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# Confucian Ethics

**Qin Zhu, PhD**

Assistant Professor

Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences

Colorado School of Mines

qzhu@mines.edu

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Ethical Governance and Learning in  
Technology and Engineering

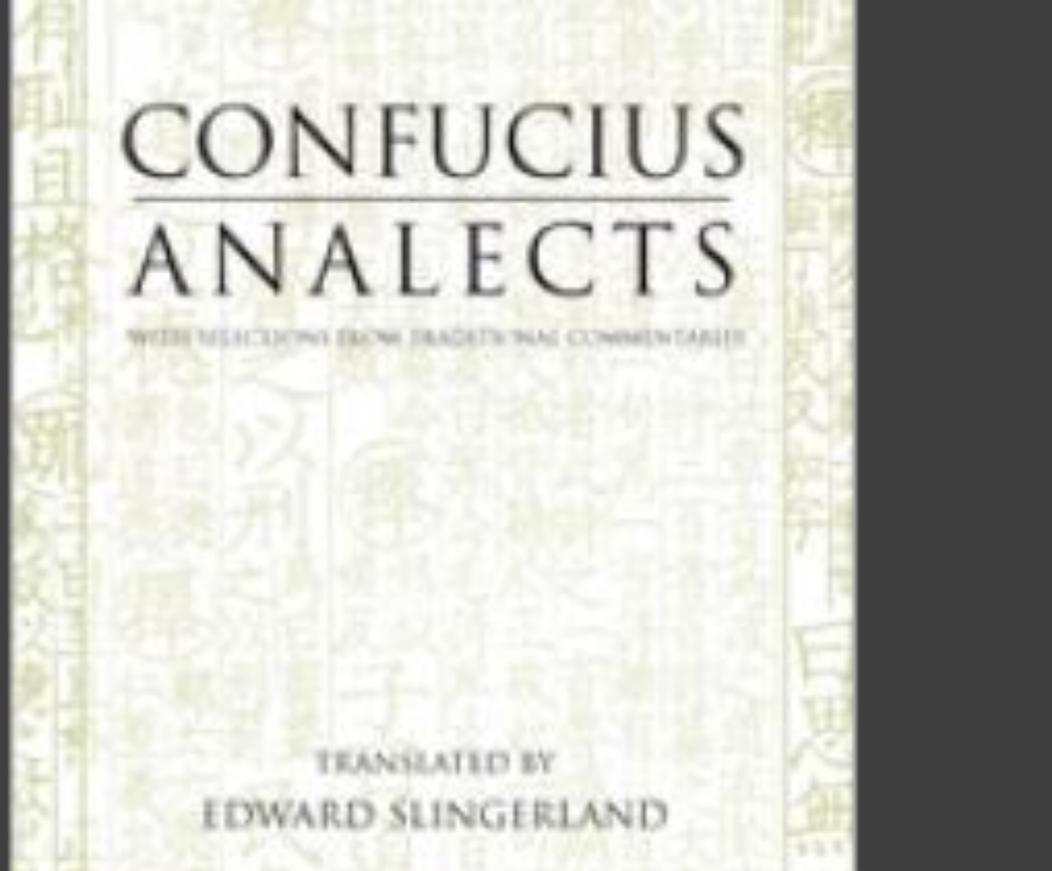


# What have we learned so far?

- Deontology: the alignment of action and universalizable ethics principles (e.g., treating others as ends)
- Consequentialism (or utilitarianism): the greatest happiness of the greatest number, *the interests of all beings considered equally*

*What do deontology and consequentialism have in common, in terms of how to treat people including yourself, those who you love, and strangers?*





# Confucian Ethics

Confucius (551 BC – 479 BC)

# A quick story...

When you find that your father took a sheep on the sly, what would you do? (1) report him to the authority; and (2) cover for his father. And explain why.



VectorS

# What does Confucian ethics say?

- We are all relational, role-bearing persons
  - The tone you use to speak to your dad is different from the one you use to communicate with a stranger
- Our responsibilities are *social* which are prescribed by the roles we assume in different communal contexts
- Conflicting roles?
  - Going to the war? Parents vs. the Country
  - Love (or care) with distinctions

# Role ethics: The foundation of Confucian moral imagination

- The moral actions we take in different situations are influenced by the special roles we play in these situations
- The nature of a particular role relationship often evokes feelings and expectations characteristic of that relationship
- *Relational ontology*: if there is only one person, there are no persons. Becoming benevolent is something we either do together, or not at all.

# Does Confucian ethics lead to egoism?

- Mencius said, “Treat with respect the elders in my family, and then extend that respect to include the elders in other families. Treat with tenderness the young in my own family, and then extend that tenderness to include the young in other families” (Mencius, 1A: 7).
- A young person who is filial and respectful of his elders rarely becomes the kind of person who is inclined to defy his superiors, and there has never been a case of one who is disinclined to defy his superiors stirring up rebellion. (Analects 1:2)

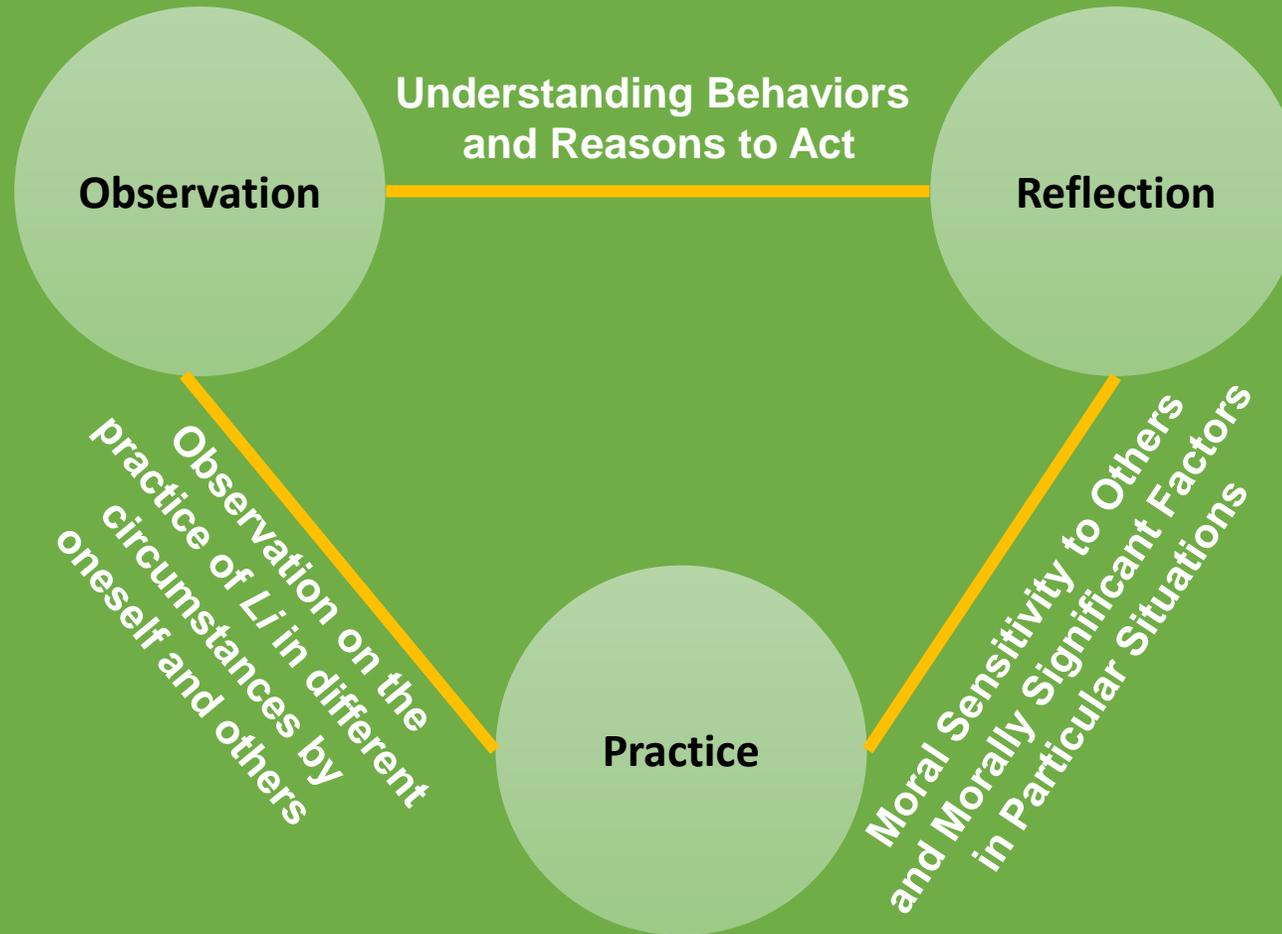


The *ultimate* goal for human development is to become a *junzi* (superior person, 君子) through self-cultivation.

# How to cultivate your moral self?

- The word “self” (ziji, 自己) in Chinese consists of two characters “zi” and “ji” – two aspects of the self (Cheng 2004).
- “Zi (自) ”: engaged self/temporal self/time-engaged self/reflective subject of the self
- “Ji (己) ”: reflective self/transcendent self/subjective self (identical consciousness)/reflective object of the self

## *Wen*: The Historical, Cultural, and Social Context



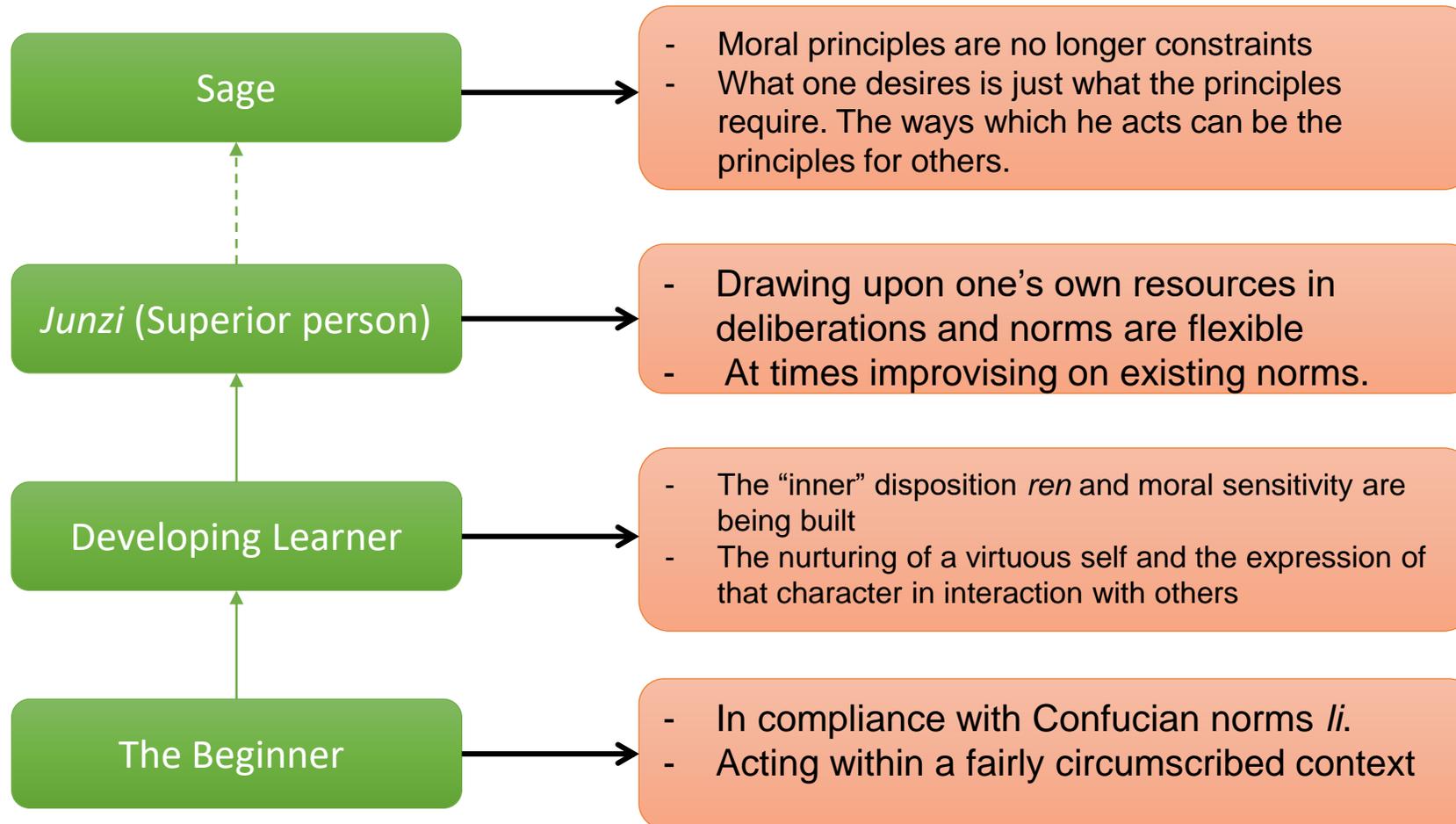
# Reflective observation of ritual practices

- To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes *ren* (benevolence or humanity) (*Analects* 12:1).
- The Master said, “In strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly.” (*Analects*, 7:22)
- The Master said, “Watch their actions, observe their motives, examine where in they dwell content; won’t you know that kind of person they are? Won’t you know what kind of person they are?” (*Analects*, 2:20)

# Practicing “as-if” rituals

In the *Analects*, Confucius is asked about ancestor worship. He says that the ritual is absolutely necessary but it makes no difference whether the spirits (ancestors) are participating or not. “We sacrifice to them,” he said, “as if they are there” (Puett & Gross-Loh, 2016).

# The Confucian Model of Moral Development



# Meritocracy

- The society should be governed and the policies should be made by: those who are virtuous and capable, intellectually and morally superior to the average, advanced in moral development.
- The limitations of liberal democracy
- Is Confucian ethics compatible with equality and justice?
- Do people still hold fundamental human rights?



**Thank you very much!  
Let me know if you have any questions.**

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