

# Confucianism as Humanism

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Confucianism is a humanism in the sense that it is centered on the improvement of humans and the collective community, but it leans towards religious beliefs in its ideals of *yin* and *yang*, *tian*, and ritualism. The major ideas defining Confucianism as a humanistic philosophy are the ideal of the sage and the four virtues: *ren* (humanity), *li* (ritual propriety), *yi* (appropriate conduct), and *zhi* (practical knowledge). Other concepts are self-reflection and change through introspection, as well as *renxing* (human disposition/nature). The early Confucian classics include the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes), *Liji* (Classic of Rituals), *Shuji* (Classic of Documents), *Shiji* (Classic of Songs), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. This paper focuses mainly on the concepts within the next four canonized books within Confucianism: the *Daxue*, *Zhong Yong*, *Analects*, and *Mengzi*. Confucianism is not an anthropocentric philosophy, but as the philosopher Weiming (1999) put it, Confucianism is anthropocosmic (p. 7). This idea of anthropocosmic arises out of the Confucian emphasis within cosmology of the ideal harmony between *tian* (heaven/ nature) and *ren* (persons), the *ren-tian* continuum, and the triad (*tian*, *ren*, Earth). It is anthropocosmic as well, in that its value theory explains itself from cosmological, historical, moral, and spiritual viewpoints. Confucianism is not an anti-religious philosophy, but a religious humanism.

This paper contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the fields of philosophy of religion and Asian philosophy. It does this by defining Confucianism as a religious humanism and identifying the key texts that support this argument. This paper also clarifies that Confucianism is not anti-religious. It also identifies and expounds upon the four main Confucian virtues and how they are interconnected between themselves and persons. This paper explicates the roles humans play within Confucian philosophy and the stances on moral natural dispositions between Confucian philosophers. This paper also identifies Confucianism as an anthropocosmic philosophy, siding with the philosopher Tu Weiming.

To decide in what sense Confucianism is a humanism one must first define humanism then compare humanism's characteristics to those of Confucianism. The main characteristics of humanism, at least in the secular sense, are as follows: a divergence from views in the supernatural to explain phenomena or morality in favor of reason and rationality. Another characteristic is that people can self-actualize without the need for an objective morality imbued in them. Finally there is an emphasis on the development of the individual, and the ability of individuals to change and transform themselves, the community around them, and possibly the world.

Following this definition of humanism, Confucianism differs in several ways, but it is still a form of humanism. One difference is within Chinese culture itself, and that is the concept of collectivism, meaning that the good of society and the community is put before the individual. This can also be seen in Confucianism with the concept that individuals can only be defined by the sum of their

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relationships to the natural world, its inhabitants, and the universe. The main difference is the internal tension of whether to accept or reject the existence of the supernatural; Kongzi (Confucius) himself didn't reject the supernatural, rather he chose to focus and emphasize the development of the natural world and humans' role in that natural world. There was conflict prevalent in the early years of Confucianism as to whether the governing force of nature, *tian*, has a heart and mind, as well as a will and intentions of its own. Reaching a compromise between the two, Confucianism could be labeled as a cosmological humanism, since it has such focus on the relationships between humans and the universe as a whole. Now that this paper has determined in what sense Confucianism is a humanistic philosophy, next it will analyze the major ideas of Confucianism, how it is defined as a humanistic philosophy, and the key texts in which these ideas are found.

Delving into the four virtues, *ren* (humaneness) comes up as one of highest importance and commonality between the four. The philosopher and founder Kongzi believed *ren* to be the sum of all virtues within a person and the pillar virtue of the *junzi* (exemplary person or gentleman). The virtue of *Ren* can only exist within a social construct. *Ren* can be translated as person, goodness, or humane. The link between persons and being humane is clearly expressed within the *Mengzi*: "To be humane (*ren*) is what it means to be human (*ren*)" (Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 2005, *Mengzi* 7B: 16). Then the link between *ren*, self-less action, and self-cultivation is seen in the *Analects* of Kongzi, "One who is good sees as his first priority the hardship of self-cultivation, and only after thinks of results and rewards" (Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 2005, *Analects* 6.22). *Ren* is a process of developing virtue gradually, acquiring it through introspection and self-correction by observing and being in harmony

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with *Tian*. This humaneness develops relationships around the person. According to Confucianism a person as well as the self is made up and defined by his, her, or its relationships in society. So through these concepts of self-cultivation and correction within a societal construct, the concept of *ren* can be viewed as becoming a person or personhood.

Important relationships within Confucianism begin first with the family and are developed outwards, transforming the world after the family, and transforming the self while transforming others. The five main relationships are father-son, older brother-younger brother, husband-wife, older friend-younger friend, and lord-servant. Within relationships the virtues of reciprocity and sympathetic understanding arise, and they further push the person's cultivation of *ren* within the self, which is formed and defined by societal relationships. Reciprocity and sympathetic understanding play an important role in emotional control, most importantly towards others in society, which helps to improve and transform the self. This in turn helps the individual flourish in society and be a larger contribution to it, through the combined virtues of *li* and *yi*.

The structure underlying the moral and social development of *ren* is the virtue *li*. *Li*, besides being translated into ritual propriety, can be viewed as the concepts of rite, role, or ritual. In the humanistic and socio-economic sense, *li* would be humans finding their appropriate place in relation to the cosmological triad and societal class. The first role a person fills in life is as a child, which is why filial piety is so important in Confucian society. Filial piety (*xian*) is how a person treats their parents and elders, which is shown even after death in the three-year mourning period. Appropriate roles govern behavior, emotion, morality, symbolic rituals, and everyday

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activities. Concerning *li* and others in society, the idea of *yi* arises and requires analyzing within the confines of humanism. *Yi* is best described as appropriate conduct in all affairs, most importantly appropriate conduct towards others. Appropriate conduct is best applied to the idea of an ever changing world and how to best react to the constant flux of forces in the natural world.

The fourth virtue is *Zhi*, which is best translated as practical wisdom. Practical wisdom allows a person to make correct judgments regarding actions, which leads to appropriate conduct and adherence to ritual and roles within relationships and social structures. This practical wisdom also stems from the Confucians' love of learning, and having an active role in the learning process. When a person learns, it is at first only ideas, but as these ideas are reflected and reasoned out through thought and practical application, they become knowledge. An accumulation of this knowledge with practical application becomes a specialized form of wisdom, practical wisdom (*zhi*). Again, the concept of self reflection and development arise within the context of Confucianism. The virtues of *zhi*, *li*, *yi*, and *ren* are possessed and cultivated by the sage in Confucian ideology.

The ideal of the sage (*sheng*) appears in several of the Confucian classics. This is a phase of being that anyone can achieve if they work hard enough at cultivating the self and virtues. This person is in complete harmony with *tian*, as he observes it and he forms his actions according to his observations. Virtuous action is second nature to the sage. He can perform any action and be assured that it is in harmony with *tian* and is the appropriate action for the current situation. The appropriate ruler according to Kongzi himself is a sage-ruler (which brings to mind the platonic philosopher-king).

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Kongzi believed this sage-ruler will rule all-under-heaven by the power of his moral virtue and have no need to implement a system of incarceration or punishment. It is said about the sage, that as a ruler he will draw persons towards him like “stars around the pole star” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 2005, *Analects*: 2:1) with his moral virtue (*de*). According to Confucians, the sage has fully realized his *renxing* or human nature and dispositions.

*Renxing* is best translated into human nature, which takes the form of human dispositions and how by nature we react to the universe around us. The main Confucian scholars were split on whether the innate human nature was good or not good. *Renxing* according to Mengzi is good, or at least humans have the potential of goodness that has yet to be actualized. These “germs” of goodness require a person to be active and choose to be good or the person will become petty and base. Xunzi believed *renxing* to be not good, or that people are not predisposed to do good. This doesn’t necessarily mean people are innately evil in nature; it means that we are animals and primal by nature. Xunzi held the view that for a person to be good, law and structure must instill this goodness. Both views require the development of the self within relationship and in the context of society and community. If the nature of humans is improved, then the community and world as a whole is improved, and this improvement begins within a person’s heart and mind.

Confucianism is anthropocentric in the sense that it is focused on the human aspect of life. It also focuses on humans fulfilling their role in the universe as a whole, as each of the triad has its own path or *dao*. *Tian* governs the appropriate role of humans within Confucianism, and to find out how to be in harmony with *Tian*, a person must look to a cosmology. People are defined by their

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relationships and this includes their relationship with *Tian* and the natural world. So Confucianism is human centered, but it is human centered within the context of a cosmology. Therefore it is as Weiming (1999) stated, that Confucianism is an “anthropocosmic” philosophy (p. 7). Related to its value theory, Confucianism’s virtues are dependent and relative to the relationships as well.

Confucianism doesn’t have a deity or creator, and they have a preference for reason and doubting superstition (Zehou, 2010). The scholars within Confucianism saw the relevance of the sacrificial and ritual practices as well as the descendants and influences of ancestral worship. Ritual reminds humans of their appropriate roles in society and instills a sense of good and structure. The ancestors, which can include *Tian* in a sense, are a model of sorts that can serve as moralistic guidelines within the human psyche. Confucian scholars and followers believe in a cosmology and that the universe is an ordered system as well as having a chaotic and constant fluxing state. These beliefs are used to develop the person morally and improve the community and world as whole, which is in accord with other humanistic philosophies. Confucianism is also religious in the sense that its followers believe that the universe has purpose and is deterministic even though it contains indeterminate qualities. The indeterminate qualities are centered on human beings and their ability to choose and to act according to the freewill that they have. Having freewill, humans must be responsible for their actions and the impact they have on the natural world and the relationships they form with other human beings in that natural world.

In conclusion, Confucianism is a humanism, but in the sense that it is centered on the abilities of human beings to develop and improve morally, and to improve the community and world around

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them. It also is contained within a cosmology of relationships between humans and constantly changing universal forces. Confucianism also addresses how humans can best change in harmony with the forces as to enable harmonious ease in life and achieve happiness. Key texts relating to humanism and their correlated values are *Mengzi*, *Analects*, *Yijing*, and *Liji* (the *Da xue* and *Zhong Yong* specifically). The correlated values are the ideal of the sage and the four virtues (*Ren*, *Li*, *Yi*, and *Zhi*). Other concepts related to humanism are humans changing their behaviors, actions, emotions, and morals through self-reflection introspection, and adjusting as best as they can to the innate nature of their natural dispositions (*RenXing*). Although sometimes attributed to be an anti-religion, because of its negative stance on superstition and lack of a central deity, Confucian philosophy is actually a unique form of religious humanism.

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