

It is common to see defenders of Confucianism arguing that this ancient tradition has much to teach the contemporary world about the importance of family relations. Many of these same thinkers, however, are less interested in what Confucianism has to say about gender. There is considerable tension here—the same considerations that lead to a sympathetic reading of Confucianism on the family ought to lead to a sympathetic reading of Confucianism on gender if the tradition draws on similar ideas for both. The Confucian celebration of the *Wu Lun*, or Five Relations, I will argue, points in exactly this direction.

Why the *Wu Lun*: Confucian Naturalism

The *Wu Lun* get their inaugural canonical statement in Mencius:

The sage Shun was anxious about [moral decline], so he appointed Xie to be Minister of Instruction and instruct [the people] about human roles: between father and children there is affection; between ruler and ministers there is righteousness; between husband and wife there is distinction; between elder and younger there is precedence; and between friends there is faithfulness.¹

The first question I want to ask is: why these five? Humans enter into a lot of relations with one another, so why privilege these five and elevate them to a recognized and special status as key to arresting moral decline?

The answer to these questions, I think, comes by way of what I will call Confucian Naturalism. “Naturalism” is used to label a variety of views, some of which are metaphysical and others methodological. Though the match is far from perfect, I

¹ Bryan Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 3A4. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2008.

think Confucianism fits reasonable well with modest versions of both. Starting with the metaphysical, I take a core claim to be that the empirical world accessible to the senses is the only world there is. Put negatively, naturalism denies the existence of a supernatural, or transcendent, realm. This negative formulation is prominent in Western thought as naturalism is usually understood as a repudiation of ideas that had been dominant in its philosophical and religious traditions—God, immaterial souls, Plato’s Intelligible Realm, and so on. Lacking this history, classical Chinese philosophers do not explicitly deny the reality of such things, but they do work comfortably within a thoroughly immanent world. Accordingly, Confucian philosophers appeal frequently to experiences with which we are all familiar on a daily basis. Their naturalism, then, is not a self-conscious naturalism, but rather an unquestioned focus on an immanent world of ordinary affairs.

As a methodological claim, I take Naturalism to discourage appeals to objects or properties that are inconsistent with what can be accommodated by the natural sciences. Just what kinds of entities or properties it rules out, and whether what remains is adequate for making sense of ourselves and the world, remains of matter of some dispute, but one thing naturalists insist on is that it is a philosophical blunder to run afoul of the results of our best sciences. In ethics, such naturalistic scruples have led increasing numbers of philosophers to turn to psychology as a way of constraining moral theorizing. At the very least, a more naturalist approach to ethics insists an adequate moral theory ought to speak to our actual psychological natures by, for

example, not demanding of people what is psychologically impossible, or by appealing to cognitive faculties we do not have.

Classical Chinese philosophers obviously could not appeal to science as we have come to know it into their thinking, but they did operate with a kind of folk psychology to which they would defer in evaluating the plausibility of normative claims. For example, speculations about the nature of the *xin*, or heart-mind, gains prominence with Mencius, who posits innate, rudimentary moral sentiments—what he calls “sprouts” (*duan*)—that he claims tend humans towards the development of virtue. Looking to refute Mencius’ optimistic claims that human nature is good, Xunzi attacks this moral psychology—he accuses Mencius of failing to understand the difference between those faculty we have by nature (*xing*), and those that are acquired through “conscious effort” (*wei*). We might also note Mencius’ appeal to our natural tendencies in rejecting the Moist idea of impartial love in favor of the more psychologically realistic gradated love—the Moist demand that we love all people equally is rejected based on our natural tendency to prefer kin. In short, in Confucianism, errors about our moral psychology is thought to doom the moral pictures housing them.

My claim then is that classical Confucian moral philosophy is constrained by a naturalism that keeps it grounded in this world and which has it deferring to what was taken to be plausible accounts of our moral psychology. In light of this naturalism, the identification and elevation of the relations making the *Wu Lun* is both unsurprising and well motivated. The move here should be familiar, as it is routinely made in sympathetic discussions of *xiao*, or filial piety, which turn on the recognition of the basic human need

for nurturing and minimally effective childrearing. While we might question and come to reject particular culturally bound expressions of *xiao*, it is plausible to argue that there is something fundamentally sound in the idea, and that we moderns may stand to learn something by attending to what Confucians had to say about it.² A comparable defense of the *Wu Lun* would highlight the frequency with which we find humans living in hierarchically organized communities, recognizing stable couplings between men and women that are oriented around child rearing, and acknowledging the importance of sibling bonds and the goods of friendship in a flourishing life.

Gender

If I am on the right track, we have good reason to conclude the specific relations identified in the *Wu Lun* are neither arbitrarily chosen nor the remnants of a highly culturally specific social and kinship system. Rather they pick out relationships whose salience points to their centrality in lives well lived. This is not to say that everything Confucians say about these relationships is undeserving of careful scrutiny. That all these relationships except (maybe) that between friends would have been understood to be hierarchical has been much discussed. But it is also striking that all would have been understood to be at least implicitly gendered as well. The language of rulers and subjects is not explicitly gendered, nor is that of friends or elder and younger, but the social reality was quite different. Rulers were typically male, and while both men and

² See Henry Rosemont Jr., *Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion*. Lenham: Lexington Books, 2015. For an even more extensive defense of Confucian insights into child rearing see Erin Cline, *Families of Virtue: Confucian and Western Views on Childhood Development*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2015

women would have friends, and be friends with one another, expectations as to how these friendships would be navigated and how people would behave with friends were highly sensitive to gender. Lastly, while in general age trumped gender, this too was complicated by gender in numerous ways. The *Wu Lun*, then, point not just to five kinds of relationships, but to characteristic differences between men and women among a number of dimensions.

Now, it is possible to translate the gender out of the *Wu Lun* and speak only of relations between “parents” and “children”, “spouses”, and “siblings” while dismissing gendered conceptions of rulers, subjects, and friends as cultural artifacts.³ It is not my suggestion that there is anything wrong with this strategy—I am not arguing that we *must* keep gender in the *Wu Lun* in order to preserve a genuinely Confucian moral philosophy. But I do want to suggest caution in adopting this strategy and urge that it is worth asking whether in adopting it we risk losing some genuine challenges that may point to insights. Put differently, I want to ask whether the incorporation of gender and recognition of gender roles can be defended from a Confucian perspective. Drawing on the account of Confucian Naturalism sketched above, I will make the case for an affirmative answer. In making this case I will offer an argument analogous to the one sketched above in defense of Confucian insights into filial piety and the plausibility of the relationships chosen for special mention in the *Wu Lun*.

Are Gender Roles Inevitable?

³ See Mary I. Bockover “The Virtue of Freedom” in *Polishing the Chinese Mirror*, edited by Marthe Chandler and Ronnie Littlejohn, New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2008 for an example of the *Wu Lun* being recast in “contemporary”—meaning gender neutral—terms.

My first point is simple. The same naturalistic considerations that speak in favor of Confucianism's focus on the specific relationships elevated in the *Wu Lun* and its emphasis on the family plainly speak in favor of distinguishing men and women. Gender distinctions, and the assigning of all manner of behavioral expectations based on gender, is surely as ubiquitous in human affairs as the other sorts of basic tendencies recognized by Confucian thinkers, as is the identification of inherently gendered roles such as father, mother, sister, brother, and so on. Moreover, as controversial as it may be, there is at least a *prima facie* case to be made that human psychology is gendered as well, and this in ways that lend some support to various folk psychological beliefs about the differences between men and women. Moreover, even those inclined to a "social constructionist" account of gender will have to concede human beings are particularly prone to constructing men and women are psychologically different.

Prima facie cases are defeasible of course, and it remains possible for us to accept Confucian insights into the nature of the family, allowing for a need to accommodate current social realities, while rejecting its claims about gender. Perhaps when it comes to women and men Confucian moral psychology is thoroughly tainted by outmoded or demonstrably false and pernicious ideas. Before we embrace this conclusion, however, we need to rehearse some of the reasons why gender and gender roles is such a complicated and controversial matter for us moderns in the first place. This will set the stage for the beginnings of a defense of Confucianism on this score.

Feminism and Gender

The routine division of the world's human population into men and woman and the assignment of behavioral expectations accordingly presents opportunities for both furthering and hindering feminist ambitions. If we allow traditional gender roles to color our assessments of certain traits, we might suppose that many historically desired characteristics—ambition, strength, autonomy—are characteristically masculine. As Roger Ames and David Hall have argued, in the West the tendency has been to define human beings in terms of qualities traditionally considered masculine.⁴ Uncritically accepting this picture has the paradoxical effect of entailing that to be truly liberated, or to achieve their potentials as humans, women must become more like men. As many have noted, this seems an odd way to argue for women's equality.

On the other hand, a strategy of recognizing traditional gender roles might allow us to valorize historically slighted "feminine" traits. Hence we might celebrate the traditional care giving roles of women, elevating them from their unjustly diminished position along with traits associates with such work—sensitivity, compassion, generosity and so on. Pushing this further, we might also point out the morally undesirable facets of more traditionally male traits, as some care ethicists such as Michael Slote and Nel Noddings do. Of course the worry here is that this same move would reinforce the very distinctions that have reserved the first kinds of virtues for men as well as gender stereotypes many women find objectionable.

In the face of this we might be tempted to think we would be better off without gender altogether. If autonomy, independence, and professional ambition are simply

⁴ David Hall and Roger T. Ames, "Sexism with Chinese Characteristics", in Shenyang Li, ed., *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*. Chicago: Open Court, 2000.

human goods, rather than masculine traits, then women who excel in their chosen professions will simply be successful people, rather than women succeeding in a “man’s world.” Conversely, if nurturing parenting and caregiving are human goods, rather than distinctly feminine practices, then the exemplary efforts of so many women in these areas through the ages can be acknowledged and celebrated, without suggesting that these were and remain in any way the “proper” work of women in general. We might be tempted, then, to imagine that a world without “men” and “women”—a world without gender—would solve a lot of problems.

This option is not comfortably available to an ethics worthy of being called Confucian if the arguments given above is sound. Gender is too woven into the roles recognized by Confucianism and for good Confucian reasons. Consequently, a Confucian ethics that is at least broadly sympathetic to the aims of feminism as a program of political and social reform must accept the burden of defending gender roles. I will now sketch the outlines of such a defense.

Gender Roles as Increasing Diversity

The argument I want to consider begins with the idea of diversity. For this I’ll rely on Peter Herschok’s gloss in his book *Valuing Diversity*. Drawing on a particularly intriguing reading of the Buddhist idea of Interdependent Arising, Herschok distinguishes diversity from variation:

Variation is a means-to and has the meaning-of generating novel incidents of nonidentity—a process of increasing the quantity of individual things present.

Diversity is a function of relational dynamics that are conducive to the production

and sustained presence of a particular quality of interaction: a distinctive complexion of interdependence. Diversification is a means-to and has the meaning-of generating creatively enriching patterns of mutual contribution to sustainably shared welfare. It marks the advent of a distinctive qualitative shift in how things are present.⁵

As an illustration Hershock considers a key difference between zoos and ecologies. While both may play host to many different kinds of plants and animals, only in an ecosystem do these different elements interact in ways that contribute to a self-sustaining and flourishing system. By contrast, without constant intervention the flora and fauna of a zoo are not long for this world. The mutually enhancing interplay of differing elements is what Hershock refers to as diversity. The idea is that diversity, as opposed to mere variety, makes use of the distinctive characteristics and abilities of the participants in interaction with one another to encourage the emergence of valued phenomena. “Cultural diversity”, he writes, “when fully realized, is a means-to and has the meaning-of both valuing and adding value to a shared situation through enhancing the significance of cultural difference.”⁶

My idea, then, is to use this as a way of exploring the possible value of gender roles. In some contexts, distinguishing men and women, and male and female behaviors and traits, can create diversity in the service of some kinds of goods or flourishing. Some simple examples come to mind in aesthetic realms like dance and

⁵ Peter Hershock, *Valuing Diversity: Buddhist Reflection on Realizing a More Equitable Global Future*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 2012, pp. 92-93.

⁶ Hershock, *Valuing Diversity*, p. 95.

music. A *pas-de-deux* in a classical ballet performed by male and female dancers can present aesthetic qualities that turn on the distinctive traits of each dancer, their ways of dancing, and how these interact. These differences exploit typical differences in physiology as well as differences in costuming and, in narrative dances, characters and their places in the story. Similar remarks would hold I think for the interplay of male and female voices in choral works, or the roles played by men and women in paired ice skating. The point in all these cases would be that it is precisely because of the differences in the male and female participants that certain aesthetic features become possible. To try to substitute a man for the woman or vice versa would be to lose something essential to the performance. Lastly, in each of these cases, the diversity is tied to a comparatively natural set of differences. Though plainly built on and extended by way of cultural practices, male and female ballet dancer do differ physiologically, and in terms of moves like lifts it is hardly arbitrary that it is typically the man who lifts the woman and not vice versa. In singing, it's not arbitrary that, for example, women typically sing the higher parts, and so on.

So, here's a provisional and very modest conclusion. It is arguable that these kinds of performances, as aesthetically rewarding as some might find them, risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes or constraining expectations. Fair enough—let's grant that, and that it would still need to be argued that the aesthetic possibilities achieved by way of distinguishing genders can be worth the risk. Still, they act as a kind of possibility proof in the sense that they illustrate that a) gender roles can contribute to at least one

kind of good—in these cases an aesthetic good—and b) they can do this by playing on non-arbitrary differences between men and women.

Conclusion

The appeal to aesthetics goods has the appeal in resonating with the general appeal to aesthetic goods in Confucian thought, and so I think the account (barely) begun here can be developed further in a recognizably Confucian way. A further selling point, I think, is the continued possibility of working within the Confucian Naturalism introduced in the first part of the paper. One important aspect of this Naturalism is that it is decidedly *not* essentialist. While Chinese thinkers routinely appeal to what is typical of humans or what is frequently or predictably encountered in human affairs, there is nothing to suggest they had a particularly essentialist metaphysical picture in mind that would account for these regularities while making them immutable, and this would go for gender distinctions as well. As noted even on the most stridently social constructionist model it is undeniable that in fact there are notable differences between men and women, even if we might want to work for their dissolution. The question here is not so much whether this is feasible, but whether it is desirable. I hope to have pointed at least to one kind of argument against this conclusion.