Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 9: Confucius: The One Thread

The Confucian articulation of the Golden Rule as we see it expressed in 12.2 may in fact be the 'one thread" Confucius said ran through his teachings. In context, we discover that the one thread is an expression of the complex interplay of two Confucian virtues, empathetic understanding (*shu*) and dutifulness, devotion to *li* (*zhong*). Up to this point, we saw that *li* must always be tempered with *ren.* Here, too, we see that devotion to *li* must be tempered with empathetic understanding (*shu*), a part of *ren*—knowing when the strict rules of *li* must be softened to respond appropriately to the situation at hand. Thus discipline and rules offer structure and guidance for our moral and spiritual lives. But to fully flourish, we must know how to make the rules work for us rather than against us. We must maintain the flexibility and creativity to adhere within the general guidelines of the ritual structure, while also able to modify them when the situation demands modulation.

> 4.15 The Master said "Master Zeng! All that I teach can be strung together on a single thread." "Yes, sir." Master Zeng responded. After the Master left, the disciples asked, "What did he mean by that?" Master Zeng said, "All that the Master teaches amounts to nothing more than dutifulness (*zhong*) tempered by empathetic understanding (*shu*).

These two virtues have been widely discussed, with varying interpretations. To my mind, the interpretation suggested by David Nivisen, modified by Philip J. Ivanhoe and endorsed by Edward Slingerland is quite convincing. Within the *Analects*, it seems that *zhong* is devotion to *li*, and specifically, one's role-defined duties. In the words of Robert Eno, *zhong* is "single minded devotion to fulfilling one's responsibilities," "a complete submergence of self-interest in scrupulous devotion to duty."[i] This strict adherence to duty is to be tempered by *shu*, empathetic understanding. This is the virtue of being able to imaginatively put oneself in the shoes of another and know when to soften and bend the role-defined rules of ritual obligation. Thus dutifulness is probably a preferable translation to loyalty,

since what one is faithful to is the *li* itself and one's role as defined by *li*, rather than a specific person with whom one is in relationship. We express ourselves in conduct by devoting ourselves to fulfilling our responsibilities to others and internalizing the needs and interests of others as our own.[ii]

> 4.15 The Master said, "Master Zeng! All that I teach can be strung together on a single thread."

What is the single thread? One way of reading this is that there is a single principle uniting the Master's teaching. However, the Way taught by Confucius emphasizes practice over theory.[iii] The reply of Master Zeng thus may give us an important interpretive clue to the one thread:

> "Yes sir." Master Zeng responded. After the Master left, the disciples asked, "What did he mean by that?" Master Zeng said, "All that the Master teaches amounts to nothing more than dutifulness *(zhong*) tempered by understanding *(shu)."*

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While there has been general agreement upon the meaning of *shu*, there are varying interpretations of the meaning of *zhong.* It is clear from many passages in the *Analects* that the virtue of *shu* involves consideration of others, by imagining oneself in the other's place:[iv]

> 5.12 Zigong said, "What I do not wish others to do unto me, I also wish not to do unto others." The Master said, "Ah, Zigong! That is something quite beyond you."

> 6.30 Desiring to take his stand, one who is human-hearted (*ren*) helps others to take their stand; wanting to realizing himself, he helps others to realize themselves. Being able to take what is near at hand as an analogy is the method of Humaneness (*ren*).

> 12.2 Zhong Gong asked about Humaneness (*ren*). The Master said, "When in public, comport yourself as if you were receiving an important guest; in your management of the people, behave as if you were overseeing a great sacrifice. Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. In this way, you will encounter no resentment in your public or private life (in your state or in your family).

> 15.24 Zigong asked, “Is there one teaching that can serve as a guide for one’s entire life?” The Master answered, “Is it not *shu,* sympathetic understanding? Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire.”

The meaning of *zhong* is not as clear. The early commentator Wang Bi defines *zhong* as "fully exhausting one's emotions" and *shu* as “reflecting upon one’s emotions in order to have sympathy with other beings." Zhu Xi and others likewise define *zhong* as "exhausting oneself or doing one’s utmost,” “exhausting the mind” or exhausting integrity.”[v] The testimony of the *Analects itself*, however, suggests a different picture of *zhong:*

> 3. 19. Duke Ding asked, “How should a lord employ his ministers? How should a minister serve his lord?”
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> Confucius replied, “A lord should employ his ministers with ritual (*li*), and ministers should serve their lord with dutifulness (*zhong*)”

> 5. 19 Zizhang asked saying: "Chief Minister Ziwen three times held office as chief minister, but showed no sign of delight; three times he was deposed, but showed no sign of resentment. He always reported to the new chief minister on the conduct of government of himself, the former chief minister. So what do you think of him?"
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> The Master said: "He was loyal [*zhong*]." "Was he humane?" said Zizhang. "One cannot know yet," said the Master. "How could he be considered humane?"

Here we see dutifulness or loyalty (*zhong*) portrayed not as a general doing of one’s utmost, but a specific attentiveness to one’s ritual duties, especially as a political subordinate. However, the virtue of fulfilling one’s ritual duties needs to be tempered by the virtue of "understanding" *(shu),* the art of imagining oneself in the place of the other, and exercising a keen discernment of when it is appropriate or "right" *(yi)* to bend or suspend the demands of role-specific duty.[vi] Thus one’s ultimate loyalty is not to a specific person—a ruler to whom one is subordinate—but to the ritual system of *li* itself. One loves *li*, but one also loves the impersonal standard of *yi*; and *yi* at times means one must bend the strict rules of *li*. [vii]

The One Thread is thus not only a negative expression of the Golden Rule; it shows *ren* to be the core of its positive expression. What we see in common between the various passages is sympathetic imagination: placing ourselves in the other's shoes. By taking our own heart mind as an analogy of others, we help others achieve their own flourishing. This extended self is parallel to the extended self we find in the Aristotelian model of friendship. Aristotle tells us that we are too close to ourselves to see ourselves clearly. In order to have a genuine appreciation for virtue we need to extend ourselves to others. We actually come to see ourselves through our interaction with others.[viii]

As we have seen, the virtue of *ren* is extended through all one's social relations:

> 12. 2 Zhong Gong asked about humaneness (*ren*). The Master said, "When in public, comport yourself as if you were receiving an important guest; in your management of the people, behave as if you were overseeing a great sacrifice. Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. In this way, you will encounter no resentment in your public or private life (in your state or in your family).

It is this principle upon which Confucius extended the model of *li* from private sacrifice in the court of the emperor to modeling all society upon a grand ceremony. If one comports oneself with dignity at the court of the emperor, should one not bring sacred dignity to all one's social interactions? In bringing sacred attentiveness to all of social life, this analect expresses the "negative" formulation of the Golden Rule, "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself." In this way, one will encounter no resentment in public or private life, in one's state or household. Thus in context, we see that the Golden Rule is a means for protecting us from overstepping and encroaching on others; it is a crucial part of a manual for public life. In a hierarchical society, Confucius is suggesting a kind of egalitarian respect for people on all social levels. Sacred dignity and ritual attentiveness become the watchword of communal life.

> 15.3 The Master said, "Zigong! Do you take me to be one who has come to understand through learning a wide variety of things?"
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> Zigong responded, "Yes. Is this not the case?" "It is not. I bind it all together with a single

thread."

As with 4.15, commentators are divided as to whether the single thread is a principle of learning or a principle of acting. [ix] However in a further analect, 15.24, it seems clear that the one thread is a principle to guide action. Note that it is in his response to the disciple Zigong that Confucius articulates this as the one thread of teaching:

> 15.24 Zigong asked, “Is there one teaching that can serve as a guide for one’s entire life?” The Master answered, “Is it not *shu*, sympathetic understanding? Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire.”

There is an irony here. We have noted that the Analects portray Zigong as a narrow specialist, one who is rigid in his adherence to duty. Thus, Confucius’ bittersweet response to Zigong:

> 5.12 Zigong said, "What I do not wish others to do unto me, I also wish not to do unto others." The Master said, "Ah, Zigong! That is something quite beyond you."

Why does the Master consider this beyond the reach of Zigong? The Neo-Confucian commentator Zhu Xi suggests that this should come naturally to the *ren* person, not something he needs to be urged to do. The Master formulates the principle for the benefit of Zigong, but realizes the aspiration is probably beyond his grasp. In another notable exchange, Zigong asked, "What do you think of me?" The Master replied, "You are a vessel." 'What sort of vessel?" "A *hu hu* or *lian* vessel." (5.4) These are particularly precious jade offering vessels that were the most important sacred vessels in certain ancestral temples. The answer thus uses pungent Socratic irony. On the one hand, Zigong is compared to a beautiful ritual vessel. On the other hand, these are archaic vessels that are extremely specialized and no longer used. In another analect, we learn that “an exemplary person (*junzi*) is not a vessel” (2.12); one is not supposed to be a merely highly specialized functionary, capable of perform only one task, like a ritual vessel employed for one particular function. Thus Confucius is subtly putting Zigong down for his

narrowness and rigid adherence to ritual. A further analect (14.29) suggests Zigong is too critical of others. He needs to temper his loyalty to ritual (*zhong*) with empathetic understanding (*shu*). [x]

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[i] Eno, 68 and 234, note 17.

[ii] Eno, 68.

[iii] Slingerland, 34. Slingerland tells us that *Guan* means "thread," and the Song commentator Huang Kan reads it as a metaphor: everything that the Master teaches is unified theoretically by one principle, like objects strung on a single thread. The *Analect's* emphasis on practice over theory makes it likely, however, that the "single thread" is a kind of consistency in action rather than a unified theoretical principle, and this is supported by Master Zeng's elaboration below. See the commentary to 15.3 for more discussion of the single thread.

[iv] Slingerland, 34.

[v] Slingerland, 34; Eno, 234-5 note 17.

[vi] Slingerland, 34-35.

[vii] There is a parallel set of concepts in the Jewish tradition between strict law and going beyond the letter of the law (*lifnim mishurat ha-din*). At times the law calls for us to go beyond the letter of the law. See Aaron Lichtenstein, "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of *Halakha*?" in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice,* 60-88.

[viii] *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 9.4* See above, Chapter 2.

[ix] Slingerland's commentary to *Analects* 15.3 is worth repeating in full: "an entire book on Confucian hermeneutics could be dedicated solely to a discussion of the various interpretations of this alternate version of 4.15. As mentioned in the commentary to 4.15, many have taken the "single thread" to be an abstract, theoretical principle behind everything the Master teaches and everything that he does. He Yan, for instance, comments:

"All of the various roads in the world lead to the same place, and all of the myriad thoughts one might have come to the same conclusion. Know the origin of things, and then the myriad excellences will be mastered. Therefore, it is not necessary to learn a wide variety of things in order to understand the one [underlying principle]."

As Jiao Xun notes, however, He Yan's idea of an underlying theoretical unity is more of a neo-Daoist than early Confucian theme, and argues that 4.15 makes it clear that the "single thread" refers to a way of acting in the world: being "dutiful and understanding *(zhongshu)"* or, as Jiao glosses it, "perfecting oneself in order to perfect others." Cf 15.24, where the "single saying" that can be a guide for one's entire life is identified as sympathetic understanding. Liu Baonan also sees the point of this passage to be emphasizing the importance of actual virtuous conduct rather than theoretical unity:

The Master has previously said, 'The gentleman is broadly learned with regard to culture" [6.27] and has also described himself as one who "silently comprehends it" [7.2]. Thus, the Master does value understanding it through learning a wide variety of things, and this is why Zigong answers the way he does. However, the Master also says, "There is no one who is my equal when it comes to cultural refinement, but as for actually becoming a gentleman in practice, this is something that I have not yet

been able to achieve" [7.33], which shows that conduct or practice is the particular focus of the teaching of the sage. The "Doctrine of the Mean" says, "Broadly learn it, carefully inquire about it, sedulously ponder it, clearly analyze it, and then sincerely put it into practice."1 Here, "learning, inquiring, pondering, and analyzing" correspond to "understanding it through learning a wide variety of things;' and "sincerely put it into practice" corresponds to "tying it all together on a single thread" . . . The point is the efficacy of being able to put learning into practice. If one is not able to do this, it is like being a person who can "recite the many odes by heart but, when delegated a governmental task, is unable to carry it out or, when sent out into the field as an envoy, is unable to engage in repartee. No matter how many odes he might have memorized, what good are they to him?" [13.5] When it comes to putting it into practice, nothing more is needed than dutifulness and understanding, and thus this passage and 4.15 can serve to illustrate one another." Slingerland on *Analects* 15.3, 174-5.

[x] See Slingerland, 166.