

Article

Special Issue: *Cross-Cultural Studies in Well-Being*

Filial Piety and Ritual: A Confucian Approach to Well-Being

Eric Yang

Department of Philosophy, Santa Clara University

Abstract | This paper examines a Confucian approach to well-being. Two Confucian ideas will be developed—in particular, filial piety (*xiao*) and ritual (*li*)—which arose in the Spring and Autumn period of ancient China. After a close examination of these two ideas and their relation to well-being, I show how a Confucian approach can serve as a competitor to other conceptions of well-being.

Editor | Gregg D. Caruso, Corning Community College, SUNY (USA)/Owen Flanagan, Duke University, USA.

Correspondence | Eric Yang, Department of Philosophy, Santa Clara University; **Email:** etyangscu@gmail.com

Citation | Eric Yang. (2019). Filial piety and ritual: A confucian approach to well-being. *Science, Religion and Culture*, 6(1): 96-102.

DOI | <https://dx.doi.org/10.17582/journal.src/2019.6.1.96.102>

Current discussion of objectivist or perfectionist approaches to well-being often focus on a list of virtues from western philosophers. However, there are other virtues that open up the discussion on well-being, and to that end, I suggest that we examine a Confucian approach to well-being. Confucian morality has been construed as a virtue-based theory (van Norden 2007, Cokelet 2016) and a version of exemplarism (Olberding 2012)¹, and some have already noted the ways in which Confucian thought (especially in Mencius and Xunzi) yields fruitful insight into well-being (Kim 2016). The aim of this paper is to present an approach that has not received much attention in the literature on well-being, one that arose from a culturally specific form of life in the so-called Spring and Autumn period of ancient China. This approach focuses on two particular ideas: filial piety (*xiao*) and ritual (*li*). I will explicate these two ideas and their relation to well-being, showing how a Confucian approach can serve as a competitor to other conceptions of well-being.

The Confucian notion of filial piety is complex and multifaceted, and only some of its features will be germane to our discussion of well-being. But at the outset it is worth stating that such a notion is undervalued in contemporary Western thought and culture.

Filial piety might appear unattractive given the ways in which it can be (and has been) easily abused, especially in authoritarian settings. Nevertheless, filial piety—at least in some forms—seems to be a defensible and even a desirable virtue for human flourishing. But to make such a case, a more perspicuous understanding of filial piety will be required.²

Although filial piety is a virtue to be possessed throughout one's life—and so must be exhibited even by adult children to their elderly (or deceased) parents—filial piety can also be construed as a precondition for the cultivation of a good life. As Confucius states, filial piety is a “root of perfect goodness,” so that once “the root is well established, the Way will flourish” (*Analects* 1.2).³ As a root, filial piety sets the attitudinal and characterological patterns of an individual as applied towards familial relationships, where such patterns are (or at least can be) eventually applied to other non-familial relationships.⁴

Some interpreters have suggested that filial piety is grounded in the fact that a child (of any age) owes her very existence to her parents, and hence she is obligated to follow a pattern of obedience and honor towards her parents. Others claim that filial piety arises out of the friendship between parent and child.⁵ However,

there is an evident relational asymmetry between parent and child, and so it is unclear that friendship can ground filial piety given the relevant disparity. Moreover, obligations do not arise simply because one's existence is dependent on another. Ivanhoe offers two examples that make this point compelling (Ivanhoe 2007, 301-302). First, Frankenstein's monster does not seem to have any filial duties to Frankenstein simply because Frankenstein brought him into being. Frankenstein's neglect as a parent/creator and lack of love for his child/creation precludes filial piety; the monster does not owe Frankenstein anything. Second, we can imagine a scenario in which parents produce children for the sole purpose of having potential organ donors, and such children need not show their parents any honor or respect.

Ivanhoe instead proposes that filial piety is grounded in the love and care that parents provide for their children, and hence merely having "a child establishes no substantial basis for filial piety" (ibid., 299). If love and loving treatment grounds filial piety, then filial piety need not be shown solely to one's biological parents but to any individual that plays the role of a good parent—thereby allowing filial piety in cases of adoption or foster homes. Filial piety can therefore be directed towards surrogate parents, perhaps even to teachers and caretakers.⁶ As Hall and Ames point out, "the family is perhaps regarded as a contingent institution that could, under different conditions, be replaced by a different, more appropriate, more meaningful communal organization." (Hall and Ames 1987, 121). Therefore, filial piety is less about biology and more about the right kind of parental figures displaying certain attitudes and practices that are constitutive of or aimed at a good life.

Here is where filial piety offers a distinctive focus—for parents or parental figures (at least the sufficiently good ones) serve as "ready-made" exemplars who children naturally admire. Although parents teach through instruction and discourse, it is often through the example displayed in the lives of parents that is far more instructive and formative. As Ivanhoe states:

Good parents prepare their children to go out and live good lives and one important way they do this is by providing good examples by living their own lives well. This is a role that very few people play in a child's life and good parents fulfill it in a distinctive way. Often what a child

learns from her parents is a general attitude or sensibility rather than a specific fact or body of knowledge (Ivanhoe 2007, 307).

Part of this education will include moral instruction, especially the foundational items of moral formation (e.g., moral intuitions, stock emotional responses, etc.). Sarkissian reflects on this point by suggesting that the "family is the first unit to introduce normative notions into an individual's psychological fabric, forming the basic dispositions and patterns of reflection and response that will color the rest of the person's moral phenomenology" (Sarkissian 2010, 725).⁷ Parents or parental figures are naturally imitable examples from the outset of one's life, as infants and babies learn speech patterns and emotional reactions, among many other things, by copying their parents. And such behaviors become dispositional traits which will have long lasting manifestations.

The Confucian notion of filial piety provides us with a practical approach for cultivating the proper responses to the circumstances: follow the instruction of one's parents through imitation and obedience. And it cannot be mere behavioral obedience, as there must be a "feeling of reverence" towards one's parents; otherwise there is no difference between humans and "dogs and horses" who can also be regarded, in a sense, as filial (*Analects* 2.7). So, filial piety is best construed not as an obligation but as a virtue, since such traits cannot be commanded but must instead be cultivated (Ivanhoe 2007, 305).

There is an obvious worry concerning filial piety, which has to do with the putative harshness and stringency of acting in accordance with its strictures. When Confucius is asked about filial piety, his response is "never disobey" or "do not act contrary" (*Analects* 2.5). That the obedience must be absolute seems to be overly demanding given that most parents are not perfect exemplars and so may issue commands or requests that are not necessarily the best course for the child to follow. Moreover, filial piety extends even after one's parental figure has died. As Confucius taught: "after his father has passed away, observe his conduct. If for three years he does not alter the ways of his father, he may be called a filial son" (*Analects* 1.11). The demand to remain dutiful to one's parents for three years after they have died appears excessive and strange given that it is not obvious that one can be "filial" when there is no parental figure.

Now one might interpret the nature of filial piety as not requiring absolute obedience. For example, some may point out that the passage in *Analects* 4.18 allows for some disagreement from the child to her parents given the possibility that one may “gently remonstrate” her parents.⁸ However, this interpretation is difficult to maintain, for in the same passage Confucius asserts that if one’s parents do not respond accordingly to the child’s criticism, the child must nevertheless “be respectful and not oppose them, and follow their lead diligently without resentment” (*Analects* 4.18). So even if there is some room for disagreement, in the end the child must adhere to her parents. Thus, the non-absolute interpretation of filial piety does not fit with the Confucian strictures.

Why, then, is there demand for such strict obedience? I propose that it has very little to do with the *content* of the commands or requests by one’s parents. This is why Upright Gong is not upright for reporting his father’s act of theft to the authorities (*Analects* 13:18). Even on the supposition that he has arrived at a moral truth or the right action, his dispositional attitude and behavior has not been correctly set. What matters, then, when considering filial piety (especially as a “root” of other virtues) is less about correct content (e.g., arriving at a moral truth or performing the right action) and much more about the formation of the correct *dispositions*.⁹

Such an interpretation seems to fit with the rest of *Analects* 4:18:

Meng Yizi asked me about filial conduct (*xiao*), and I replied: ‘Do not act contrary.’ Fan Chi asked, “What did you mean by that?” The Master replied: “While they are living serve them according to the observances of ritual propriety (*li*); when they are dead, bury them and sacrifice to them according to the observances of ritual propriety (*li*).”

The role of ritual, at least in part, is to ensure the acquisition of filial piety. Moreover, mere continence (in the Aristotelian sense) will not do; harmonious ease (*he*) is the aim in the practice of ritual:

When it comes to the practice of ritual it is harmonious ease [*he*] that is to be valued...If you merely stick rigidly to rituals in all matters, great and small, there will remain that which you can-

not accomplish. Yet if you know enough to value harmonious ease but try to attain it without being regulated by the rites, this will not work either (*Analects* 1.12).

The relevant dispositions are difficult to acquire without regulation by ritual. Moreover, such a discipline must involve self-imposed order, for “coercive regulations” [*zheng*] can be easily evaded, whereas order that is self-imposed “by means of ritual” results in individuals who can “rectify themselves” (*Analects* 2.3).¹⁰ Since such rectitude and the inculcation of the correct dispositions is not easily acquired, vigilant self-examination that asks “What should I do? What should I do” (*Analects* 15.16) is necessary. And this process is on-going, since the relevant mastery and discipline requires a lengthy amount of time:

At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society; at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven’s Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety (*Analects* 2.4).

Once the appropriate dispositions are possessed, one can freely follow one’s “heart desires” in a way that will not be disastrous for those who would do so without the correct dispositions.

Ritual, like filial piety, is also a multifaceted concept. Some of it has to do with moral actions, but many of its prescriptions involve etiquette, conventional formalities, or informal gestures. These minor mannerisms appear irrelevant to the formation of a virtuous character. However, the Confucian approach to well-being requires attentiveness to the details and minutiae of the good life.¹¹ One reason is that what is sought, as mentioned before, is not necessarily the content (such as the acquisition of moral knowledge or the performance of right conduct) but the right kind of rudimentary moral formation—which comports with the idea of filial piety as the root of the other virtues. What is sought in ritual, then, is not mere adherence but rather developing the ability to engage in spontaneous responses that are appropriate for the circumstances. Hence, the focus on “informal actions or gestures,” as Sigurosson notes, is to bring about “spontaneous responses to unique circumstances”, where such “spontaneity in this sense does not imply randomness” (Sigurosson 2012, 228).

Sigurroson also highlights the pedagogical role of ritual, averring that “in a pedagogical context the more formal aspects are to be applied at one’s early stages of learning, while more spontaneous, personalized and informal patterns will emerge from them at advanced stages” (ibid., 238). By understanding filial piety in light of ritual, we see that the stringency of filial piety is due to the ritual practices required to cultivate the right kind of spontaneous response when the need arises. But such spontaneous responses require discipline and practice. A jazz musician must not only know the relevant music theory but must also practice her scales and arpeggios. The latter can seem dull and uncreative from the perspective of the novice or the outsider, but the teacher knows the importance of the habit that must be adopted (both in muscle memory and in one’s “ear,” so to speak). Following that, one often learns the melodic lines of musical exemplars, where the execution of such lines over the chord progressions comes across as artificial or forced (to the attentive expert). But with sufficient practice, the musician is able to play and improvise “on the spot,” reacting not only to the sheet music but to her musical partners in the band. And no two performances, not even of the same song and with the same musicians, are exactly the same. The creative responses that arise spontaneously is finally achieved. Confucian ritual, then, is descriptive (and prescriptive) of the way in which mastery is achieved in non-moral domains.

The same structure is applicable in moral domains. Moral situations are extremely nuanced and complex. Merely knowing certain universal moral truths or being in possession of *prima facie* moral intuitions is as unhelpful practically as universal platitudes in sports or music. It is not helpful to tell a basketball player to “score another basket” or to tell a musician “try not to make a mistake.” Similarly, moral platitudes (even if true) such as “the good is to be pursued” or “always act in such a way so as to bring about the outcome with the highest total aggregate of pleasure” are often unhelpful given our epistemic or characterological limitations. A professional basketball player cannot think or calculate on the spot when a defender is approaching. Her teammates will be in a flux (not always in the exact positions as they were during practice) and she must react in a way fitting to the circumstances. An athlete who has inculcated the right kind of mastery can engage in spontaneous actions that reliably yield successful results. Similarly, we cannot sit in our armchairs and merely reflect on

what we would or should do in various morally complex situations. What is required for moral development is strict adherence and obedience to formal and informal practices that yield the relevant character or dispositional traits. Scales and arpeggios appear irrelevant to the recital performance, and warm-up drills appear irrelevant in the game. But the appropriate spontaneous responses can only occur because of the mastery over these rudimentary skills. Similarly, mastery over rudimentary moral practices yields the appropriate spontaneous responses to morally complex situations.

Given an understanding of the role that ritual plays in moral (and non-moral) formation, the putative stringency of filial piety is thereby mitigated without recourse to rejecting the absoluteness of filial piety. As noted earlier, some do not think of filial piety as demanding absolute obedience and adherence to one’s parents. For example, Nuyen instead proposes that filial piety be construed as respect for tradition (Nuyen 2004b).¹² Filial piety, then, is a “root” for other virtues in the sense that individuals are embedded in an already existing tradition and must learn the ways of such a tradition. Within this interpretation, parents or parental figures are seen as “representing a tradition” (Nuyen 2004a, 437). According to Nuyen, this goes some way in explaining the kind of respect and obedience required, since one’s tradition is to be revered and honored. Hence, when one honors one’s parents, one honors the tradition of which one is a member.

There is, however, a serious worry for Nuyen’s proposal: it is not at all evident that tradition (*qua* tradition) should be respected. Mere age does not seem to be adequate. Then what is special about tradition? Nuyen even interprets “never disobey” (in 2.5) as meaning that one should never “place oneself outside of the tradition of one’s forefathers” (Nuyen 2004a, 438). But if Nuyen is willing to place some limitations on obedience to parents, then why wouldn’t there be similar limitations on obedience to tradition? Tradition, like parents, can be either good or bad (or likely a bit of both), thus limited obedience to parents but unlimited obedience to tradition is difficult to justify.

By connecting ritual to filial piety, the absoluteness of filial piety begins to make sense in the overarching goal of moral development. Children are required to absolutely obey their parents because the primary

beneficiary of such obedience is not the parents (or the tradition) but the children (including adult children who may or may not have parents that are contemporaneously alive). An advantage of this proposal is that a straightforward interpretation of *Analects* 2.5 is admissible such that one can “never disobey” one’s parents, and that the child’s reverence and respect is directed at one’s parents or parental figures as opposed to tradition. By diminishing the importance of the content of the commands or obligations and highlighting what is acquired in stringent obedience—such as discipline and mastery that yields appropriate spontaneous responses to various circumstances—filial piety is properly understood as focusing on the acquisition of certain dispositions or character traits that serve as preconditions for the acquisition of other virtues. Virtuous living is no easy matter, and some regard it as too idealistic or impractical. But for an individual who has the discipline and the appropriate stock emotions is able to progress with harmonious ease in her moral journey of inculcating other moral virtues. Thus, the stringency of filial piety in light of ritual is akin to the stringency that a music instructor or an athletic coach demands of her students or players. Adherence and obedience to commands or requests by these authoritative figures benefit (or should benefit, at any rate) the novice.

The proposal here also explains why children must retain a reverential attitude and obedience to the ways of their parents even after their parents have died. Again, such postmortem obedience is odd if we take the parents to be the primary beneficiaries. But if filial piety is not to be understood in terms of what we owe our parents but understood in terms of how it cultivates certain dispositions and traits in the child, postmortem obedience ensures continued practice in a certain way of living that (even if one is an adult) takes a long time to develop, as evident in *Analects* 2.4.

The stringency of filial piety in light of ritual might seem to come into tension with the fact that the Confucian approach is scornful of “inflexibility” (14.32). The initial obedience may seem to be inflexible, but it is the kind of practice that permits (eventual) flexibility in light of the subtle and complex nuances in moral situations. But the right kind of spontaneous responses to these circumstances requires tempering one’s emotions. The worry again for the flourishing approach has been a lack of explaining how this is to be accomplished. Filial piety through ritual provides

an actual prescription of what is to be practiced: obey one’s elders. Since filial piety is merely a “root” and not the flower, adherence and imitation of the exemplary patterns of one’s parents should eventually be transferred to the exemplary patterns of those further along in the moral journey, such as sages. However good or virtuous one’s parents may or may not be (and many will be far less than ideal), the study of Confucianism allows us to discover better exemplars (including Confucius as the primary exemplar of the *Analects*).

Knowing where and how to start is always difficult in the moral journey (there are many teachers and many positions). The Confucian position seems to be quite natural: start with your family. Most (though certainly not all) individuals have “ready-made” exemplars. Some parents are admirable, but many are not; hence, accounts that merely rely on admiration are incomplete since there may be some who have no one (at the outset) to admire. But almost everyone has parents or parental surrogates, and such individuals can serve as initial exemplars (and better exemplars may eventually be adopted). Moreover, this does not preclude strict obedience (in the way that Nuyen suggests) since the content of the commands matters less—for the reverence and respect, though it may benefit parents, should primarily benefit the child by imprinting certain attitudinal and characterological traits and patterns that can be transferred as the child begins to form non-familial relations. Such strict adherence to the formalities and informalities in a variety of social (and private) environments yields the kind of discipline and mastery necessary for the formation of other virtues. The absolute demands, then, do not arise out of irrational obsequiousness from a hyper-authoritarian society but out of the need to inculcate the right kind of dispositions and character traits that enable one to adopt additional virtues in the later stages of the moral journey.

Although much of what has been said here requires more development, the inclusion of filial piety in light of ritual can open up promising lines of inquiry. Moreover, the Confucian approach presented here provides a plausible competitor to some of the other forms of life with their own conception of well-being. Further examination into these Confucian ideas and their associated practices would therefore be beneficial in continued discussion regarding well-being.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Owen Flanagan for helpful comments. I am especially indebted to Meilin Chinn for her insightful comments and discussion on an earlier draft of this paper.

References

- Ames, Roger T. 2011. *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Blustein, Jeffrey. 1982. *Parents and Children: The Ethics of the Family*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cokelet, Bradford. 2016. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Virtue Ethics. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8: 187-214.
- Connolly, Tim. 2012. Friendship and Filial Piety: Relational Ethics in Aristotle and Early Confucianism. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39: 71-88.
- Curzer, Howard J. 2012. Contemporary Rituals and the Confucian Tradition: A Critical Discussion. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39: 290-309.
- Dixon, Nicholas. 1995. The Friendship Model of Filial Obligations. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 12: 77-87.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1975. *Truth and Method*. Translated and edited by G. Barden and J. Cummings. New York: The Seabury Press.
- Hall, David L. and Ames, Roger T. 1987. *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2007. Filial Piety as a Virtue. In Rebecca L. Walker & P.J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, 297-312. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keller, Simon. 2006. Four Theories of Filial Duty. *Philosophical Quarterly* 56: 254-274.
- Kim, Richard. 2016. Well-Being and Confucianism. In Guy Fletcher (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, 40-55. New York: Routledge.
- Makra, Mary L. 1961. *The Hsiao Ching*. New York: St. John's University Press.
- Nuyen, A.T. 2004a. The Contemporary Relevance of the Confucian Idea of Filial Piety. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31: 433-450.
- Nuyen, A.T. 2004b. Filial Piety as Respect for Tradition. In Sor-Hoon Tan and Alan Chan (eds.), *Filial Piety: Concepts and Traditions*, 203-214. New York: Routledge.
- Olberding, Amy. 2012. *Moral Exemplars in the Analects*. New York: Routledge.
- Rosemont, Henry and Ames, Roger T. 2008. *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Sarkissian, Hagop. 2010. Recent Approaches to Confucian Filial Morality. *Philosophy Compass* 5: 725-734.
- Sigurosson, Geir. 2012. Li, Ritual and Pedagogy: A Cross-Cultural Exploration. *Sophia* 51: 227-242.
- Slingerland, Edward. 2003. *Analects: With Selections from the Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.
- van Norden, Bryan. 2007. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Norden, Bryan. 2008. *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.
- Zagzebski, Linda. 2004. *Divine Motivation Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zagzebski, Linda. 2017. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Endnotes

[1] For further discussion of a contemporary account of exemplarism, see (Zagzebski 2004 and 2017).

[2] Although filial piety has been discussed in a variety of settings, my focus will be on the *Analects* given the limitation of space. Filial piety in other Chinese writings can be found, *inter alia*, in the works of Confucius' disciple Mencius (van Norden 2008), the *Xiao-jing* (Rosemont and Ames 2008), and the *Hsiao Ching* (Makra 1961). Filial piety can also be found in the western tradition, e.g. Thomas Aquinas grounds filial duties in human nature and divine commandments (Blustein 1982, 56-62).

[3] All translations of the *Analects* are from (Slingerland 2003).

[4] Consider the following remarks by Sarkissian: This seems to be the rationale within Confucianism: cultivate moral emotions in the family, where they naturally arise, and then extend them to others in an ever-broadening circle of moral concern. If one can

learn to be devoted, reverential, and respectful within the family, then one already has a head start on the moral life (2010, 729).

[5] cf. (Dixon 1995). For a sympathetic though critical examination of the relationship between filial piety and friendship, see (Connolly 2012). For discussion of other theories regarding filial piety, see (Keller 2006).

[6] Ivahhoe makes this point, which explains “why Confucians have tended to see teachers as second parents—referring to good teachers as *shifu* (‘teacher-father’) or *shimu* (‘teacher-mother’)” (2007, 309).

[7] As we will see, ritual (*li*) ties naturally with filial piety given that the “process of learning does not begin in formal institutions but in the family” (Siguroson 2012, 234).

[8] For one such interpretation, see (Nuyen 2004a, 435).

[9] It is worth stating that the proposal here does not require reverence and obedience to abusive parents. As mentioned earlier, filial piety will be directed towards those who genuinely take on the parental role. Since the aim is the formation of correct dispositions, those individuals who fail to love or care for their children (by hampering their moral development) can and perhaps should be replaced by parental surrogates.

[10] Although the correct dispositions are what is sought in the practice of rituals, there is a legitimate worry that such rituals can become stale and retrogressive in the sense of harming the individual and her community. With such a worry in mind, Curzer defends the employment of ritual with the addendum that new rituals can be generated to supplement and, in some cases, supplant older, stagnant rituals (2012, 304-305).

[11] As Ames notes:

li requires the utmost and relenting attention in every detail of what one does at every moment that one is doing it, from the drama of the high court to the posture one assumes in going to sleep, from the reception of honored guests to the proper way to comport oneself when alone, from how one behaves in formal dining situations to appropriate extemporaneous gestures

(2011, 174).

[12] The notion of ‘tradition’ here is the one found in (Gadamer 1975).