of virtue, but rather with the roles we lead in everyday life and how we can make them better. The Confucian emphasis on *xiao* shows the Confucian regard for the familial setting in which these roles are first acquired (Ames 2011: 112). As Rosemont puts it, *xiao* is proof that when learning morality, »it all begins at home, in the role of son or daughter with which every human being begins their life« (Rosemont 2015: 98). Understood as a role-based ethics, Confucian ethics can offer a powerful alternative to mainstream Western ethical thinking.

The two interpretations disagree not only about the philosophical foundations of Confucian ethics, but also about the appropriate methodology for interpreting early Chinese philosophical texts. Comparative ethics brings together works from different philosophical traditions, themselves embedded in disparate cultural settings. The most significant problem that arises from the attempt to bridge cultural-philosophical traditions is the problem of *incommensurability*, which states that because the target texts are embedded in distinctive wholes, they cannot be meaningfully compared with one another (Connolly 2015: 67 ff.).<sup>6</sup> This challenge was raised for comparative virtue ethics in particular by Alasdair MacIntyre in his 1991 paper »Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confu-

---

<sup>5</sup> P. J. Ivanhoe, »Filial Piety as a Virtue,« in R. L. Walker and P. J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 297–312.

<sup>6</sup> T. Connolly, *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

cians and Aristotelians.«<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre argues that even if there are significant areas of overlap between the ethical views found in the Aristotelian and Confucian traditions, because these traditions offer different overall conceptions of the human good, any commonalities we identify will have distinctive places within the wider moral configurations of which they are part. As a result, he contends, there are no shared standards by which we might understand and evaluate their competing claims.

In the first issue of *Confluence*, Rosemont himself raised the issue of whether it is more productive for comparativists to focus on similarities or differences between traditions, going on to argue that »it is almost surely better to focus on differences before seeking the near familiar – the latter being far more deceptive if too quickly obtained« (Rosemont 2014: 205).<sup>8</sup> Commensurability between traditions is best thought of as a spectrum, with total unintelligibility at one end of the scale and complete similarity at the other (cf. Angle 2002: 6).<sup>9</sup> While CRE does not maintain that the views found in texts like the *Analects* and *Nicomachean Ethics* are mutually incomprehensible, and VEC does not claim they are identical, each interpretation falls closer to either end of the spectrum.

MacIntyre points to work by Hall and Ames emphasizing the unique metaphysical foundations of the Confucian tradition, as well as by Rosemont on the tradition's distinctive cluster of ethical concepts, as providing some measure of support for his view (MacIntyre 1991: 107). However, these interpreters came to reject MacIntyre's view that if there is no universally valid comparative framework by which to measure culturally distinct traditions then we are stuck with incommensurability. »The third position,« as Hall and Ames write, »is to see these traditions as historical narratives that, at a practical, concrete level, intersect and even overlap. At this level, comparisons can be formulated and understood that are productive in identifying alternatives to familiar modes of expression and action« (Hall, and

---

<sup>7</sup> A. MacIntyre, »Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians,« in E. Deutsch (ed.), *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991, pp. 104–122

<sup>8</sup> H. Rosemont, Jr., »Reply: Truth as Truthfulness, *Confluence: Online Journal of World Philosophies*, Vol. 1, 2014, pp. 205–212.

<sup>9</sup> S. C. Angle, *Human Rights: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Ames 1998: xv).<sup>10</sup> Rosemont's introduction to *Against Individualism* places his work in this same vein. Whereas the more common approach to non-Western texts has been to ask, »To what extent do these texts suggest answers to questions that vex us?« he finds it more fruitful to inquire, »To what extent do these texts suggest that we should be answering different philosophical questions?« (Rosemont 2015: 5)

CRE argues for a broad set of differences separating classical Chinese and Western ethics: that Western ethics begins from the individual and ignores the family, while Confucian ethics places the family at the center; that the goal of Western ethics is to think more coherently about ethics, while the goal of Confucian ethics is to become a better person; that whereas Western ethics begins from abstract principles, Confucian ethics from concrete situations; and that Western ethics relies on rationality to determine right conduct, but Confucian ethics relies on imagination and moral exemplars (Ames, and Rosemont 2011). In *Against Individualism*, Rosemont's aim is to show that the predominant Western view of human beings as »most fundamentally free and rational, autonomous individual selves« (Rosemont 2015: xii) is both false and socially pernicious, and to defend an alternative Confucian view based on his idea of humans as role-bearing persons.

As Rosemont writes, »we should work hard to understand non-Western texts *in their own terms*, not ours« (*ibid.*: 5), and he and Ames have sought to satisfy this method of interpretation not just in their scholarly work, but also by offering their own collaborative set of translations of early Confucian texts. In *Against Individualism*, Rosemont relies on his longstanding view that philosophical traditions must be understood by means of their distinctive »concept-clusters.« In contrast to the Western set of concepts that Rosemont takes as his target in the book, consisting of terms like »rights,« »democracy,« »choice,« »autonomy,« and »individual,« and centering around the notion of »freedom« (*ibid.*: 62), or the Aristotelian concept-cluster involving terms such as *ethos*, *arête*, *prohairesis*, *phronesis*, and *eudaimonia*, early Confucian ethics has a set of concepts that is entirely unique: *ren*, *yi*, *de* 德, *dao* 道, and the like. Western interpreters of Chinese texts have distorted the inherent meanings of and inter-

---

<sup>10</sup> D. L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998.

relationships among these terms by projecting too much of their own tradition's vocabulary onto them.

Proponents of VEC have responded to MacIntyre's challenge by attempting to construct a shared framework through which conversation between Confucian and Western forms of virtue ethics might take place. At the same time, they reject the idea that linguistic difference is the proper starting point for comparative philosophy. Jiyuan Yu, drawing on Aristotle and Martha Nussbaum, maintains that it is the basic human experiences to which our languages give expression that should be point of departure for cross-cultural comparison (Yu 2007: 9–10). Edward Slingerland uses conceptual metaphor theory to argue that, regardless of the languages we speak, humans have a shared conceptual structure that is shaped by our experience of our body in its physical environment (Slingerland 2004: 24).<sup>11</sup> He dismisses views like Rosemont's as »linguistic determinism« or »word fetishism« (*ibid.*: 5–6). Other defenders of VEC have criticized Rosemont's idea that we cannot claim that a Chinese thinker has a particular concept if we cannot find a term in the thinker's text expressing that concept (Van Norden 2007: 22).

While MacIntyre's views about incommensurability are only mentioned once in a footnote in the Angle and Slote volume, and Ames and Rosemont's concerns about linguistic difference and interpretive one-sidedness are not cited at all, the editors' introduction frames the collection as addressing similar issues. One feature of the volume is a recurring debate about whether or not terms like »virtue« and »virtue ethics« make sense in a Confucian context (Angle, and Slote 2013: 7). The essay by the Hong Kong-based scholar Wong Wai-ying raises doubts about whether Confucian ethics can be classified as virtue ethics, and the Taiwanese scholar Lee Ming-Huei claims that Confucian ethics is best understood as deontology.<sup>12</sup> Liu Liang-jian, a philosopher at East China Normal University, argues that the study of Confucian virtue ethics should begin from a consideration of the classical Chinese term *de* and the modern term *meide* 美德, and proceeds to point out some important differences between these

---

<sup>11</sup> E. Slingerland, »Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion,« *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 72, No. 1, 2004, pp. 1–31.

<sup>12</sup> Wong Wai-ying, »Confucian Ethics and Virtue Ethics Revisited,« Angle, and Slote 2013, pp. 74–79; and Lee Ming-huei, »Confucianism, Kant, and Virtue Ethics« *ibid.* pp. 47–55.

terms and the English »virtue« and Greek *aretē* (Liu 2013: 67–69).<sup>13</sup> Both this essay and the one by Chen Lai of Tsinghua University point out an interesting distinction between »virtuous character« (*dexing* 德性, with *xing* pronounced using the fourth tone) and »virtuous conduct« (*dexing* 德行, with *xing* pronounced with the second tone) in early Chinese texts, a distinction I shall return to momentarily.<sup>14</sup>

A second feature is the volume's regard for a »mutual learning« that goes beyond merely imposing a set of Western terms and concepts on Confucian texts. Virtue ethics, as Angle and Slote write, does not mean just Aristotle and other Western theorists; rather, »its universality exists in relation to the growing variety of particular texts and textual traditions that provide it with specificity, and some of this clearly comes out of China« (Angle, and Slote 2013: 10). Many of the papers use early Chinese texts to explore alternatives to views defended in the Western virtue ethical tradition. The paper by Huang Yong, for instance, contends that the neo-Confucian philosopher-brothers Cheng Hao (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107) offer resources for addressing problems that emerge in prominent versions of moral particularism.<sup>15</sup> Angle begins his own contribution by noting the lack of agreement among contemporary Western ethicists about whether conscientiousness is virtue; he proceeds to examine early Confucian accounts of the quality, with the idea that »stepping outside the Western tradition provides a valuable way for Western philosophers to check our bearings.«<sup>16</sup> The essays by Andrew Terjesen and Marion Hourdequin explore how the Confucian tradition might provide alternative foundations for empathy-based ethics.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the piece by Bryan Van Norden is part of a larger project that combines elements of Aristotelian, Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist virtue ethics.<sup>18</sup>

Such contributions are representative of the »global philosophi-

---

<sup>13</sup> Liu Liangjian, »Virtue Ethics and Confucianism: A Methodological Reflection« (*ibid.*: 66–73).

<sup>14</sup> Chen Lai, »Virtue Ethics and Confucian Ethics« (*ibid.*: 15–27).

<sup>15</sup> Huang Yong, »Between Generalism and Particularism: The Cheng Brothers' Neo-Confucian Virtue Ethics« (*ibid.*: 162–170).

<sup>16</sup> S. C. Angle, »Is Conscientiousness a Virtue? Confucian Answers« (*ibid.*: 182–191).

<sup>17</sup> A. Terjesen, »Is Empathy the ›One Thread‹ Running through Confucianism?« (*ibid.*: 201–208); and M. Hourdequin, »The Limits of Empathy« (*ibid.*: 209–218).

<sup>18</sup> B. W. Van Norden, »Toward a Synthesis of Confucianism and Aristotelianism« (*ibid.*: 56–65).

cal« approach to comparative philosophy championed by Angle and others, which attempts to learn new ideas from other traditions while at the same time remaining committed to developing one's own.<sup>19</sup> In light of this approach, we might think that Rosemont's dichotomy of approaches to comparison is one that needs to be updated. The question of »similarities or differences?« is perhaps less relevant to today's comparative philosopher than whether we focus on »difference *within* a common framework,« such as virtue ethics, or »difference *as an alternative* to a common framework,« such as Western ethics in general.

CRE takes its point of departure from »a specific vision of human beings as relational persons constituted by the roles they live rather than as individual selves« (Ames, and Rosemont 2011: 17). It is this vision, its proponents maintain, that makes it distinct not only from deontology and utilitarianism, but also from Aristotelian and other forms of virtue ethics. We can separate CRE's claim about Confucian relational persons into both a *metaphysical thesis* and a *psychological thesis*. Whereas Aristotle's conception of the individual is based on a metaphysics of substance, CRE argues that for Confucius there is no »substantial self« left over once we take away a person's social relations. As Rosemont puts it in *Against Individualism*, »when all of [our roles] have been specified, and their relationships made manifest, then we have, for Confucius, been thoroughly individuated, but with nothing left over with which to piece together an autonomous individual self« (Rosemont 2015: 93). He devotes Chapter Three of his book to arguing that the concern with the individual self, the *real me* that exists apart from all my relationships, is at the heart of a host of misguided Western theories not just in philosophy and politics, but in the social and behavioral sciences as well.

The psychological thesis draws on Herbert Fingarette's claim in his 1972 book *The Secular as Sacred* that Confucius lacks a concept of an »inner psychic life« so familiar to his Western interpreters (Fingarette 1972: 45).<sup>20</sup> Since virtues like *ren* 仁 are not connected with mental states such as willing or feeling, Fingarette's account of Confucius shifts our focus outward to human interaction by means of ritual. In

---

<sup>19</sup> See S. C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 6. I discuss the global philosophical approach in the last chapter of my *Doing Philosophy Comparatively* (2015).

<sup>20</sup> H. Fingarette, *Confucius – The Secular as Sacred*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

*Against Individualism*, Rosemont quotes with approval Fingarette's statement that »For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there are no human beings,« asserting that the »private« realm is a fiction (Rosemont 2015: 97). As a result, CRE finds accounts of moral agency that rest on the notion of character to be problematic. In a recent essay critiquing Joel Kupperman's account of character, Ames and Rosemont write that their own view »would resist the uncritical substance ontology underlying Kupperman's conception of agency that requires a separation between the agent of conduct and the conduct itself« (Ames, and Rosemont 2014: 26).<sup>21</sup> Since Aristotelian virtue ethics likewise rests on the idea that virtuous actions must proceed from a »firm and unchanging disposition,« they think that the Greek thinker's moral psychology is a poor fit for early Confucian ethics (Ames, and Rosemont 2011: 20).

Proponents of VEC maintain that there is strong evidence suggesting that the early Confucians are committed to a notion of the self that exists independently of our roles and relationships (Sim 2007: 56 ff.; Yu 2007: 211–212). The *Analects* distinguishes between self (*ji* 己) and others (*ren* 人), and Confucius' emphasis on commitment (*zhi* 志) suggests internal self-directedness. Other passages imply the existence of relation-transcending character traits, such as when Confucius claims that the presence of a gentleman (*junzi* 君子) among the Nine Yi barbarian tribes would transform the latter, rather than they changing him (Slingerland 2011: 404).<sup>22</sup> Fingarette's claim about the absence of an inner psychic realm in the *Analects* has also come under scrutiny from scholars who think that there are good reasons to read the text in light of the inner/outer distinction. Confucius emphasizes self-examination, and often looks to inner character rather than external appearance to determine whether a person is virtuous (Slingerland 2013).<sup>23</sup> As Philip Ivanhoe sums up the case,

---

<sup>21</sup> R. T. Ames and H. Rosemont, Jr., »From Kupperman's Character Ethics to Confucian Role Ethics: Putting Humpty Together Again,« in Chenyang Li and Peimin Ni (eds.), *Moral Cultivation and Confucian Character: Engaging Joel Kupperman*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014, pp. 17–46. See J. Kupperman, *Character*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> E. Slingerland, »The Situationist Critique and Early Confucian Virtue Ethics,« *Ethics*, Vol. 121, 2011, pp. 390–419.

<sup>23</sup> E. Slingerland, »Cognitive Science and Religious Thought: The Case of Psychological Interiority in the *Analects*,« in *Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion*, Bristol, CT: Acumen, 2013, pp. 197–212.

»On the Confucian view, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and dispositions – not social roles – are largely *constitutive* of proper action« (Ivanhoe 2008: 45).

These different understandings of self are connected with different conceptions of virtue. Hall and Ames recognized early on that the focus on relations and events emphasized in their interpretation of Confucius is antithetical to the notion of virtues as attributes of substantial selves. »[I]n place of a consideration of the essential nature of abstract moral virtues,« they write in their 1987 work *Thinking Through Confucius*, »the Confucian is more concerned with an explication of the activities of specific persons in particular contexts« (Hall, and Ames 1987: 15). Ames and Rosemont's more recent defence of CRE is an elaboration of this insight, seeing virtues as the continual attaining of excellence in our relations, »virtuing,« the »activity of relating itself« (Ames, and Rosemont 2011: 34). Rosemont argues in *Against Individualism* that to say that a person is virtuous is not to ascribe a property to that person's »inner self,« but rather to make a claim about how she will act in a given role.

Proponents of VEC have in turn seen virtuous character as the defining feature of early Confucian ethics. Jiyuan Yu writes that for Confucius the attainment of *ren* »involves a full-fledged development of moral character« (Yu 2007: 48), Van Norden that »Confucius was concerned with ethical character and the cultivation of virtue« (Van Norden 2002: 20),<sup>24</sup> and May Sim that Confucian ethics »centers on character and its qualities and relations« (Sim 2007: 13). Sim argues that the Confucian ontology of virtue closely resembles Aristotle's, writing that »Quality is [...] the category employed whenever Confucius marks out the abiding habits that qualify one as a person with a certain virtue« (*ibid.*: 53).

While the Angle and Slote volume does not mention this debate specifically, the aforementioned essays by Chen and Liu draw our attention to the distinction in early Chinese texts between virtuous character and virtuous action. Chen points out that the important account of ethics in the time period leading up to Confucius was based on »virtuous conduct« rather than »virtuous character« (Chen 2013: 17). Indeed, »virtuous character« does not appear in the *Analects*, *Mengzi*, or *Xunzi*, whereas »virtuous conduct« appears in all three

---

<sup>24</sup> B. W. Van Norden, »Introduction,« in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

texts. Liu contends that the Confucian tradition's exploration of virtuous conduct gives it a richness that surpasses Aristotelian virtue ethics (Liu 2013: 68). Hopefully these essays will lead to more discussion of the nature of virtuous conduct and virtuous character, and the connection between them, in the Confucian tradition. Is »character« a central part of the early Confucian concept-cluster?

As one reviewer commented on the debate between VEC and CRE, »there is probably no need to consider role ethics and virtue ethics to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, the idea of a virtue ethics embedded in roles, or a role ethics guided by the cultivation of virtues may well serve to approximate the Confucian view of things« (Chan 2010: 340).<sup>25</sup> If the best interpretation of the *Analects* does not belong solely to one interpretation or the other, then perhaps the two can help correct and clarify one another in important areas of ethical concern. We might imagine, for instance, an account of virtue in which particular roles and relationships play a more central part, so that we cannot define »courage« or »honesty« or »filial piety« without specifying the particular role in which it is displayed.<sup>26</sup> In Mencius' statement of »human roles,« each of the quintessential human relationships is governed by a particular norm: for fathers and children, affection (*qin* 親), for ruler and ministers, righteousness, and so on. Confucius' teachings in the *Analects* also connect virtues with specific positions: dutifulness is a quality that a minister shows in regard to his ruler; trustworthiness governs relationships between friends. To be sure, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between virtues and roles in these texts; a virtue may be valuable in multiple roles, and a single role may require a number of virtues. Yet a role-based conception of virtue might serve as an interesting counterpart to the Aristotelian view of virtues as qualities or fixed dispositions of the non-rational part of the individual's soul. At the same time, it might draw more attention to the importance of familial and other kinds of roles in the Greek thinker's ethics.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> A. K. Chan, Review of »Rosemont, Jr., Henry, and Roger T. Ames, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing*,« 《中國文化研究所學報》 *Journal of Chinese Studies*, Vol. 50, 2010, pp. 335–341.

<sup>26</sup> Ivanhoe offers a brief sketch of such an account in relation to filial piety (Ivanhoe 2008: 39 n. 16), though he maintains that the early Confucians see virtuous dispositions as the more fundamental category.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of familial roles in Aristotle and Confucius, see T. Connolly,

Despite the many differences between VEC and CRE highlighted above, I think both interpretations would agree that there is something distinctive and potentially enriching about the early Confucian emphasis on the family and community. As Ivanhoe writes in his contribution to the Angle and Slote volume, for the Confucians »Families and society in general are not simply the context or enabling conditions for human flourishing; they set constraints upon our behavior and offer core elements of what makes life good.« He thinks this element makes Confucian virtue ethics distinct from »most if not all« of its Western peers (Ivanhoe 2013: 42).<sup>28</sup> A similar sentiment is expressed by Van Norden, who argues that virtue ethicists like Aristotle and Aquinas do not do full justice to the relationships that are central for the early Confucians (Van Norden 2013: 63). Whether translated into language of virtue ethics or role ethics, it seems that the time is ripe for a Confucian ethics centered on virtuous human relationships.

–Tim Connolly, East Stroudsburg University,  
East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, USA<sup>29</sup>

---

»Friendship and Filial Piety: Relational Ethics in Aristotle and Early Confucianism,« *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 39, 2012, pp. 71–88, especially section IV.

<sup>28</sup> P. J. Ivanhoe, »Virtue Ethics and the Chinese Confucian Tradition« (Angle, and Slote 2013, pp. 28–46.

<sup>29</sup> The author thanks Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach and Jim Maffie, as well as the journal's anonymous reviewers, for their contributions to this essay.