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## ON THE SIMILARITIES AND CONNECTIONS BETWEEN HEGEL AND CONFUCIUS

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### **Abstract**

An analysis of the peculiarities of the moral teachings of Confucius, which retains its influence in much of Chinese society today, reveals the central importance that it bestows on the notion of reciprocity; and the Confucian formulation of one particular rule, 'what you don't desire for yourself, do not desire for others', differs significantly from the so-called golden rule for moral guidance, expressed in the Christian gospels: 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (Matthew 7:9-12 and Luke 6:27-31). Both of these central tenets in the philosophy of Confucius, in particular the notion of reciprocity, resurface centuries later in the philosophy of Hegel, revealing some interesting similarities and connections between what otherwise may appear to be two very disparate philosophies.

**Keywords:** Confucius' moral philosophy, the golden rule of morality, reciprocity, Hegel's moral philosophy and philosophy of history.

### **Introduction: The concept of reciprocity in Hegel and Confucius**

To study philosophy one must study its history; instead of a self-assurance with regard to the advancement that has been achieved in order to arrive at our present stage of enlightenment, it is profitable to attend to previous epochs, each of which is characterized by a distinctive kind of wisdom and understanding. From these bygone times, positive ideas that may have been lost can then be salvaged to remedy deficiencies in the present age. Indeed, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, (1770 - 1831), saw his own philosophical system as preserving and incorporating what is true and essential, though perhaps undeveloped, in previous systems; and one very important

idea in his system, for the understanding of our relations to each other and to the world in which we live, is that of reciprocity; an idea that was also central to the philosophy of Confucius, (551 BC - 479 BC); but it was not until many centuries later that Hegel reintroduced the concept and characterized it in such a way as to mirror the Confucian idea of an entire universe seen as an enclosed expanse of reciprocal action and reaction.

**The golden rule**

'With the empire of China', Hegel wrote, 'history has to begin, for it is the oldest, as far as history gives us any information; and its principle has such substantiality, that for the empire in question it is at once the oldest and the newest' (Hegel, 2004, p. 129). These old, substantial and traditional principles of the Chinese were subjected to an insightful commentary by Confucius, a moral philosopher living 500 years before Christ, and whose moral authority has been greatly revered in China. The conversations between Confucius and his followers are collected in the *Analects*, a widely read book in China, the thoughts therein attracting much attention and consideration, expressing as they do a practical wisdom, in the fashion of a robust and solid doctrine. A similar practical wisdom was to be found expressed elsewhere and amongst other people in the ancient world (Hegel, 2004), but if we remember that 'any fool can make a rule', as Thoreau said, 'and every fool will mind it' (Thoreau, 1859 - 1869, p. 10), what is especially noteworthy in the context of Chinese society, both then and now, is the Confucian formulation of one particular rule:

15.24. Zigong asked: 'Is there a single teaching that can be practiced to the end of one's life?' Confucius replied: 'It is reciprocity! What you don't desire for yourself, do not desire for others' (Confucius, 2003).

This is a significantly different formulation of the so-called golden rule expressed in the Christian gospels: 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (Matthew 7:9-12 and Luke 6:27-31), and which prompted George Bernard Shaw's retort: 'Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same' (Shaw, 2012, p. 3). With Confucius, however, the rule is expressed in a negative form, thereby avoiding the Shavian response. It may be objected that to think of this as a rule grates against the idea of early Confucianism that moral adroitness in itself resists easy regulation or systemization, or even further, that it is not readily susceptible to any satisfactory verbalization. And yet, because of the way it is formulated, we may interpret this rule or principle as an expression of the Confucian dao, a largely intuitive

understanding, acquired through life's experiences, of the proper functioning of the cosmos, and of men and women's place therein. For it is with such a reading that the Confucian term for reciprocity acquires a moral significance. Indeed, explaining reciprocity in terms of the Confucian rule expressed above suggests that reciprocity itself can be defined by the rule. The particular formulation of the rule being comparable to a single explicit principle of reciprocity, it thereby supports Hegel's further contention that 'the Chinese have also taken up their attention with abstract thoughts and with pure categories' (Hegel, 2004, p. 129).

**The principle of reciprocity**

This is because an important grounding and support for social relationships within the Confucian framework is this principle of reciprocity. Hegel writes of reciprocity as being a very advanced category, for which we should find perfect exemplars in the social, and indeed in the spiritual, lives of mankind, from which an understanding of both the national character and the history and social conditions of a nation such as China may be understood. For instance, passivity is an abstraction, but what is passive is also active. Action and reaction is a reciprocal activity. If x, which is active, operates on y, which is passive, y is also active, and operates on x. To illustrate how this works, we can take the spiritual life of a person. He or she may be beset by temptations, suggesting a total passivity in the person as they are thus tempted. But it is only because of their own interior feelings and emotions being incited towards activity by an exterior stimulant that they can be so tempted.

Activity thus occurs on both sides, and causality in itself is an inadequate category, when it comes to the field of history, of social conditions, of human nature. Of two phenomena, which is the cause? Which is the effect? How far are the laws and constitutions of a nation the effect of the national character, or how far is the national character the effect of the laws and constitutions? The truer and more appropriate category to help account for such issues as these is that of reciprocity, and not of causality. This particular understanding of reciprocity underlies the Confucian belief in the welfare of a country being dependent on the moral cultivation of its people, commencing with the leaders of the nation. A good leader would be self-disciplined, and would govern his subjects through education and by his own example, and would seek to correct his subjects with caring interest, and love, rather than punishment and coercion: 'If you try to guide the people by coercive regulations and keep them in line with punishments, the common people will become evasive and will have no sense of shame. If, however, you guide them with virtue, and keep

them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and will rectify themselves' (Confucius, 2003, 2.3).

Such a political outlook may have been at odds with the legalistic political outlook of China's leaders of the day, and Confucius was unsuccessful in promoting his ideals among China's leaders within his own lifetime, but given the central importance that both philosophers attach to reciprocity, it is to be expected that a similar outlook recurs in the political theory of Hegel, who wrote, concerning the efficacy of punishment as a threat: 'To what extent is the threat compatible with right? The threat presupposes that human beings are not free, and seeks to coerce them through the representation of an evil. But right and justice must have their seat in freedom and the will, and not in that lack of freedom at which the threat is directed. To justify punishment in this way is like raising one's stick at a dog; it means treating a human being like a dog instead of respecting his honour and freedom' (Hegel, 1991, pp. 125 - 126). Reciprocity also underlies the Confucian belief that an individual can cultivate an all-embracing sense of virtue through ren, the positive feeling experienced through actions done with humaneness and generosity: 'wishing to be established himself, he seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others' (Confucius, 2003, 6.30).

The principle stage in the cultivation of ren occurs within the family, by a devotion to one's parents, or by a sibling's respect for elder siblings, and so on. Similarly, we find in Hegel that: 'The family, as the immediate substantiality of spirit, has as its determination the spirit's feeling of its own unity, which is love. Thus, the disposition [appropriate to the family] is to have self-consciousness of one's individuality within this unity as essentiality which has being in and for itself, so that one is present in it not as an independent person but as a member' (Hegel, 1991, p. 199).

It is also through such an understanding of reciprocity that the Confucian can hold that it is not necessary for one's individual desires to be suppressed, but that people can be educated to harmonize their desires through ritual practices and a civil demeanour, for this allows them to demonstrate their respect for others, and their responsible functions within a harmonious society. The leader's sense of virtue will be reciprocated in his students, as they deport themselves with dignity and sobriety, are articulate and correct in their speech, and demonstrate a superlative rectitude in all aspects of their lives. The reality of the social discord in the time of Confucius, on the other hand, was largely sown by China's ruling elite soliciting titles that they did not merit.

The principle of good government as understood by Confucius, however, is presented in the *Analects* as follows:

Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, 'Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister, a minister, the son, a son'. 'Excellent', said the duke. 'Truly, if the ruler is not a ruler, the subject is not a subject, the father is not a father, and the son is not a son, though I have grain, will I get to eat it?' (Confucius, 2003, 6.30).

In particular, a leader upon acquiring his obligations and duties of office should immediately set about rectifying names, for the behaviour of the leaders reverberates in the way that they identify and describe themselves. Clear and concise description of phenomena, in this case the phenomena of the leaders and of the led, is the grease that lubricates the wheels of reciprocation. This was noted by Hegel, whose account of theoretical education bears comparison to that of Confucius, in that it 'involves not only a variety of representations and items of knowledge, but also an ability to form such representations and pass from one to the other in a rapid and versatile manner, to grasp complex and general relations, etc. - it is the education of the understanding in general, and therefore also includes language' (Hegel, 1991, p. 232). The leader is the model for the led, and the rectifying of names begins with the leader not the led, for subsequently the led will undergo a reciprocal modification in emulation of the leader (Confucius, 2003, 12.19).

#### **Reciprocity within the state**

We therefore find that the emphasis on reciprocal relations within the state leads not only to a harmonious society, but also to an authentic kind of freedom of the individual within it, as opposed to a mere abstract kind of freedom that Hegel warns us against: 'When people say that they want to be free, this means primarily only that they want to be free in an abstract sense, and every determination and division within the state is regarded as a limitation of that freedom' (Hegel, 1991, p. 192).

For Confucius, however, a leader can cultivate his or her sense of virtue through a devotion to the proper practices of *li*, rituals, including rites of sacrifice in ancestral temples as an expression of humbleness and gratitude, or in a reciprocal exchange of gifts that serve to attach people into complex hierarchical relationships of dutiful obligation. If we were to focus on a reciprocal sense of duty itself rather than its expression through arcane ritualistic observances, then again we find echoes of Confucian reciprocity in Hegel: 'Duty places limits only on the arbitrary will of subjectivity and clashes only with that abstract good to which

subjectivity clings... To this extent, duty is not a limitation of freedom, but only of freedom in the abstract, that is, of unfreedom: it is the attainment of essential being, the acquisition of affirmative freedom' (Hegel, 1991, pp. 192 - 193).

On the contrary, 'an immanent and consistent theory of duties can be nothing other than the development of those relations which are necessitated by the idea of freedom, and are therefore actual in their entirety, within the state' (Hegel, 1991, p. 192). Confucianism as a philosophy has, of course, been under siege, assailed as a feudal conception of society, to be subjected to severe criticism if a socialist society is to be established. Whatever the merits of such a view, it is undeniable that the central importance, and the particular understanding, that Confucianism attaches to the category of reciprocity was a decisive step forward in the history of philosophy, its central importance as a category only re-emerging in philosophy centuries after the time of Confucius, and its effect is manifested in Chinese society today. For instance, in 'the phenomenon known as guanxi, 'relationships' or 'connections', that 'can be used to refer to relationships between people and groups [social relationships, international relations] as well as between processes and ideas' (Stockman, 2000, p. 85). As Stockman explains: 'With the increasing politicization of all aspects of everyday life, people felt the need to construct a kind of buffer zone between themselves and the state, made up of kinship, friendship, and guanxi networks' (Stockman, 2000, p. 87).

In addition, 'the important basis for social relationships within the Confucian framework is... the principle of reciprocity. The idea that one kindness or favour should be repaid by another and that the social order is held together by a continual exchange of services is repeatedly encountered both in written reflections on social life and in everyday situations' (Stockman, 2000, p 72). But the Confucian principle of reciprocity has a much more extensive range of application than Brockman suggests. The principle is an expression of the essential truth of all things, the reciprocal influence of object upon object, object upon subject, subject upon subject, as they reciprocally affect each other, rather than one merely being the effect of the other. Reciprocity is a moral force at the basis of all social harmony; and all social conventions within a harmonious society, for Confucius, or within a society founded on rational principles, for Hegel, are to be embraced rather than resisted, for a truly free individual exists in harmony within a harmonious state. In the Western world, greater import has been ascribed to the notion of individualism; individual rights and freedoms, and personal

independence, are considered to be the chief constituents of any just and fair society. But such an understanding of individualism merely reflects freedom in the abstract, or personal independence in the abstract.

Whereas the Chinese think of themselves in terms of their relationships with others, with the Western stress on individualism the importance other people play in the lives of the successful is devalued, or even disregarded, and reproach is directed towards the failures. The latter are held responsible for their own defeats, their failings are not rather thought to originate in a lack of the appropriate connections. And furthermore, although reciprocity finds its most discernible exemplifications in the more advanced levels of existence, it is nevertheless, as both Confucius and Hegel would concur, applicable to the entire universe. It is of the fundamental nature of the cosmos, that the terms in a reciprocal relation are aspects of another thing, be it society, or the universe. Which is to say, and to express it in the terms of ancient Chinese philosophy, the principle of reciprocity is an expression of the dao.

In conclusion, this paper began with a recognition of an important concept central to the ancient Chinese wisdom associated with the teachings of Confucius, that of reciprocity, an understanding of which determined the particular Confucian formulation of the golden rule of morality; it then identified its re-emergence and development in the philosophy of Hegel, whose thought has been very influential in the direction that western philosophy has taken, but it is in Chinese society today that the concept maintains its influence and significance.

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