

THE COMMON GOOD IN A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE:

INSIGHTS FROM THE CONFUCIAN MORAL COMMUNITY

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by

James T. Bretzke, S.J., S.T.D.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CONFUCIAN NOTION OF THE COMMON GOOD

David Hollenbach has pointed out the "common good is increasingly a transnational reality,"¹ and just as consideration of the practical requirements of the common good can no longer be limited parochially to individual nation-states, in the same way we need to move beyond our traditional philosophical and theological categories in order to open up new avenues through which we can conduct these discussions in an authentic cross-cultural manner. Clearly the time has come to expand both our discussion and methodology in approaching this topic. As one small contribution to this discussion I offer a reflection on the common good from the perspective of a quite different philosophical heritage, namely Confucianism.

As a cross-cultural or universal concept the common good points to those moral values, norms, behavior, conditions, laws, institutions, etc. which are both essential for basic cooperation for life together in a given society, as well as providing a means for the articulation and achievement of

¹David Hollenbach, S.J. "Common Good," in The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought, ed. Judith Dwyer, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994): 196.

shared objectives, policies, goals, etc. which in turn will foster and bring to greater perfection the life of both the individuals who belong to the community as well as the community itself taken as a whole. In the Western tradition the common good stresses the basic level of well-being of which each individual must be assured, as well as indicating ways in which every individual can make his or her personal contribution to the common realization of the ideals embodied in the common good. While the individual's needs and potential contributions to the common life interact and are conditioned by the respective needs and abilities of others in the same community, the basic moral unit of this equation remains the individual *qua* individual. While a Confucian understanding of the common good also accepts the basic criteria listed above, the philosophical tradition sees the component parts, especially the understanding of the individual and his or her relationship to the larger community, in a somewhat different way. This different philosophical vision has a number of important ramifications, not only in the arena of moral discourse on the common good and related concepts, such as human rights, but also in the very patterns of social organization, economics, and daily life. Thus, a further examination of the Confucian notion of the common good hopefully will increase our understanding of societies such as China, Korea, and Singapore, as well as broaden our own philosophical and theological horizons, and also further the reciprocal process of ethical cross-fertilization in which the insights from one culture might aid in another culture's perception, enrichment, and refinement of a mutual category such as the common good.

At the outset I would note that the precise term, "common good," is not in the standard Confucian philosophical vocabulary, nor has Confucianism expended much effort in abstract

discussion of moral concepts such as the nature of the good and evil, right and wrong, duty, etc.² Thus, we cannot aim at a simple explication of a common philosophical expression, such as "virtue," and present it to an audience coming from a different tradition. Nevertheless, I assert that a strong notion of the common good does undergird all of Confucian ethics, and it is my thesis that the Confucian understanding of the common good itself is intimately related to the understanding of the Mandate of Heaven (*T'ien-ming*) and grounded in the basic list of Confucian cardinal virtues (*jen*, *yi*, *li*, and *chih*),³ which in turn are embodied in the well-known "Five Relationships."

The Five Relationships provide a sort of abbreviated taxonomy of the moral community. These Five Relationships are grouped in pairs which cover the range of society: 1) Ruler and Ministers; 2) Father and Son; 3) Husband and Wife; 4) Elder and Younger (often portrayed as between elder and younger brother); and 5) Friend and Friend. One principal moral virtue is emphasized with each one of these individual relationships and thus, between the ruler and the government's ministers there is to be righteousness (*yi*); between father and son, intimacy; between husband and wife, distinction (reciprocity) of duties and roles; between elder and younger, respect based on propriety (*li*); and between two friends, fidelity. Among the Five Relationships, three, called

²As one sinologist has observed, "Western philosophers have been much more concerned with trying to define what the good is. Chinese thinkers have focused instead on the problem of how to become good." Philip J. Ivanhoe, Confucian Moral Self Cultivation, The Rockwell Lecture Series, 3, (New York: Peter Lang, 1993): 1.

³I am using the older Wade-Giles transcription system, which will be more familiar to non-sinologists, rather than the newer Pinyin system more common among contemporary sinologists. *Jen*, *yi*, *li*, and *chih* are further discussed below, but for the moment they may be translated respectively as "benevolence," "righteousness," "propriety," and "(moral) knowledge."

the Three Bonds, are further highlighted as being the most important for society: the relationships between King and Minister, Father and Son, and Husband and Wife.

Seen from the perspective of Confucian social ethics the matrix of the Five Relationships seeks to build from a collection of individuals gathered in one geographical location (a *Gesellschaft*), a true "fiduciary"⁴ moral community (a *Gemeinschaft*) in which the common good would be the community's organizing concept of its moral identity and self-understanding. In this vein the Confucian notion of the common good accents the corporate well-being of the community conceived of primarily as whole, out of which individuals recognize their own set of particular identities and relationships. The accent, however, falls on the community as the basic moral "unit" as both the ultimate criterion of the community's moral calculus and common teleological goal. Therefore, there is considerably less stress on the individual *qua* individual, as might be the case in an ethics of autonomy which is grounded in a conception of the individual person abstracted out of the particular identities, roles, and relationships she or he would have in the concrete community. While Confucianism has no philosophical anthropology which could consider the moral interests of the individual as antecedent to, or independent of that particular individual's social embodiment in the moral community, the individual is not simply absorbed into the community. In the following sections I will elaborate on how the individual, the community, and the Confucian notion of the common good are held together and integrated by the concepts of the *chün-tzu*, or paradigmatic moral person; the four cardinal virtues of *jen*, *yi*, *li*, and *chih*; the framework for the common good found in an

⁴This expression is used by the well-known contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming as a principal organizing concept in his analysis of the Doctrine of the Mean. See especially the third chapter of his Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness, rev. ed., (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

understanding of community as fiduciary; and the moral force of the *T'ien-ming* or Mandate of Heaven.

THE *CHÜN-TZU* OR PARADIGMATIC MORAL PERSON

"Morality" in the Confucian sense involves much more than is usually included in the Western concept. In Confucian ethics "morality" is perhaps best understood metaphorically in terms of the aesthetics of living well ethically in the myriad complexities and relationships of any concrete life. As an embodiment of one proficient in this aesthetics of morality the *chün-tzu* is one of the most fundamental concepts in Confucian moral philosophy and this person functions as both moral paradigm and a strong suasive force and authority for the concrete realization of the common good in Confucian society. Perhaps the most common translation is "Superior Man," though literally the ideograms signify "ruler's son," and exact translation of this term is difficult.⁵ One contemporary Confucian scholar, A.S. Cua, suggests the expression "paradigmatic individual" captures better Confucius' own understanding of the *chün-tzu*.⁶ In Confucianism a clearer understanding of the *chün-*

⁵Other translations which have been frequently employed are the Prince, the Noble Man, the Gentleman, and the Great Person. I have rejected using these because of their potentially misleading aristocratic connotations. In fact, one of the major contributions of Confucius himself was to re-interpret the notion of *chün-tzu* so that anyone might become a Superior Person. Thus, in Confucianism the requisites for being called a *chün-tzu* are found only in personal conduct and not in parentage. In fact, those of aristocratic birth who behaved in a mean or small-spirited manner forfeited their claim to be called a *chün-tzu* in Confucius' opinion.

⁶Cf. A.S. Cua, Dimensions of Moral Creativity: Paradigms, Principles, and Ideals, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

tzu as "paradigmatic" person emerges when contrasted with the *hsiao-jen*, or "small-minded person."⁷ The *chün-tzu*'s first task is his or her own moral self-cultivation through a life of intense study, reflection, and practice.⁸ The *chün-tzu*'s whole moral project of self-cultivation was never conceived of as being for either personal advantage or self-fulfillment, but first and foremost as a means for advancing the common good of the whole community: one's family first, but then moving outward to the rest of the local community, then on to the state, and finally to the whole universe. *The Great Learning (Ta-Hsueh)*, which is the first important work studied in the traditional Confucian curriculum, states in its opening section: "What the Great Learning [*Ta-Hsueh*] teaches [literally 'the

⁷While the ideograms for *hsiao-jen* literally signify a "small person" in the sense of stature, and *hsiao-jen* is usually translated as "mean man," though this rendition is open to being misunderstood as signifying merely an unkind person. Thus, "small-spirited" or "small-minded" would better capture the correct Confucian nuance. The nature of the foil between the *chün-tzu* and the *hsiao-jen* is expressed well in the following selection from the *Analects*: "The Master said, 'The mind of the superior man [*chün-tzu*] is conversant with righteousness [*yi*]; the mind of the mean man [*hsiao-jen*] is conversant with gain.'" [*Analects* 4:16].

⁸Historically Confucian scholars usually were men, and therefore the *chün-tzu* was portrayed in masculine terms. However, Confucian virtue as an ethical category was never restricted to the male members of the human species alone, and therefore it makes better sense to speak of the *chün-tzu* in terms of inclusive language.

tao of the Great Learning'] is,--to illustrate illustrious virtue [*te*]⁹; to renovate the people [*min*]; and to rest in the highest excellence [*chih*--`knowledge']." [*The Great Learning*, 1]¹⁰

Based on the famous Confucian metaphor of the root and branches, eight practical steps next move outward in socially expanding concentric circles to state first the external goal of governing the kingdom, and then move inward to the core of the individual her/himself, and finally back outward to realize the original goal of establishing a moral community grounded in the common good:

⁹Helmut Wilhelm notes that the term *Te* is linked closely with *Tao*, and that original meaning of *Te* was probably meant "a straightforward character, manliness (Latin *virtus*) and then a way of acting based thereon, the straightforward following of the Way, the application of meaning in life." Helmut Wilhelm, Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes, Seven Eranos Lectures, Publications on Asia of the Institute for Comparative and Foreign Area Studies, no. 28, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977): 82.

¹⁰For all passages cited from Four Books of the Confucian canon I give simply the name of the work, followed by the standard numbers which indicate where the passage may be found in the text. I use James Legge's classic translation, Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of The Mean, Chinese Text; Translation with Exegetical Notes and Dictionary of all Characters, (New York: Dover Publications, 1971 [republication of the second revised edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893 as Volume I in "The Chinese Classics" Series]). Even though one or another of the books of the classical Confucian canon has been more recently translated into better English (from a technical sinological point of view) Legge's is still the only translation of all the books of the canon done by a single individual, and thus it is easier for the non-expert to track some of the pertinent vocabulary. Legge's translation also provides the reader with the original Chinese text so it is easier to work with in terms of textual analysis.

Things have their root and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught *in the Great Learning*.¹¹
[*The Great Learning*, 3]

The ancients¹² who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. [*The Great Learning*, 4]

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy. [*The Great Learning*, 5]¹³

The passages cited above show a great deal about the Confucian understanding of the *tao*, which we can describe as the fundamental path which leads to the concrete embodiment of the

¹¹Because of the terseness of the original Chinese text Legge had to supply a number of interpolations for both clarity and style in his English translation. He indicates these by placing them in italics. Strictly speaking, there are no Chinese ideograms in the text for these italicized words.

¹²The "ancients" refer to the mythical sages who ruled China well before Confucius' own time: i.e., men who were felt to embody best the moral vision and political vision requisite for a society well-ordered to the common good. Lee H. Yearley maintains that the concept of these ancient sages' rule is one of the foundational cosmogonic myth which structures the Confucian worldview. See his "A Confucian Crisis: Mencius' Two Cosmogonies and Their Ethics," in *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics*, ed. Robin W. Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 310-327.

¹³Li Fu Chen uses these eight steps of *The Great Learning* as the organizing schema for his whole treatment of Confucian philosophy. See his *The Confucian Way: A New and Systematic Study of the "Four Books"*, trans., Shih, Shun Liu, (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 1972).

common good. Yet, we must acknowledge that this Confucian notion of the common good is frankly not very "democratic" in the modern sense of arriving at a consensus of opinion about public policy, but rather depends upon both a hierarchy and an aristocracy based on merit, which in turn is charged with the care (renovation) of the people (the *min*). A recent symposium on Confucianism admits that the

societies of East Asia are all characterized by explicit social hierarchies, subordination of the individual to the family, and subordination of females to males--repressive qualities that emerge from an otherwise humanistic Confucian tradition."¹⁴

However, one of the participants in this symposium, Benjamin Schwartz, examines this issue from a cross-cultural perspective, and concludes that

"we are all children of the Enlightenment" in the sense that as Westerners we express discomfort with the notion of hierarchy and authority and tend to think that those characteristics should be overcome by reason. He [Schwartz] said there is a certain arrogance in denying the role of hierarchy and authority in Asia, considering that those features have not been eliminated from Western societies. He suggested that status and hierarchy may have value that civilizations influenced by Confucianism have more easily accepted.¹⁵

The key to a better understanding of this twin Confucian notion of hierarchy and meritocracy is the role of the *chün-tzu* as moral model in and for the community.¹⁶ One of the problems in

¹⁴Tu Wei-ming, Milan Hejtmanek, and Alan Wachman, eds., The Confucian World Observed: A Contemporary Discussion of Confucian Humanism in East Asia, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992): 7.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Technically there is a distinction between a *chün-tzu* (Superior Person) and the *sheng-jen*, or Sagely Ruler. Confucius usually reserved this latter term to designate an ancient philosopher or ruler who merited great respect in terms of his moral reputation, while the *chün-tzu* expressed the moral ideal for

traditional studies on Confucianism is the tendency to discuss the nature of this paradigmatic person in an individualistic sense, while neglecting to ground this person in a particular moral community. This tendency must be corrected if we hope to understand the concept itself correctly, as well as to grasp more fully the Confucian vision of the common good as the expression of the corporate life of the whole moral community. The authoritative force of the *chün-tzu*'s is rooted in the moral vision which branches out into an ethical virtuosity displayed in particularities of his or her own life situation.

THE CONFUCIAN CARDINAL VIRTUES: *JEN*, *YI*, *LI*, AND *CHIH*

For the individual, this moral self-cultivation takes place especially in reflection on, and embodiment of the Confucian cardinal virtues of *jen* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety), and *chih* (knowledge). "Learning" and "knowledge" in the Confucian canon refer primarily, and almost exclusively, to moral learning, and thus we can speak of *chih* as the virtue of commitment to the transformation detailed by other particular Confucian virtues.¹⁷ However, in reference to the Confucian common good it is important to keep in mind that even though the individual "learns" for

the living. However, in terms of general Confucian ethics what is predicated of one can be applied to the other. For a good overview of the concept of the *sheng-jen* see Rodney Taylor's "The Sage as Saint: The Confucian Tradition," in Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions, eds. Richard Kieckhefer and George Bond, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988): 218-242.

¹⁷Consider these two illustrative passages from the *Analects*: "The Master [Confucius] said. 'The superior man [*chün-tzu*], extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety [*li*], may thus likewise not overstep what is right.'" [*Analects* 6:25] and further on, "The Master said, 'By extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety [*li*], one may thus likewise not err from what is right'." [*Analects* 12:15].

his or her moral well-being, this process is in the final analysis neither introspective nor individualistic. Rather, all the Confucian virtues are always directed outward to the family, community and state.

This outward trajectory is seen most clearly with *jen*. Though an exact translation of *jen* is impossible, the following terms have been traditionally used to explain this ideogram: "Humanity," "human-ness," "humanitarianism," "goodness," "virtue," "benevolence," and "love."¹⁸ Since the ideogram itself is a composite of the radical for the "human person" and the number "two," *jen* also suggests human interaction or community.¹⁹ *Jen* expresses itself as a universal love for humankind, yet it is not an undifferentiated abstract love which is equal towards all. In this sense *jen* operates most strongly within the family. Nevertheless, *jen* is not restricted to the family group, but grounds the relationships of duty and service, and care for the entire moral community. Tu Wei-ming suggests that the best way to consider *jen* is to view it as the overall ethical norm which gives moral meaning to the other ethical norms, especially *yi* (righteousness) and *li* (propriety).²⁰ This triadic relationship

¹⁸For a good discussion of the etymology of *jen*, as well as the Confucian redaction of this term see Lin Yü-sheng's article, "The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of *Jen* and the Confucian Concept of Moral Autonomy," Monumenta Serica 31 (1974-75): 172-204. Other helpful articles on the background meaning of *jen* would include: Wing-tsit Chan, "The Evolution of the Confucian Concept *Jen*," Philosophy East and West 4 (January, 1955): 162-175; 295-315; and Tu Wei-ming, "The Creative Tension between *Jen* and *Li*," Philosophy East and West 18 (1968): 29-39.

¹⁹Nearly all Chinese characters are comprised of component parts which also often have independent meanings. Analysis of these components often, though not infallibly, sheds light on the etymology and meaning of the character itself.

²⁰Tu wei-ming says that *jen* is "the virtue of the highest order in the value system of Confucianism. In other words, *jen* gives 'meaning' to all the other ethical norms that perform integrative functions in a Confucian society." Tu Wei-ming, Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought, (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979): 6. This excellent book is a collection of fifteen previously published essays, and the selection cited here

among *jen*, *yi*, and *li* is summed up well in Confucius' response in *The Doctrine of the Mean* to Duke Ai's question about the nature of true government:

'Benevolence [*Jen*] is *the characteristic element* of humanity, and the great exercise of it is in loving relatives. Righteousness [*yi*] is *the accordance of actions with what is right*, and the great exercise of it is in honouring the worthy. The decreasing measures of the love due to relatives, and the steps in the honour due to the worthy, are produced by *the principle of propriety* [*li*]. [*Doctrine of the Mean* 20: 5]

Li is one of the most difficult concepts not only to translate, but to explain in any adequate way so that those who come from a Western philosophical tradition might be able to grasp its moral significance in Confucian ethics.²¹ Herbert Fingarette terms *li* the expression of the "uniquely human way of getting things done."²² In the Confucian context the "uniquely human way of getting things done" always presumes that these things are accomplished in a community. Echoing this theme, Roger Ames that *li* functions reciprocally for the individual and his or her community. Engagement in the moral performance concretized in *li* enculturates and socializes the individual in a given community, but also is a means by which the individual contributes "to the pattern of relationships

can also be found in Tu, Wei-ming's article, "The Creative Tension between *Jen* and *Li*," cited above.

²¹The bibliography on this concept is extensive, however, for a good overview see A.S. Cua's "The Concept of *Li* in Confucian Moral Theory," in Understanding the Chinese Mind: The Philosophical Roots, ed., Robert E. Allinson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989: 209-236. A recent article which is helpful in critiquing some of the major cross-cultural analyses of *li* is Stephen A. Wilson's "Conformity, Individuality, and the Nature of Virtue: A Classical Confucian Contribution to Contemporary Ethical Reflection," Journal of Religious Ethics 23 (1995): 263-289.

²²Herbert Fingarette, "Human Community as Holy Rite: An Interpretation of the Confucian *Analects*," Harvard Theological Review 59 (1966): 62. This article is also found as Chapter One of Fingarette's Confucius--The Secular as Sacred, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972).

which ritual entails, and thereby to have determinative effect on society."²³ Tu Wei-ming argues that *li* functions as the "externalization of *jen* in a specific social context. No matter how abstract it appears, *jen* almost by definition requires concrete manifestation."²⁴ *Li* complements and completes *jen* by actualizing it so that each individual will be incorporated morally into the community, and the community into the larger world. The external dimension of *li* is expressed in the myriad rites and rituals which make up daily living. The strong moral connotation attached to these rites shows once again that the very concept of the term "morality" has a broader meaning in Confucian ethics than in the West. In Confucianism morality embraces *explicitly* the mores, customs, rituals, etc. embodied in the cultural ethos.

These insights on the nature of *li* are important in order to grasp better the Confucian notion of the common good because it is the common good itself which is the central organizing concept of the whole of Confucian ethics, whereas in Western liberal society often the notion of the common good seems to be *de facto* something of a "remainder" concept, i.e., what is left over after proper attention has been given to safeguard the more important individual human rights and prerogatives. The symposium on Confucianism cited above makes a similar point on this aspect of the relationship

²³Roger T. Ames, "Rites as Rights: The Confucian Alternative," in Human Rights and the World's Religions, ed. Leroy S. Rouner, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988): 200. For a further development of this interpretation of Confucian thought, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, Thinking Through Confucius, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).

²⁴Tu, Wei-ming, Humanity and Self Cultivation, p. 10. Tu goes on to add that "A Confucian personality does not speculate on the metaphysical connotations of *jen* for their own sake," thus underscoring once again the reluctance of Confucianism to conduct philosophical speculations in purely abstract terms, but preferring to ground any such discussion in concrete life examples.

between the individual and the larger community in noting that while Confucianism certainly has stressed both the basic human dignity and autonomy of the individual, "this by conscious choice has never been developed into a doctrine of individualism."²⁵

Confucianism is clearly a system of virtue ethics,²⁶ and the cardinal virtues of *jen* and *li* must move through a perception of moral knowledge (*chih*), and become embodied in a living out of *yi* (righteousness), as well as all the other virtues, in the intersecting spheres of the individual, family, community, and world. This outward movement of the common good is what is signified by the metaphor of the root and the branches expressed in the passage of *The Great Learning* cited above.

THE COMMON GOOD IN THE FIDUCIARY COMMUNITY

If a society knit together by the Five Relationships follows the lead of the ancients in keeping to the moral path of the Confucian *tao*, then that society will be truly happy, prosperous and just, its individual citizens morally upright, and the common good assured. Tu Wei-ming uses the term "fiduciary community" to describe the ideal expressed by the Five Relationships and which also indicates a foil to an understanding of society as an "adversarial system" in which the dignity and rights of the individual must be protected, lest the community impinge upon these rights. Clearly the notion of the common good will cash out very differently if the basic understanding of society is

²⁵Tu Wei-ming, et al., The Confucian World Observed, p. 17).

²⁶Since Confucianism is a virtue ethics theory it is sometimes discounted by ethicists who argue against the lived possibility of a system of virtue ethics. For a good article which counters this point of view see James A. Donahue, "The Use of Virtue and Character in Applied Ethics," Horizons 17 (1990): 228-243. For a discussion of how Confucian virtue ethics might mediate the ethics of duty and ethics of virtue debate see James T. Bretzke, "The *Tao* of Confucian Virtue Ethics." International Philosophical Quarterly 35 (1995): 25-41.

"fiduciary" or "adversarial." In this perspective of the fiduciary community the fundamental import of the Confucian Five Relationships is that there can be no split between self and society, no "oxymoronic private citizen" to borrow Robert Bellah's phrase, since the very identity of each individual human person is conceived essentially in terms of his or her moral matrix of relationships.²⁷ Thus, there is no "I" that is not at one and the same time the I" that is my father's son, my sibling's older brother, a member of the nation [*min*], and so on. Through these various relationships each individual comes to know who s/he is, i.e, morally aware of one's particular social identity. At the same time, since the society structured by the Five Relationships is conceived of as a concrete particularity and not an abstract generalization, each person should also come to realize more deeply that *everyone* belongs to the concrete moral community embodied by these Five Relationships.²⁸

²⁷Bellah et. al, go on to assert that the vision of the common good which grounded the American Constitution's political understanding of the moral community (the "We the People" of the Constitution's Preamble) has deteriorated to such a degree that "our concern for the economy [is] the only thing that holds us together, [and that] we have reached a kind of end of the line. The citizen has been swallowed up in 'economic man'." Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985): 271.

²⁸Thus, in theory at least, there should be no "non-citizens" who would stand in danger of a civil legislation which would seek to circumscribe benefits normally associated with the basic social services connected with the embodiment of the common good, such as California's well-known Proposition 187, passed in the 1994 elections as a referendum, designed to prevent illegal immigrants from access to a wide range of publicly funded services such as education and health care.

On the political level, the common good is both protected and embodied in the relationship of mutual trust embodied in the First Relationship of righteousness or justice (*yi*),²⁹ between the sovereign and the ministers. *Yi* connotes a wide range of meanings in addition to "justice," and includes the idea of principle and obligation, as well as right conduct, righteousness, morality, duty to one's neighbour, public spirit, being patriotic, loyal, and faithful.³⁰ Thus, for the purposes of cross-cultural ethics it is important the term *not* be equated with the Western understanding of abstract justice-as-fairness.³¹ While it is well-known that governments in Confucian cultures traditionally are very hierarchically structured, with a strong ruler or oligarchy at the top, nevertheless, Confucius himself emphasized time and again that the welfare of the people, the *min*, and their support of any government, was the paramount concern of the state and its governing authorities. Numerous texts abound to illustrate this point, but perhaps the *locus classicus* is the following exchange between Tsze-kung and Confucius:

²⁹In various literary contexts, besides "justice," *yi* is translated as principle and obligation. According to one dictionary the ideogram (sometimes rendered as *i*) can be also translated as right conduct, righteousness, morality, duty to one's neighbour, public spirit, patriotic, loyal, and faithful. R. H. Mathews, Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary, rev. American ed., (Shanghai: China Inland Mission and Presbyterian Mission Press, 1931; Cambridge [MA]: n.p., 1944): 448.

³⁰As found in R. H. Mathews, Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary, rev. American ed., (Shanghai: China Inland Mission and Presbyterian Mission Press, 1931; Cambridge [MA]: n.p., 1944): 448.

³¹For an excellent discussion of this point see R.P. Peerenboom's article, "Confucian Justice: Achieving a Human Society," International Philosophical Quarterly 30 (1990): 17-32. Peerenboom discusses the Confucian notion of a just society in contrast to John Rawls' well-known concept of "justice as fairness" and suggests that the Confucian concept might be both a challenge and a corrective to that of Rawls.

1. Tsze-kung asked about government. The Master said, '*The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler.*'

2. Tsze-kung said, 'If it cannot be helped, and one of these must be dispensed with, which of the three should be foregone first?' 'The military equipment,' said the Master.

3. Tsze-kung *again* asked, 'If it cannot be helped, and one of the remaining two must be dispensed with, which of them should be foregone?' The Master answered, 'Part with the food. From of old, death has been the lot of all men; but if the people have no faith *in their rulers*, there is no standing *for the State.*' [12:7]

One might argue that food should be of greater importance to the welfare of the people than the respect which would insure the people's confidence in the ruler. However, Confucius shows both a shrewd awareness of the reality of the practical order, while maintaining a unwavering commitment to his basic moral principles, which here indicate a respect for basic human rights. To oppress the people in the name of providing for their physical welfare would simply be despotic tyranny.

Yet, it must be admitted that strong Confucian societies, such as China and Korea, have had a number of despotic rulers, and frequent critiques are made that Confucianism itself must have some sort of inherent weakness that tends to produce, or at least allow, for despotism. While it is true that Confucius stressed respect for superiors and that Confucian society traditionally has a very strong hierarchical arrangement, this does not *necessarily* mean that Confucianism leads *facilely* to unbridled despotic rule, any more than one could legitimately accuse Western political thought of fostering the rise of a Hitler or Mussolini. In fact, authentic Confucian thought, if properly studied and applied, contains the resources to counteract and correct this sort of political despotism and two aspects in particular could work to check this sort of abuse of political power. First would be the frequent and strong emphasis found in the Confucian canon on the need for the ruler to cultivate his or her own

virtue.³² Yet, even when the ruler is found lacking in moral virtue, there is another important corrective force in Confucian ethics, namely the role to be played by the government ministers and the whole class of civil servants.

The civil servant class exercised this corrective force in two principal ways. First and foremost would be through their own cultivation of all the virtues in both the exercise of their public office, as well as in their private lives, so that they would provide what Benjamin Schwartz terms a "government by example."³³ The "government by example" works in two directions. The people, the *min*, are led by this example (cf. *Analects* 8:9 and 12:17), though at times even the ruler must be "led" in the spirit of correction implied by the virtue of loyalty (*ch'ung*),³⁴ the doctrine of the rectification of names (*ch'eng ming*),³⁵ and the practice of "remonstrating with the ruler."³⁶ Though Confucius was not naive in thinking that rulers necessarily would always be part of the moral elite, it is clear that this was his hope, in the sense of the ideal goal. A government led by a capable and upright ruler, assisted by educated and worthy ministers, was thought most likely to produce the best possible state.³⁷ This sort of government would be less troubled by strife produced by competition

³²For some typical references see the following passages in the *Analects*: 2:1; 12:18; 13:1,6; 14:44; and 20:2.

³³Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985): 102.

³⁴Cf. *Analects* 3:19. Commentators have rendered this term also as "faithfulness," "doing one's best," and "single-minded devotion to one's cause."

³⁵For the *locus classicus* of the Confucian use of this term see the *Analects* 13:3.

³⁶Cf. *Analects* 19:10.

³⁷This was the philosophy behind the centuries' old practice in China and Korea of using the Confucian canon as the examination material of the elaborate system of civil service tests, successful

due to individual concerns and the lobbying of special interest groups, since the governing principle would be the harmony of virtue in which the common good could truly flourish. As de Bary notes, "government is the product of a co-operative effort which strives for the good of all. Since this should be the only aim of men in government, he does not seek a balance of contending or competing interests or a reconciliation of opposing political forces."³⁸

In such a state the people themselves would naturally follow the course exemplified in the conduct of the leaders. Though such a society would be clearly hierarchical it would at the same time be a community bonded together by the force of *jen, li, chih*, and *yi*. In the Confucian understanding neither the government nor the common good is best served by a system of mutual checks and balances designed to insure democratic protection of the individuals' rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Rather, Confucianism would envision a ethico-political system of mutual trust and aid designed to foster a true community dedicated to a common moral purpose of justice and righteousness for all--in other words, a fair approximation of the moral meaning of the common good. Certainly the argument might be made that this shared understanding of the common good has aided contemporary Confucian societies, such as China, Korea, and Singapore, in their efforts to implement a whole range of economic and social policies which aim at the development of the given society, but which policies do come at the expense of a certain amount of sacrifice of individual interests, and which would most likely be unpopular in many Western societies.

completion of which were necessary for initial appointment and advancement in virtually every level of government service.

³⁸Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal: A Seventeenth Century View," in Chinese Thought and Institutions, ed. John King Fairbank, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957): 197.

THE T'IEN-MING OR MANDATE OF HEAVEN

While thus far the exposition of the Confucian notion of the common good has made no real mention of any religious aspect of the discussion, it would be a mistake to consider that the Confucian understanding of the moral life or the common good as being essentially "secular" in the usual sense this word is used in contemporary ethics.³⁹ The Confucian understanding of the common good is *not* a version of secular humanism, in the usual contemporary usages of the expression. Rather, the whole consideration of what we have been calling the "Confucian common good" is grounded in the *t'ien-ming*, or Mandate of Heaven. This intimate connection between working for the common good in accord with the "will of heaven" is clearly seen in the *locus classicus* for the doctrine of the *t'ien-ming*, as recorded in the Book of History (*Shu Ching*):

God⁴⁰ sent down correction on Hea [or Hsia, the dynasty overthrown and replaced by the Shang dynasty], but the sovereign only increased his luxury and sloth, and would not speak kindly to the people. He proved himself on the contrary dissolute and dark and would not yield for a single day to the guiding of God--this is what you have heard. ...Heaven on this sought a true lord for the people, and made its

³⁹While Confucianism is not properly speaking a religion or a theology, it would be inaccurate to consider Confucian ethics as being devoid of religious content in the sense of being either divorced from, or conceptually independent of, some notion of a divine transcendent. This is another area in which a cross-cultural consideration of Confucianism is particularly susceptible to serious mistakes and misapprehensions if the basic terms of the discussion remain cast in traditional Western philosophical or theological terms, because these terms often set up a framework which makes it difficult for Confucian thought to express itself clearly in its own philosophical language.

⁴⁰Here character used is *ti*, as in *Shang-ti* (Supreme ruler or "Lord of Heaven"), which is often used interchangeably with *t'ien* (heaven).

distinguishing and favouring decree light on T'ang the Successful [Shang dynasty], who punished and destroyed the sovereign of Hea.⁴¹

This quotation illustrates the basic principle that in the eyes of Heaven the primary requisite for receiving Heaven's Mandate is that the ruler work for the common good by respecting and treating the people well. Lee Yearley notes that the concept of "sagely rule" functioned together with the notion of the Heavenly mandate as two important and inter-related moral "myths" which aim at elucidating the moral universe in Confucian political culture:

The "sagely rule" myth describes how certain sages saved society by ordering it. The "Heavenly mandate" myth concerns Heaven's actions in the world, especially Heaven's effect on the rules of society. The relationship between the two is clear: Heaven is responsible for those who correctly order societies. Indeed, one might even say the two myths differ only because one focuses on those who do the ordering and the other on why their ordering is to be seen as correct. The one describes while the other validates.⁴²

Yearley's explanation of how the notion of the heavenly mandate works together with the notion of the ruler's individual moral cultivation can be easily related to our Confucian understanding of the common good. In much the same vein, H. G. Creel asserts that the *t'ien-ming* established the political principle that "rulers existed for the sake of the people, rather than the reverse, and they held their powers only in trust, as a kind of stewardship, subject to revocation if they did not use them well."⁴³

⁴¹The Shoo King or the Book of Historical Documents (two parts), Vol. 3 of the Chinese Classics, rev. ed., trans. James Legge (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960): 495-497.

⁴²Yearley, "A Confucian Crisis: Mencius' Two Cosmogonies and Their Ethics," p. 313.

⁴³Herrlee Glessner Creel, Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-tung, (New York: New American Library, 1953): 23.

The *t'ien-ming* functions not only on the socio-political level, but also provides the cosmic dimension to each individual's own moral understanding. These two aspects of the individual and the social are not to be separated, but rather come together reciprocally in the "political" aspect or aim for the *chün-tzu's* individual moral cultivation which is the larger social project of the moral transformation of the human community. In reference to the concrete working for common good in a particular time and place, the Mandate of Heaven serves both as an interpretative key for reading the "signs of the times" and the ultimate standard for judgment according to Confucian ethics. Thus, all rulers, the ruler's ministers, parents and their children, husbands and wives, elders and the younger, friends, and in fact all people, find themselves under Heaven and subject to its decrees. To remonstrate with another, even a superior, who is not following the Way is only to obey the higher moral power of Heaven. Such activity is intrinsically moral in that it is just another aspect of the public character of individual moral self-cultivation, which aims at a deeper concretization of the common good of the whole moral community.

CONCLUSION

Obviously much more could be said in detailing the understanding of the common good in the Confucian canon, but let us draw a few conclusions from a cross-cultural perspective on the theme. An understanding of the common good, when viewed from the perspective of cross-cultural ethics clearly needs a theoretical articulation that goes beyond one cultural formulation of an abstract theory of justice. Besides such speculative theories I would argue that a fuller grasp of the nature and possibilities of the common good requires a *vision* which can call, convince, and commit both individuals and communities to a concrete program of life and action grounded in and articulated

through this broader understanding of the common good. It is the vision of the common good which ultimately will embolden us and sustain us in the risk-taking and sacrifice-making necessary to overcome our more short-sighted individualistic and egotistical goals and motivations. Moreover, the "common" element in this understanding of the common good is *not* a Lowest-Common-Denominator moral calculus, but rather a common moral understanding in the sense of being an understanding arrived at communally, out of a number of different particular approaches. Such a communal vision in turn will only be possible if we expand and enrich in a practical way our grasp of what membership in the moral community means.

The Confucian understanding of the common good has much to offer this sort of a discussion. Though traditionally Confucianism does not use the expression "common good," concern for what is embodied in the concept of the common good is the central concept which frames the Confucian basic understanding of how the moral universe in a moral manner. The abiding genius of Confucianism is that it has provided a meaningful and still viable language for both individuals and collectivities in concrete moral communities. Central to this language of the moral community is the "grammar" or structure provided by moral matrix embodied in the Five Relationships and grounded in the vision of the *tao*. The Five Relationships, along with the Confucian cardinal virtues of *jen*, *yi*, *li* and *chih*, are not moral ideals of supererogation, but function in what might better termed a "deontological teleology," i.e., the *tao* as moral duty and *telos* of each human person to walk the particular path which best incarnates his or her moral identity in the concrete social reality of the variety of roles each must assume in the real world.

This Confucian moral identity is found neither in an individualistic moral autonomy, nor in a contractarian list of inalienable rights which each individual demands of the others in the social group.

Instead, Confucianism provides a careful contextualization of rights with responsibilities, and it would really be more accurate to speak not of "rights" vs. "responsibilities" so much as a "reciprocity" of mutual concern expressed in the varied webs of individual relationships. It is this reciprocity which is the hermeneutical key to the Five Relationships and the Confucian virtues. In this same vein, the Confucian understanding of justice/righteousness (*yi*), especially as grounded in the Five Relationships and the notion of individual moral self-cultivation, is a justice always in service to the moral community. The community is not the ultimate end in itself, but in turn must live among other communities, all of whom must live in accord with the universal moral order as expressed in the *t'ien-ming*. This Confucian notion of justice could *augment* (not replace!) the Western communitarian understanding of the common good as it relates to commutative and distributive justice. Confucianism itself could in turn be enriched and refined by Western understandings of the individual, especially in relation to the interplay among rights and duties lived out in a pluralistic context.

Obviously, this reciprocal cross-fertilization and inter-religious dialogue of our moral vocabularies requires ongoing work. We still need to open up other new avenues which may aid in our comprehension of the common good, especially in light of the multi-faceted challenges posed by pluralism and multiculturalism. If we commit ourselves to such an enterprise we will discover that ethical pluralism is not so much a danger, but rather a positive value which helps us to see better and further in our morally complex landscape.

GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS

<i>Ch'eng ming</i>	Rectification of names
<i>Chih</i>	Knowledge (especially moral)
<i>Chün-tzu</i>	Superior Person, prince
<i>Ch'ung</i>	Loyalty, faithfulness
<i>Hsiao-jen</i>	Small-spirited person
<i>Jen</i>	Benevolence, charity, human-ness
<i>Li</i>	Rites, propriety, mores
<i>Min</i>	The people (i.e. of a state or nation)
<i>Shang-ti</i>	Lord of Heaven, Supreme ruler (i.e., god)
<i>Sheng-jen</i>	Sagely Ruler (usually a mythical figure from China's past)
<i>Ta-Hsueh</i>	<i>The Great Learning</i> , one of the Four Books
<i>Tao</i>	Path, the way (usually understood morally)
<i>Te</i>	Virtue (one of several generic terms)
<i>T'ien</i>	Heaven

T'ien-ming

Mandate of Heaven

Yi

Righteousness, justice