THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF CONFUCIUS AND PLATO

論語

Πολιτεία

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Abstract

This thesis attempts a comparison between the political philosophy of Confucius and Plato. The first half introduced the reader to Confucian thought, while the second half is split between discussions of Plato and comparisons between the two. Their views of leadership broadly defined receive the most attention. Special importance is placed on ideal leaders, virtue, nature and education, love, and societal organization. I argue that, due to their differing historical circumstances and epistemological assumptions, Plato provides a rigid, loveless society, while Confucius aims for a flexible, humane one. Finally, brief statement of the lessons and limits of this comparison is provided.
This is an exercise in comparison between Eastern and Western political thought. I first came to the idea to do a study on Confucius and Plato while enrolled in Professor Hammer’s Classical Political Theory course. It was so intriguing that I read Republic from cover to cover and decided to revisit Plato’s work for my senior thesis. I chose a comparison with Confucius because I knew it would make the study of Plato more interesting, purposeful, and challenging. What is more I am a student of Chinese language and culture and am greatly interested in how they differ from those of the West. I supposed (and have now confirmed) that some of these differences can be traced to the foundational, written works of each and that examining those texts would greatly further my understanding of the traditions at hand. While this is a paper about thought, it cannot be forgotten that there were founders.

Confucius, mentor and politician, lived from 551-479 BC. He was from a once aristocratic family that had become impoverished. He worked many humble jobs and held minor political office but spent most of his years traveling from princedom to princedom in search of employment.\(^1\) His life was full of adventure, and he was never alone, offering free instruction to his several followers. It is they who have

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\(^1\) “Lesser Odes” *Shih-yüe-chich-chiao*, Mao no. 193; in Watson, 36.

\(^2\) Hsu, 585.
passed on his knowledge, the imperfect result of which is the *Analects*, a collection of the sayings and dialogues of the Master and his circle. It was compiled in its present form during the second century BC by Han dynasty scholars and has been of extreme importance since. Confucius’ ideas are one of the foundations of Chinese thought and have had an incredible, direct impact on the people and governments of China past and present.

Beginning fifty years after Confucius’ death, halfway around the world Plato (429-437 BC), follower of Socrates, led a very different life. He was from a wealthy family but shied away from politics in order to pursue the life of the mind. This was at least in part due to Socrates’ execution by the Athenian democracy in 399 BC, which left Plato critical of democracy and hyper-aware of the relationship between philosophy and society. Plato founded the Academy, which has been called the first university and produced famous students, such as Aristotle. His principle work, *Republic*, was written in 380 BC and has fascinated Western and other thinkers ever since.

As the way they chose to live their lives may indicate, their philosophies are quite different. I will focus on their political philosophies, namely the notion of leadership broadly defined. Specifically, I will look at the ideal ruler, virtue, and the ordering of society. In Part I I take the reader through a thorough introduction of Confucian thought as it appears in the *Analects*. Ten sections outline the ideal rulers, their virtues and how they are expressed in cultural and government structures. Part II consists of five major topics with regard to Plato that cover corresponding areas of interest. Each is followed by a brief comparison of the two thinkers on the
preceding topic. Finally, Part III addresses some of the overall lessons of my work as a whole, the difficulties I encountered, and some possible reasons as to why the two projects are so different followed by my final thoughts.
I. THE WISDOM OF CONFUCIUS

Overview

In this part I will carefully take the reader through the Confucian vision of society and especially the “exemplary person” or junzi 君子 who exemplifies Confucian excellence. What kinds of things Confucius values will be revealing, especially when they are later compared with Plato. Importantly, both the Confucius and Platonic visions of society include super-humans— the Sage King for Confucius and the Philosopher King for Plato. The Sage King will be our first topic of discussion. His powers to order society through non-action are awesome.

Then we will discuss the junzi 君子 (exemplary person). Becoming a junzi 君子 is a realistic goal one might strive for. We will start with zhi 智 (innate characteristics) or one’s inherited potential, followed by wen 文 (cultural refinement), its opposite and compliment. Innate characteristics are important. How they are embellished with learning is equally so.

Zhi 智 or wisdom will come next as a basic characteristic that allows the junzi 君子 to be informed and ready to lead and take action. Next comes ren 仁 (humanity/authoritative conduct) the ultimate Confucian virtue and the one that most distinguishes the junzi 君子 from the masses. Following ren 仁 will be a thorough discussion of li 禮 (observing ritual propriety), an extensive code of behavior that the junzi 君子 masters and improves upon that is used to order relationships and society. Important to the good governance of society is deference. Deference along with filial piety (xiao 孝), the following section, allows the wills of
the best to rule over those of the weak. Finally, I will discuss the structure of society into which all of these attributes and people fit. After a short conclusion the Plato and comparative sections will follow.
1. SAGE KING (SHENG REN)

When it comes to realizing human potential, “Sage King” is the highest level one can achieve. Few have. It is a title reserved for the founders of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC) in which Confucius lived. Sage Kings are like Theseus for Athens, a powerful founder with incredible ability to order society.

Generosity as manifested through ren 仁 is one of his defining characteristics. This is stated in chapter six part thirty of the Analects:

6.30 Zigong said, “What about the person who is broadly generous with the people and is able to help the multitude—is this what we could call authoritative conduct (ren 仁)?”

The Master replied, “Why stop at authoritative conduct? This is certainly a Sage (sheng 聖). Even a Yao or a Shun would find such a task daunting. Authoritative persons establish others in seeking to get there themselves. Correlating one’s conduct with those near at hand can be said to be the method of becoming an authoritative person.”

Here we see that the first qualification of being a Sage is the ability to help one’s nation or mankind as a whole. A daunting task, indeed. It makes sense, then, that the founders of Confucius’ order would be among them. They are those that unified the lands like King Wen, the most cited Sage in the Analects, for example.

For Confucius, these men only exist in the past. The possibility of their reemergence, however, is not completely out of the question:

7.26 The Master said, "I will never get to meet a Sage (sheng
The Master said, "I will never get to meet a truly efficacious person—I would be content to meet someone who is constant. It is difficult indeed for persons to be constant in a world where nothing is taken to be something, emptiness is taken to be fullness, and poverty is taken to be comfort."

Since Confucius is a lover of antiquity, it is not surprising that we find him here using the absence of Sages as a way to criticize his contemporary world for not having conditions favorable to their existence. Perhaps, this is why, despite the claims of others, Confucius does not consider himself a Sage.

7.34 The Master said, "How would I dare to consider myself a Sage (sheng 聖) or an authoritative person (ren 仁)? What can be said about me is simply that I continue my studies without respite and instruct others without growing weary."

Gongxi Hua remarked, "It is precisely this commitment that we students are unable to learn."

In the previous passage Confucius lamented the lack of constancy in people. Here he renounces any claim that he is a Sage King or even a junzi 君子, but does claim constancy. This is, as we saw in 7.26, an admirable quality that is difficult to attain. So, though Confucius has not reached the highest heights of human potential, he has set himself above the multitude.

We will learn more about the junzi 君子 later. For now, know that he is a rare gentleman, an outstanding cultural leader. Their relationship to the Sage is informative.

16.8 Confucius said, "Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) hold three things in awe: the propensities of tian 天 (heaven), persons in high station, and the words of the Sages (shengren 聖人). Petty persons, knowing nothing of the propensities of tian, do not hold it in awe, they are unduly familiar with persons in high station, and ridicule the words of the Sages."
Here Confucius claims that admiring and respecting the great men of the past is a precondition for becoming a junzi 君子. Junzi 君子 are rare, but they much more common than Sages. A junzi 君子 must humble himself before the great Sage Kings of old and do his best to imitate their ways. In this way, the Sages are the example for ideal conduct, similar to the ideal of Jesus for Christians.

The last piece of information offered on Sages in the Analects is somewhat esoteric and takes more effort to understand. Like much of Confucius’ most important teachings, it is illustrated through a natural metaphor.

19.12 Ziyou said, “The disciples and young friends of Zixia are quite all right when it comes to housekeeping, taking care of guests, and standing in attendance, but these are just the tips of the branches. What do you do about the fact that they have no roots?”

Zixia heard about this, and responded, “Ah! Ziyou is mistaken! On the path (dao 道) of the exemplary person (junzi 君子), what is passed on first and what must wait until maturity, can be compared to plants which must be nurtured differently according to kind. How can he so misrepresent the path of exemplary persons? And it is the Sage (shengren 聖人) alone who walks this path every step from start to finish.”

The Sage is the only one who walks the path from start to finish. A person completing this journey is like a flower coming to full bloom. The Sage, then, is the only one who truly reaches the limits of his potential. In this way he is represents the greatest human achievement.

We have now covered every quote in the Analects that mentions the Sage King. Needless to say the picture is far from complete. For more information we must look to the Book of Songs, the ancient classic that Confucius cites throughout the Analects. Much of Confucius’ teachings are based on its short poems, and it
provides us with a more complete picture of the Sage King. It makes sense that Confucius would not be clear about the Sage Kings in the *Analects*, because his students were expected to study the *Book of Songs* religiously and know the stories of the Sage Kings.

First of all, the *Book of Songs* reveals that the Sage King’s power comes from heaven.

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God shifted his bright power;
To fix customs and rules he gave a path.
Heaven set up for itself a counterpart on earth;
Its charge was firmly awarded.
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God or Heaven (*tian* 天) is the source of the customs (*li* 礼—much more on this later) of the Chinese people. These customs are “heaven's counterpart on earth;” the most perfect way for humans to live together. Figuring out and implementing these customs and the will of heaven are what great Sages and great men must do.

Ideally, overseeing said society is the perfect ruler, the Sage King:

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Then came King Wen
God set right measure to his thoughts,
Spread abroad his fair fame;
His power was very bright,
Very bright and very good.
Well he led, well lorded,
Was King over this great land.
Well he followed, well obeyed,
Obeyed—did King Wen.
His power was without flaw.
Having received God’s blessing
He handed it down to grandsons and sons.
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King Wen is able to understand the will of heaven. His thoughts and power come from God. He obeys heaven's will and passes this tradition to future generations.
It is interesting what God says about the Sage King Wen’s relationship to himself and knowledge.

God said to King Wen,
‘I am moved by your bright power.
Your high renown has not made you put on proud airs;
Your greatness has not made you change former ways,
You do not try to be clever or knowing,
But follow God’s precepts.’

The Sage King is not an innovator. Though “ancient” by Confucius’ day he still led traditionally, that is according to Heaven (tian 天) and the Way. He is not a person who has great knowledge or cleverness. His knowledge does not come from himself but from heaven. He does not invent policies but follows “God’s precepts.”

Now, I would like to shift and talk about the virtues of the junzi 君子 and how they relate to each other. The goal of becoming a junzi 君子 is much more feasible, though still quite rare, and thus merits more attention.

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3 Waley, Shi Ching (Book of Songs), Song 243.
2. BASIC DISPOSITION (ZHI)

The goal of becoming a junzi 君子 is only attainable for those with the capacity to do so. This is far from everyone. Zhi (質) or basic disposition determines how far along the road one may walk. Zhi 質 is an individual’s innate characteristics and the early cultivation and later internalization of certain values or outlooks. As we would say, “both nature and nurture,” in other words, heredity and core values. Of utmost importance for Confucius is to recognize one’s shortcomings yet strive to improve oneself to the best of one’s abilities.

In laying out the formula of a junzi 君子,

15.18 The Master said, “Having a sense of appropriate conduct as one’s basic disposition (zhi 質), developing it in observing ritual propriety (li 禮), expressing it with modesty, and consummating it in making good on one’s word: this then is an exemplary person (junzi 君子).

Confucius’ students are not junzi 君子, however, and he does not shy away from recognizing their shortcomings:

11.18 Zigao is stupid; Zeng is thick; Zhuansun is biased; Zilu is rough and rude.

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4 Ames and Rosemont, 250.
Similarly, Confucius shows his frustration with one of his students, Zaiwo, whose basic disposition is such that teaching him is futile.

5.10 Zaiwo was still sleeping during the daytime. The Master said, “You cannot carve rotten wood, and cannot trowel over a wall of manure. As for Zaiwo, what is the point in upbraiding him?

Zaiwo, perhaps, was born of a not so sturdy wood. Regardless, he is now rotten. He has acquired bad habits and is now uncarvable by the Master’s hand. Without a sense of appropriateness as his basic disposition, Zaiwo does not instinctively know right from wrong.

In the Analects there appears frequent recognitions of limitations. Confucius recognizes his own and those of his students and speaks frankly, urging them to be sober about their abilities.

5.12 Zigong said, “I do not want others to impose on me, nor do I want to impose on others.” Confucius replied, “Zigong, this is quite beyond your reach.”

Only by being realistic about one’s ultimate goal can one focus on the little steps that need to be taken to get there. Other followers are pushed on, despite their limitations.

6.12 Ranyou said, “It is not that I do not rejoice in the way of the Master, but that I do not have the strength to walk it.”

The Master said, “Those who do not have the strength for it collapse somewhere along the way. But with you, you have drawn your own line before you start.”

This passage highlights the emphasis on effort. Effort and perseverance are the determining factors of success, which is realizing one’s potential. Everyone must pursue excellence to the best of their ability, regardless of how far they are able to walk along the path.
3.16 The Master said: "Marksmanship does not lie in piercing the leather target, because the strength of the archers varies. This is the way of the ancients."
3. CULTURAL REFINEMENT (WEN)

6.27 The Master said, “Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) learn broadly of culture (wen 文) [...]”

One way to pursue excellence is through cultural refinement (wen 文). In several passages, wen 文 is the component of an exemplary person that corresponds to zhi 質:

6.18 The Master said, “When one’s basic disposition (zhi 質) overwhelms refinement (wen 文), the person is boorish; when refinement overwhelms one’s basic disposition, the person is an officious scribe. It is only when one’s basic disposition and refinement are in appropriate balance that you have the exemplary person (junzi 君子).

While zhi 質 is one’s basic quality, wen 文 is how it is developed and enhanced, especially by the study of letters. A balance must be reached between zhi 質 and wen 文, because while under-refinement is undesirable, over-refinement is just as bad. To simply be what you are naturally, zhi 質, is to understand little of humanity. Studying culture, especially poetry, broadens this understanding, and allows a person to be capable of facing the world in a meaningful, grounded way.

The foundation of rich cultural knowledge on which a junzi 君子 draws daily is a tool that enables his excellence. Special importance is given to the study of the Book of Songs, or simply the Songs, a collection of 305 ancient poems about the life
of the common people and the rule of the Sage Kings at the beginning of the Zhou
dynasty that junzi 君子 and good students alike knew well.

17.9 The Master said, "My young friends, why don't any of you
study the Songs? Reciting the Songs can arouse your sensibilities,
strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get
on with others, and sharpen your critical skills. Close at hand it
enables you to serve your father, and away at court enables you
to serve your lord. It instills in you a broad vocabulary for making
distinctions in the world around you."

In hearing Confucius lay out the vast advantages of knowing the Book of
Songs, one cannot but wonder why we do not expect our leaders to know the Iliad or
Hamlet? For Confucius, the Book of Songs give an important foundation to all of its
students. The foundation goes beyond artistic or cultural sensibilities, however. The
study of the Book of Songs is meant to be practical. It allows the student to see the
world more clearly and enables them to act more effectively in it. That is why
centuries later they would be memorized by everyone seeking public office.5

Poetry forms the core of the junzi's studies. The end of this study and of
cultural refinement (wen 文), the study of letters, and the Book of Songs is to
understand people. As the closing phrase of the Analects states:

20.3 A person who does not understand words has no way of
knowing others.

Knowing words is a way to know others, and thus provides a means to better
navigate the world and personal relationships. In addition, more than just providing

5 As the translators note: The worth of knowledge is a direct consequence of its efficacy: to what
degree does it conduce to human happiness and enjoyment? Ames and Rosemont, 240.
insights into other humans, *wen* 文 is a means to humanity or *ren* 仁, itself, the supreme Confucian virtue.

12.24 Master Zeng said, "The exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) attracts friends through refinement (*wen* 文), and thereby promotes authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁)."

The *junzi* 君子 attracts and inspires others by his authority on cultural matters. The *junzi’s* friends greatly benefit from this relationship, because they are brought closer to *ren* (仁).

The assertion that refinement (*wen* 文) is a way to attract friends extends across borders; it is also a way to win allies:

16.1 If distant populations are still not won over, they [*junzi* 君子] persuade them to join them through the cultivation of their refinement (*wen* 文) and excellence, and once they have joined them, they make them feel secure."

The importance of words and culture lies at the heart of Confucian ethical and political thought. It is the assumption illustrated in this passage that informs what we think of as soft power.

Political action, however, requires more than just *wen* 文. Leaders must be wise in a practical way. This is the subject of our next chapter.
4. WISDOM (ZHI)

Zhi 智 appears in seventeen of the Analects’ 499 chapters. Its written form shows a mouth and an archer shooting at a target. A zhi 智 is someone who hits the mark when they speak. “Zhi” 智 means “wisdom.” “The zhi” 智 are “the wise.” The ancient Chinese conception of wisdom is not the same as that of the modern west. For us wisdom is usually associated with old sage-like characters. As the archer may indicate, in the Analects wisdom (zhi 智) is primarily of the practical kind. The zhi 智 study history, but above all know how best to accomplish their goals and have the savvy to act. They are good managers of people and property. Throughout the Analects zhi 智 is associated with government.

Interestingly, Confucius presents wisdom in a familiar way:

2.17 The Master said: “Zilu, shall I teach you what wisdom (zhi 智) means? To know (zhi 智) what you know and know what you do not know—this then is wisdom.”

Similar to Socrates, the zhi 智 know what they know, and they know what they don’t know. The awareness of how one’s knowledge fits into the scope of all knowledge is an important condition of wisdom.

“Zhi 智” is most commonly translated as “knowledge” or “wisdom,” but, due to zhi’s 智 practical character, Ames and Rosemont prefer “to realize” when possible; Ames and Rosemont, 55.
Unlike the western conception of wisdom, however, which is usually associated with passivity and having a grasp on the big questions, zhi 智 is a practical characteristic. For this reason:

14.28 The Master said, “The wise (zhi 智) are not in a quandary.”

The wise are not in sticky situations because they can clearly see the way out of them. This characteristic can be found in Confucius himself, who, due to his desire for the political power to implement his system, traveled from kingdom to kingdom searching for someone to give him control of a piece of their territory. Being an outsider asking for power was sometimes dangerous, and Confucius’ life was threatened several times. Each time, however, the Master found his way out, never doubting that he would.

Confucius’ and the zhi’s 智 being well acquainted with the past is partly why they are able to find their way out of difficulties or never get into them in the first place. Reverence for the past is a recurring theme in the Analects. Much of Confucius’ teachings were not new teachings, or at least he would not call them that, because in ancient China it was unthinkable that the current generation could be better than the previous one. Thus, Confucius looked to the histories of the ancients for wisdom (zhi 智):

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7 Simon Leyes footnote to 9.23: “It never occurred to the Confucian mind that the next generation might actually excel the present one. At the end of the nineteenth century, when the theories of social Darwinism were first introduced to China [...], young Chinese intellectuals—and future revolutionaries—were mesmerized. The very concept of “revolution” (which is a Western notion) is predicated upon the belief that the future can be better that the past—which is inconceivable in a Confucian perspective.”
The Master said: “I am not the kind of person who has gained knowledge (zhi 智) through some natural propensity for it. Rather, loving antiquity, I am earnest in seeking it out.”

Wisdom (zhi 智) like other characteristics of the junzi 君子 is not innate (zhi 質). It is “sought out,” which recalls the recurring theme of effort. Wisdom (zhi 智) is acquired through study or experience.

After gaining wisdom (zhi 智) it must be put into action:

Zigong said, “We have an exquisite piece of jade here—should we box it up and put it away for safe keeping, or should we try to get a good price and sell it off?”

The Master replied, “Sell it! By all means, sell it! I am just waiting for the right price!”

The jade vase represents one’s talents. The student is asking if he should keep them private or enter into the public sphere. Confucius is adamantine that the best thing one can do with his talents is to employ them in government. The only reason, according to Confucius, that one would not take office is if one was not offered a position.

Wisdom (zhi 智) is an advantageous quality for a government functionary. Wisdom in the Confucian sense is not about having a broad vision of the common good but promoting the right people to the right positions. Zhi 智, thereby enables a pragmatic and effectively managed government:

“Fan Chi inquired about […] zhi 智, and the Master said ‘Realize others.’”
To realize in this sense is to promote the right people to the right jobs for them and, thus, maximize their talents. This is said more directly in another passage:

2.19 Duke Ai of Lu inquired to Confucius, asking "What does one do to gain the allegiance of the people?" Confucius replied: "Raise up the true and place them over the crooked, and the allegiance of the people will be yours; raise up the crooked and place them over the true, and the people will not be yours."

The importance of choosing and promoting people is fundamental to good governance. It is the surest way to do what is best for the people.

Ultimately, zhi 智 means doing what is “appropriate” for the people.

6.22 "To devote yourself to what is appropriate for the people [...] can be called wisdom (zhi 智)."

The language of “appropriateness” illustrates that there is no single way to pursue the common good. What is appropriate for the people depends on what kind of people they are and in what situation the rulers find them.

There is one sure way to pursue the common good. That is compassionately and authoritatively. This is the essence of ren 仁, the subject of the next section.
5. REN

*Ren* 仁 appears in 58 of the *Analects’* 499 chapters and is, perhaps, the most important term in the text. It is also *the* Confucian value. *Ren’s* written form, “仁” consists of a person (人) and the numerical character “two” (二). The oldest version also included *shang* (上), to rise above. The “two” (二) illustrates the inherently social character of the process of becoming a human being. As one scholar said, “For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings.” The *shang* (上) represents the growing distinction one gains as a result of becoming *ren* 仁. No similar term exists in English. The closest approximation would come from combining the terms “humanity” and “authoritative conduct.” “Humanity,” because love and compassion for others are *ren’s* 仁 hallmarks. “Authoritative conduct,” because the *ren* 仁 internalize the rituals and, thus, behave appropriately at all times. As a result, the *ren* 仁 embody their culture and are natural leaders and examples to those around them.

*Ren* 仁 is never clearly defined by Confucius and is used in various ways. It is clear, however that that *ren* 仁 is held high above all other virtues:


Ames and Rosemont, 48-51.
authoritative conduct (ren 仁), one could do nothing wrong."

The relationship between ren 仁 and doing the right thing is so close that they are almost inseparable; and doing the right thing, for Confucius, is of utmost importance. “The right thing” is undefined, and there are not specific laws that apply to all situations. “Morality” is situational.\(^\text{10}\) Ren 仁 helps one to make the right choice in an ambiguous or difficult situation.

Since one who sets his purposes on ren 仁 does nothing wrong, the junzi 君子, because they possess ren 仁, do not err.

4.5  
Exemplary persons 君子 do not take leave of their authoritative conduct (ren 仁) even for the space of a meal.

“He clings to [ren 仁] through trials; he clings to it through tribulations.”\(^\text{11}\) As we saw with the Sage and zhi 质 (basic disposition) and will later see with li 禮 (observing ritual propriety), constancy is a virtue. The ren 仁 epitomize it.

In addition to discipline, the ren 仁 are distinguished by their calmness:

14.28  “The authoritative (ren 仁) are not anxious.”

The ren 仁 are not anxious because they have nothing to be ashamed of (12.4). Furthermore, this calmness is a sign of cultivation. Their stillness is compared to that of mountains:

\(^{10}\) Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, Confucius.

\(^{11}\) Leyes, 15.
6.23 […] those authoritative in their conduct (ren 仁) enjoy mountains
[… ] are still[, and] are long-enduring.

The metaphor of the mountain offers several useful ways of talking about ren 仁 :
(1) the ren 仁 are authoritative as cultural leaders; (2) they are still in their
unwavering adherence to compassion, the rituals, and righteousness; And (3) they
are long enduring because their impact is felt for generations. Finally, the ren 仁 and
junzi 君子 are tall like mountains because they set the bar as high as one can. Their
example is seen by the entire community and respectfully emulated.

One thing worth emulating in the ren 仁 is their compassion. For example,

12.22  Fan Chi inquired about authoritative conduct (ren 仁), and
the Master said, “Love others.”

Also,

12.2  Zhonggong inquired about authoritative conduct (ren 仁).
The Master replied, […] “Do not impose upon others what you
Yourself do not want, and you will not incur personal or
Political ill will.”

Passages such as these have led several translators to translate ren 仁 as
“humanity,” “love,” or even “goodness.” Though these English words are inadequate,
the “benevolence” side of ren 仁 is apparent in the text. For example, in the Analects
Confucius speaks little of violence. One infers that it is only to be used as a last
resort. Instead, Confucius prefers compassion. His way was created in hopes to stave
off the civil wars and end the incessant bloodshed that marked his time and offers
leaders a new way of doing things: gain power by being kind instead of by killing. This is “conduct worthy of a man, as distinct from the behavior of mere beasts.”

However, ren 仁 is much more than compassion: “Ren 仁 is one’s entire person: one’s cultivated cognitive, aesthetic, moral, and religious sensibilities as they are expressed in one’s ritualized roles and relationships.” The rituals are closely related to ren 仁. Their mastery brings ren 仁 to the master, and one cannot be ren 仁 without close adherence to the rituals. So what are they?

Observing ritual propriety, li 禮, is a “social grammar” that informs every aspect of individual behavior. It covers everything from basic manners to religious conduct. There are proper ways to eat and dress, as well as to interact with others. More than just convention, these guidelines are internalized and personalized whereby they temper all of one’s good qualities.

Mastery of the rituals (li 禮) makes one a ren 仁 and a junzi 君子. This is where the “authoritative” aspect of ren 仁 comes in.

12.1 Yan Hui said, “Could I ask what becoming authoritative (ren 仁) entails?” The Master replied, “Do not look at anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety (li 禮); do not listen to anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not do anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety.”

Ren 仁 and li 禮 are intertwined like flesh and bone. As bones give form to the body, the rituals (li 禮) structure ren 仁 and all of the junzi’s 君子 characteristics. In

12 Waley, 27.
13 Ames and Rosemont, 49.
14 Ames and Rosemont, 51.
interpreting and mastering his culture to such an extent, the *junzi* 君子 becomes authoritative. He knows the rituals (*li* 禮) like the back of his hand. By adding his own interpretation to culture (*wen* 文), he forges the path of his culture in a new direction. Thus, he not only shapes his own society but also the course of history. As a result, he is an example to others and likely to be given the reins of government.

Such a figure, however, may not need to pull on them too hard:

12.1 Yan Hui inquired about authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁). The Master replied, “Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) one becomes authoritative in one’s conduct. If for the space of a day one were able to accomplish this, the whole empire would defer to this authoritative model.”

This passage shows the sweeping, transformational power of *ren* 仁 and *li* 禮. Only one man needs to be nearly perfect to set the whole empire in order. The deference of the people results from non-coercive persuasion. A good governor is a great man. His subjects obey him through emulation. They do not need to be convinced or punished.

Now that the importance of the rituals (*li* 禮) has been established, they deserve a closer look.
6. OBSERVING RITUAL PROPRIETY (LI)

Li 禮, observing ritual propriety, is a key concept in understanding the whole of Chinese culture and Confucian thought in particular. Contemporary Chinese still heed much of the ritual guidelines laid out in the Confucian classics. They are not just words in an old book.

The only specific examples of ritual propriety are found in Book Ten. Confucius’ daily comportment is its subject. For instance:

10.26 To mount his carriage, he would invariably stand upright and grasp the cord. While riding in the carriage, he would not turn his head to look back, speak hastily, or point at things.

The Master’s polite example is meant to inform the behavior of others.

In addition to manners, the Master’s eating habits receive generous treatment. We learn that “He did not object to the food being cut up fine.” However, “damp” or “mildewed” food was not eaten, nor was spoiled meat or fish. Food is to be properly cooked and eaten only at the dinner hour. Confucius would not eat food that was “lacking the appropriate condiments and sauces.”\textsuperscript{15} Such an extensive list seems odd for a philosophical classic, but, for Confucius, a man must be built from the ground up, brick by brick. He cannot eat well unless he sits well and holds chopsticks well. Once he can eat properly in the presence of others, he may speak in

\textsuperscript{15} Ames and Rosemont, 137.
the presence of others. Growth is incremental. Through unyielding daily practice of the rituals or “self-cultivation,” one may someday attain greatness.

Proper interaction with others is another key part of ritual propriety. This is especially important because of the collective nature of ancient Chinese culture. For example, the ancient Chinese language, in fact, does not distinguish between “I” and “we.” Even those of a relatively higher social status like Confucius are required to show consideration for everyone, even their close friends:

10.25 On meeting someone in mourning dress, even those on intimate terms, he would invariably take on solemn appearance. On meeting someone wearing a ceremonial cap or someone who is blind, even though they were frequent acquaintances, he would invariably pay his respects. On encountering with a sumptuous feast, he would invariably take on a solemn appearance and rise to his feet. On experiencing a sudden clap of thunder or fierce winds, he would invariably take on a solemn appearance.

That Confucius stands for the feast and becomes somber at the sound of a storm illustrates that reverence for nature also plays an important role in observing ritual propriety. This is not surprising given that ancient China was an agrarian society, and harmony with nature is a core belief of the Chinese folk tradition.17

Confucius was not an official, but he shows how to act before those who are:

10.4 On passing through the entrance way to the duke’s court, he would bow forward from the waist, as though the gateway were not high enough. While in attendance, he would not stand in the middle of the entranceway; on passing through, he would not step on the raised threshold. On passing by the empty throne, his countenance would change visibly, his legs would bend, and in his speech he would seem to be breathless. He would lift the hem of his skirts in ascending the hall, bow forward from the waist, and hold in his breath as though ceasing to breathe. On leaving and descending the first steps, he would relax his expression and regain

16 Ibid, 54.
his composure. He would glide briskly from the bottom of the steps, and returning to his place, would resume a reverent posture.\textsuperscript{18}

This passage captures the extent to which ritual life is like a well-choreographed dance. Notice the meticulousness of his behavior. The nuances of movement are meant to show respect for the duke, who being Confucius’ superior deserves and expects it. There is a strict hierarchy in Confucius’ ideal society—emperor, nobles, ministers, ministers’ household stewards, and common people (16.2). Observing ritual propriety allows the lowest of rank to lead fulfilling lives. And by relating to those of higher rank in the right way, i.e., obediently, they allow rulers to do govern well.

Though explicit instructions abound, ritual propriety is not static. Changes, modifications, and even personal interpretation are critical. To truly observe ritual propriety, to truly internalize it, is to make it one’s own.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{9.3} The Master said, “The use of a hemp cap is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety (\textit{li} 礼). Nowadays, that a silk cap is used instead is a matter of frugality. I would follow accepted practice on this. A subject kowtowing on entering the hall is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety (\textit{li} 礼). Nowadays that one kowtows only after ascending the hall is a matter of hubris. Although it goes contrary to accepted practice, I still kowtow on entering the hall.”

Confucius here accepts the change in material of hats. Frugality trumps ritual propriety in this instance. With regard to kneeling in the hall, however, change is not welcome, and Confucius is not afraid to be different by sticking to older practice; he feels no shame in using his own judgment and subscribing to the rituals in the way

\textsuperscript{18} Ames and Rosemont, 135.
\textsuperscript{19} Ames and Rosemont, 51; 3.4.
he deems best. Appearance, however, whether the material of one’s hat, or kneeling in the hall, is not the core of ritual propriety (3.4).

17.11 The Master said, “In referring time and again to observing ritual propriety (li 禮), how could I just be talking about gifts of jade and silk? And in referring time and again to making music, how could I just be talking about bells and drums?”

The goal of observing ritual propriety is not just to become accomplished in the rituals themselves. The rituals’ aims are realizing one’s potential and achieving harmony in society (1.12). As Confucius says, it’s about rhythm:

17.11 “One stands to be improved by the enjoyment found in attuning oneself to the rhythms of ritual propriety (li 禮) and music.”

Such attunement allows one’s good qualities to become truly beneficial. In 8.2 “Deference,” for example, “unmediated by observing ritual propriety is lethargy,” which means that to simply give control to others without considering the consequences is to be overly passive and lazy. “Caution” without observing ritual propriety is “timidity,” while “boldness unmediated by observing ritual propriety is rowdiness.” The message is that too much of a good thing is bad. And the three qualities above (deference, caution, and boldness) are good things for Confucius, but they must be present in the proper amount. This goes to show that li 禮 is not simply about following rules or fitting your personality and desires in a box drawn by tradition. Li 禮 is becoming a kind of person. It works on the internal as much as the external. Book Eight chapter two adds:

8.2 “[...] Where exemplary persons (junzi 君子) are earnestly committed to their parents, the people will aspire to authoritative conduct
(ren 仁); where they do not neglect their old friends, the people will not be indifferent to each other."

The junzi 君子 is one who is able to temper his innate characteristics in this way. He invariably becomes an example for others. Herein lies the importance of ritual propriety to governance. Governance by ritual propriety is governance by example.
7. OBSERVING RITUAL PROPRIETY (LI) AND GOVERNANCE (ZHENG)

How does the junzi 君子, “a person that can be given the reigns of government” govern through ritual propriety (li 礼) (20.3)? When one considers that li 礼 is not a set of guidelines, rules, or suggestions, but shared beliefs and values, it is less difficult to imagine.

Ritual guidelines are most likely not written down. In political society, at least, they are only promulgated by the leader’s example. Confucius is quite suspicious of written law, which was a new development in his period. He believes that writing down laws simply motivates people to find ways around them.

2.3 The Master said: “Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense a shame.

People in a society in which law is written and punishments are enforced do not feel guilty about committing crimes unless they are caught. 2.3 continues:

Lead them with excellence and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (li 礼) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.”

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20 Confucius seems favor not writing li 礼 down, but he mentions reading of the rituals of past societies (3.9), and Book 10 is itself an example of writing down ritual propriety, though it was, of course, compiled after Confucius’ death.

21 Hsu, 585.
“The government is of men not of laws.”22 Leaders live according to li 禮, and the people follow their example. Thus, li 禮 directs the people’s behavior and gives them a standard to live up to. Their behavior is further influenced by the shame and awe they feel in the presence of their leader:

20.3 Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) wear their caps and robes correctly, and are always polite in their gaze. With such an air of dignity, persons seeing them from far off hold them in awe.”

This awe leads to admiration and imitation. Confucius provides us with a natural metaphor:

2.1 The Master said: “Governing” with excellence can be compared to being the North Star: the North Star dwells in its place, and the multitude of stars pay it tribute.

The attraction the people feel toward the junzi君子 takes no effort on his behalf.

What is more, his non-coercive power improves them.

12.19 [...] “If you govern effectively,” Confucius replied, “what need is there for killing? If you want to be truly adept, the people will also be adept. The [character] of the exemplary person (junzi君子) is the wind, while that of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend.

By bending their will to his, the junzi君子 helps bring people up to his level. This is possible because everyone has a lot of room for improvement. Though some are born with more potential, all can reach theirs if they dedicate themselves to proper conduct. Whether they become a junzi君子 or not is unimportant:

3.16 The Master said: “Marksmanship does not lie in piercing

22 Leys, xxv.
the leather target, because the strength of the archers varies. This is the way of the ancients."

The junzi 君子, himself, was not born a junzi 君子. He took his potential (zhi 質) and through tireless effort achieved junzi 君子 status.

15.17 The Master said, “Having a sense of appropriate conduct as one’s basic disposition (zhi 質), developing it in observing ritual propriety (li 禮), expressing it with modesty, and consummating it in making good on one’s word: this then is an exemplary person (junzi 君子).
8. DEERENCE (RANG)

The junzi 君子, however, does not have all the answers. Understanding the limits of his own knowledge and feeling compassion for his subjects, he governs with a gentle hand. Thus, “deference” (rang 諩) is an important Confucian virtue. To defer is to delegate power to someone else or yield to his will. This was far from common practice during the tumultuous and murderous time in which Confucius lived. For him, a leader should pick expert advisors and be humble enough to let them make decisions.

13.3 “[...] An exemplary person (junzi 君子) defers on matters he does not understand.”

In other words, though they are at the top of the totem pole so to speak, junzi 君子 remain respectful and humble.

This is partly the case because junzi 君子 are not bent on anything; they go with what is appropriate (4.10). Since their knowledge of appropriateness is authoritative but not absolute, they must remain open to the opinions of others and

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23 Political leaders were murdered, succession struggles were common, war was commonplace. Confucius himself barely escaped with his life on more than one occasion.
24 Such matters may not be numerous, because political leaders in Confucius’ day were expected to perform “simultaneously the functions of administrator, judge, engineer, economist, police officer, agronomist, architect, military commander, etc” (Leys, 166). But when the time comes, a junzi 君子 will defer. Confucius, a persistent seeker of political office is said to have had a team ready to be employed made up of “a specialist in foreign affairs and diplomacy,” “experts in finances, administration, and defense.” This may have caused others to feel intimidated and prevent his coming to power (Leys xxiii).
use their powers of differentiation to forge ahead. This requires flexibility on the part of the ruler:

14.32 The Master said, “I hate inflexibility.”

The flexible man is ideal:

8.5 Master Zeng said, “Able himself yet asking those who are not so, informed himself yet asking those who are less so, having much to offer himself yet seeming to have nothing, substantial himself yet seeming to be empty, transgressed against himself yet paying it no notice—in the old days I had a friend who proceeded in just such a way.”

This passage, commonly seen as a reference to Yan Hui, Confucius’ favorite student, makes clear that deference is not just an action, but also a demeanor.

Such deportment is beneficial.

1.10 Ziqin asked Zigong: “When the Master arrives in a particular state and needs to learn how it is being governed, does he seek out this information or is it offered to him?” Zigong replied: “The Master gets all he needs by being cordial, proper, deferential, frugal, and unassuming. Perhaps this way of seeking information is somewhat different from how others go about it.”

Being deferential makes things easier, because people are more likely to give one what he wants if he is not demanding. An air of dignity and humility allows others to offer one what he seeks without coercion: Confucius “focuses his attention upon his own inner virtue and allows external things to come to him naturally.”

Deference is also closely related to observing ritual propriety (li 禮).

1.13 Master You said: “[...] That being deferential gets one close to observing ritual propriety (li 禮) is because it keeps disgrace and

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25 Ames and Rosemont, 243.
26 Slingerland, 5.
insult at a distance. Those who are accommodating and do not lose those with whom they are close are deserving of esteem."

This passage illustrates the triangular relationship between deference, *li* 禮, and appropriateness. Deferring is like *li* 礼 because it is appropriate. One who defers is not likely to incur the resentment of others and thus has come a long way in cultivating proper ritual relationships.

Like other virtues deference must fit into the frame of ritual (*li* 礼) for it to be truly virtuous.

8.2 The Master said, “Deferece unmediated by observing ritual propriety (*li* 礼) is lethargy [...]

This passage reiterates the power of ritual (*li* 礼) to ensure that one’s characteristics are moderate. This has been called “the Doctrine of the Mean” (a notion similar to that of Aristotle). One defers only when it is appropriate, according to ritual (*li* 礼), to do so. If one simply takes deference as his *modus operandi* and defers at every opportunity, he is sluggish; far from admirable behavior for Confucius.

Deference is not only a desirable *personal* attribute but a fundamental part of *ruling* through observing ritual propriety (*li* 礼):

4.13 The Master said, “If rulers are able to effect order in the state through the combination of observing ritual propriety (*li* 礼) and deferring to others (*rang* 让), what more is needed? But if they are unable to accomplish this, what have they to do with observing ritual propriety?”

Ruling through deference is a concept alien to the western mind, because we are accustomed to relying on law and force to impose order. Nonetheless, Confucius
envisioned the perfect government as gently guiding the people and heeding their will whenever appropriate. As an early commentator explained,

In an ordered age, gentlemen honor ability and defer to those below them, while the common people attend to their agricultural labors in order to serve those above them. In this way, both above and below ritual prevail, and slanderers and evil men are dismissed and ostracized. All of this arises from a lack of contention [...] Once an age declines into disorder, gentlemen strut about announcing their achievements in order to lord over the common people, and the common people boast of their skills in order to encroach upon the gentlemen. Both above and below there is a lack of ritual, giving birth simultaneously to disorder and cruelty. All of this arises from people contending over excellence [...] 27

To rule by deference is to eliminate contention by hearing and meeting the common people’s needs. The common people in turn respect and revere their rulers. The result is a harmonious society.

27 Duke Xiang, Year 13 (559 B.C.E.); Slingerland, 34.
9. FILIAL PIETY (XIAO)

China is known for obedience. Children obey their parents and students obey their teachers. The elderly hold a distinguished place in society and are not swept aside to make room for the young. These customs are in line with the Chinese reverence for tradition that Confucius shares, despite its withering away in his time.

As a virtue xiao 孝, or filial piety, is one of the most straightforward of Confucius; it translates well into English and does not require us to rethink any core assumptions. Respect and obedience toward superiors and elders is highly valued because it allows the deferential chain, for lack of a better word, to remain unbroken. This ensures that orders are carried out and that the government remains stable:

1.2 Master You said, “It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial and fraternal responsibility (xiaodi 孝弟) to have a taste for defying authority. And it is unheard of for those who have no taste for defying authority to be keen on initiating rebellion. Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (ren 仁).”

That filial piety is called “the root” of ren 仁 is a testament to its importance. Xiao 孝 is the foundational virtue upon which the others are built. It is also the one from which society can, perhaps, most benefit: “If everyone simply loved their parents
and respected their elders, the world would be at peace.” Under such circumstances the oldest and wisest members of society would have their wills enacted, while the younger and more ignorant would benefit from their guidance. The result would be a harmonious society free from impropriety and violence.

Like other virtues, *xiao* 孝, unmediated by *li* 禮 (observing ritual propriety) is worthless:

2.5 Meng Yizi asked about filial conduct (*xiao* 孝). The Master replied, “Do not act contrary.” Fan Chi was driving the Master’s chariot, and the Master informed him further: “Meng Yizi asked me about filial conduct, 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* 禮); when they are dead, bury them and sacrifice to them according to the observances of ritual propriety.”

This quote illustrates that one must always serve his parents while living according to *li* 禮 and then continue this behavior after they are dead. Making sacrifices to one’s deceased parents or ancestors is viewed as a continuance of the duty to provide for them owed during life. Similar customs are still practiced in China today.

*Doing* the right thing, however, is not enough.

2.8 Zixia asked about filial conduct (*xiao* 孝). The Master replied, “It all lies in showing the proper countenance. As for the young contributing their energies when there is work to be done, and deferring to their elders when there is wine and food to be had—how can merely doing this be considered being filial?”

The true essence of *xiao* 孝, like *li* 禮 itself, lies not in the action itself, but in the deep emotional connection attached to it. One cannot simply serve one’s parents. One

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28 *Mencius 4:A:11; Slingerland, 2.*
must also feel great appreciation and reverence toward them. Xiao 孝 involves “deep affection, a harmonious disposition, and a willing heart.”²⁹ Such a connection ensures that one’s obedience and service remain unshaken during difficult times and that it lasts after one’s parents are gone.

4.20 The Master said, “A person who for three years refrains from reforming the ways of his late father can be called a filial son (xiao 孝).”

An old custom that Confucius hoped to see return was a mourning period of three years after the death of a parent. The rationale being that this is the minimum time that a parent devotes to a newborn child before they acquire a certain degree of independence. During the mourning period one should not question his father’s ways lest he disgrace him. The best example is the minister who became lord after his father’s death and did not reform his policies though they were not exactly sound (19.18). It is as if deference is so important that one, despite how certain they are that their father is wrong, cannot be sure enough of himself to alter their ways.

The greatest example, however, of filial piety comes from a junzi 君子 who had a lot to do with the founding of the much venerated Zhou dynasty.

8.1 The Master said, “As for Taibo, he can certainly be said to be a person of unsurpassed excellence. He repeatedly renounced his claim to the empire, and the people could not find words adequate to praise him.”

Taibo was the uncle of the Sage King Confucius admires most, King Wen. While Taibo was next in line for succession, it was revealed to his father, the current king, ²⁹ Slingerland, 11.

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that King Wen was to be a great Sage. The King then decided that Taibo’s younger brother, the father of King Wen, would succeed him. Instead of protesting Taibo fled, and allowed his younger brother, King Wen’s father, to assume power. Eventually, King Wen assumed the throne, and his rule led to the monumental unification of the empire.

One reason why *xiao* is so important is that good individual behavior is the foundation of society. People who fulfill their family roles well create good families. Doing so is to do a great service for your country.

2.21 Someone asked Confucius, “Why are you not employed in governing?” The master replied, “The Book of Documents says:

> It’s all in filial conduct! Just being filial to your parents and befriending your brothers is carrying out the work of government.’

In doing this I am employed in governing. Why must I be ‘employed in governing’?

On the individual rest strong families; and on strong families rest strong cities; and on strong cities rest strong states. This, as commentators note, is summed up in the ancient saying that Confucius certainly would have known, *xiu shen—qi jia—zhiguoying tianxia*, which literally means “Self-cultivation—family harmony—good order in the state—peace in the empire.” The fundamental importance of proper individual behavior is enormous. *Xiao* underlies it.

30 Huang, 7-8.
10. THE STRUCTURE OF THE SOCIAL ORDER AND GOVERNING EFFECTIVELY
(ZHENG)

The structure of the social order is given shape by *li* 礼. In addition to entailing a particular type of personal rule, *li* 礼 calls for a fixed organization of government. The hierarchy is as follows: the emperor, the nobles of the various states, their ministers, the ministers’ household stewards, and the common people. This structure allows the best to lead, but the importance of every link in the chain, including the commoner, cannot be understated. The lord expects obedience from his subjects, and the common people expect their needs to be met and their requests to be considered or granted. This was the way feudal society was run in the early Zhou dynasty\(^{31}\) two hundred years before Confucius’ birth. Since then, society had declined. Royal authority was largely ignored, and violent competition between sovereign states became the norm.\(^ {32}\) Confucius calls for a return to the old system.

The feudal hierarchy is outlined in the following passage:

16.2 Confucius said, “When the way prevails in the world, ritual propriety (*li* 礼), music, and punitive campaigns are initiated by the emperor. If the way does not prevail in the world, then they are initiated by the various nobles. When they are initiated by the various nobles, it is unlikely that the state will survive beyond ten generations. When they are initiated by the ministers, it is unlikely that the state will survive beyond five generations. When the household stewards of the ministers seize command of the state, it is unlikely that the state will survive

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\(^{31}\) I refer to the Western Zhou (1046–771 BC).

\(^{32}\) Hsu, 569.
beyond three generations. When the way prevails in the world, governing does not lie in the hands of the ministers; when the way prevails in the world, the common people do not debate affairs of state."

This is the order prescribed by ritual: emperor, nobles, ministers, the household stewards of the ministers, and the common people. The common people “do not debate affairs of state.” This does not mean that common people should not discuss the affairs of state, but rather that they should have nothing to criticize, because well-ruled people are “busy and content.” Confucius is condemning the current situation in which this hierarchy has been turned upside down, and ministers had taken over state affairs. “Power must be articulated through patterns of deference, and there can be only one center.”

That center is the emperor or ruler. I quote Confucius at length here to show how virtue is put into action and the respect the rulers have for the common people.

20.2 Zizhang inquired of Confucius, saying, "What kind of person is it that can be given the reigns of government?"

The Master replied, "A person who honors the five virtues and rejects the four vices can be given the reins of government."

"What are the five virtues?" asked Zizhang.

The Master replied, "Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) are generous yet not extravagant, work the people hard and yet do not incur ill will, have desires and yet are not covetous, are proud and yet not arrogant, and are dignified and yet not fierce."

He continues,

"What does it mean to be generous and yet not extravagant?"

asked Zizhang.

The Master replied, "Give the common people those benefits that will really be beneficial to them— is this not being generous without being extravagant? If you select those projects

33 Huang, 161.
34 Slingerland, 193.
35 Hsu, 571.
36 Ames and Rosemont, 264.
which the people can handle and make them work at them, who will feel ill will? Desire to be authoritative (ren 仁) and become authoritative—how is this being covetous? Exemplary persons wear their caps and robes correctly, and are always polite in their gaze. With such an air of dignity, persons seeing them from far off hold them in awe. Is this not being dignified and yet not fierce?”

“What then are the four vices?” asked Zizhang.

The Master replied, “To execute a person who has not first been educated is cruel; to expect a job to be finished without having first given notice is oppressive; to enforce a timetable when slow in giving direction is injurious; when something is to be given to someone, to be niggardly in carrying it out is officious.”

Here we see the ruler is to be dignified, and authoritative, but also compassionate and caring. He respects the common people and treats them well. Power does not give him the privilege to be harsh or unfair. What he can justly expect from the common people is proportionate to what he has given them.

Therefore, rulers are to regularly ask the opinions of those below them.

5.15 Zigong inquired, “Why has Kong Wenzi been given the posthumous title of ‘refined (wen 文)?’

The Master replied, “He was diligent and fond of learning, and was not ashamed to ask those of a lower status—this is why he has been called ‘refined.’

Again, the respect the ruler has for those he rules is highlighted. He asks the advice of his ministers, which underlines the fallible judgment of the ruler. Humility and deference are central to governing well. The ministers, too, then, have an important role in decision-making, and power appears more diffuse. Rulers treat ministers with respect and propriety, while ministers try their best to carry out their lord’s will. The ruler, the minister, and the commoner must all respect and serve each other for the system to be viable.

Despite thorough communication across levels of the hierarchy, these positions may be well defined and limited.
8.14 The Master said, “Do not plan the policies of an office you do not hold.”

Confucius gives us his version of the “one man, one job” rule. People are to stick to their given office. Interfering with someone else’s responsibility would undermine their authority and be a breach of ritual propriety.

12.11 Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about governing effectively (zheng 政).
Confucius replied, “The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son.”
“Excellent!” exclaimed the Duke. “Indeed, if the ruler does not rule, the minister not minister, the father not father, and the son not son, even if there were grain, would I get to eat of it?”

The efficacy of the empire depends on “a correct definition of each individual’s function, identity, duties, privileges, and responsibilities,”37 and everyone executing this ritually assigned role to the best of their ability. To do otherwise is confusion.

Even the commoner’s role in the Confucian vision is important.

12.7 Zigong asked about governing effectively (zheng 政).
The Master said to him, “Make sure there is sufficient food to eat, sufficient arms for defense, and that the common people have confidence in their leaders.”
“If you had to give up one of these things, he said, “which should be given up first?”
“Give up the arms,” he replied.
“If you had to give up one of the remaining two,” he said, “which should be given up first?”
“Give up the food,” he replied. “Death has been with us from ancient times, but if the common people do not have confidence in their leaders, community will not endure.”

Food and arms are obviously important; the confidence of the commoners is more so. A good government depends on the trust of the common people; this is its base.

37 Leys, 178.
The role of the *junzi* 君子 is to guide the commoners along the way (*dao* 道), even if they do not comprehend it as fully as he does.

8.9 The Master said, “The common people can be induced to travel along the way, but they cannot be induced to realize (*zhi* 知) it.”

In other words, “everyone can have a place on the way, even when they don’t participate in constructing it.”

The role of those with superior knowledge is to guide those with less. That all travel as far as possible down the path is in everyone’s best interest.

This is made possible by *li* 禮, the true cornerstone of this system.

15.33 The Master said, “When persons come to a realization (*zhi* 知) but are not authoritative (*ren* 仁) enough to sustain its implementation, even though they had it, they are sure to lose it. When persons come to a realization, even though they had it, are sufficiently authoritative to implement it, but nevertheless fail to guide the common people with proper dignity, the people will not be respectful. When persons come to a realization, are authoritative enough to implement it, guide the common people with proper dignity, but fail to inspire them by observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮), they are still not good enough at it.”

One can do everything right and see it all fall apart without *li* 禮.

Ultimately, *li* 禮 acts as a lubricant that makes every gear in the machine of state run more smoothly.

14.41 The Master said, “If those in high station cherish the observance of ritual propriety (*li* 禮), the common people will be easy to deal with.”

Of course, the common people respect and obey those who rule with dignity and respect for tradition and their fellow man. *Li* 禮 is both the glue that holds the

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38 Ames and Rosemont 243.
system together and the lubricant that makes it run smoothly. The ruler listens to the common people according to ritual. They obey according to ritual. This structure only works if the best are at the top, but no such structure can endure without the cultivated goodness of those at the bottom. This value placed on the commoner explains the compassion (ren 仁) and deference that the junzi 君子 has for them. The deference and admiration the commoners have for the junzi 君子, in turn, allow his rule to succeed. Thus, li 礼 brings security to the sovereign and good governance to the people.39 It “eliminate[s] disorder.”40

39 Huang, 20.
40 Slingerland, 25.
SUMMARY

We see that Confucius’ vision of society is a loose hierarchy ordered by ritual propriety (li 禮) and headed by a junzi 君子. The makeup of the junzi’s character began at birth with his innate characteristics (zhi 質). These were then built upon by cultural refinement (wen 文), especially the study of letters. Through study and experience the junzi 君子 acquired wisdom (zhi 智), a quality that made him an effective leader. Through even more learning and self-cultivation he found himself among the ranks of the ren 仁 (the authoritative and humane), which cemented his status as a cultural leader. Ordering each part of himself and each detail of interaction with others is observing ritual propriety (li 禮). These customs cover literally everything. The junzi interprets them and makes them his own. With regard to government, they stand in the place of western law by bringing shame to those who do not live up to its standards. Ultimately society is ruled from above with those below deferring (rang 譲) to their wills. This is closely tied to the notion of filial piety (xiao 孝) that entails great respect for elders and superiors. Despite the great power of those at the top of society, the individual has a great responsibility to create a good family, the basis of a strong state. Importantly, those at the top are completely deserving of their position and did not use force to get or keep their power. The people hold them in awe and their example is the great force that orders society.
II. PLATO RECONSIDERED

We will now shift to a discussion of Plato. I will discuss five key issues, mainly from *Republic*. They are 1) the Philosopher King, 2) Nature and education, 3) Love, 4) Justice, virtue and the soul, and 5) Governance. Each will be followed by a short comparison with Confucius. After I discuss each in turn, the final section will discuss the lessons and limits of this study.

1. PHILOSOPHER KING

In Plato’s world the Philosopher King represents the highest level of human potential. In this way he is comparable to Confucius’ Sage King. Like the Sage King he is quite rare:

I imagine that everyone would agree with us about this: the sort of nature that possesses all the qualities we prescribed just now for the person who is going to be a complete philosopher, is seldom found among human beings, and there will be few who possess it (491a-b).

The Philosopher King is the product of special innate characteristics and a lifetime of education. He studies music and physical training when he is young, and as an adolescent he studies mathematics, solid geometry, astronomy and dialectic. He then serves in the military or public office for fifteen years, whereupon he is ready to assume the role of leader of his society, Philosopher King. Only the rarest of natures can travel this long and arduous road from start to finish. Those who do are honored long after their deaths.

For Plato, a key reason that this road is so grueling is the difficulty of achieving temperance. What Plato has in mind is a relationship with oneself, a kind
of "self-mastery." In short, Temperance means that one’s mind governs his heart and stomach. In other words, one’s reason decides what one will do, while his pride and passions humbly obey. According to Plato’s vision of human nature, this is no small task. People are inclined to follow their passions, illustrated as a multifarious, multi-headed beast. Those who rein them in have come a long way on the path to the throne of philosophy.

There is more, however, to becoming a Philosopher King. It takes a special nature that loves learning and truth and a lot more education (485c). Truth is of great importance in Republic, and the Philosopher King has total access to it. It is the basis for knowledge, which is “the most effective power of all” (477d). Truth’s great power is compared to that of sunlight, which affords all things the ability to be seen. This is illustrated in the much-cited allegory of the cave. Leaving the cave is like “the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm” (517b). The philosopher’s sight is great, because he is able “to approach the beautiful itself, and see it by itself” and “grasp what is always the same in all respects [...]” (476b, 484b). In other words, he knows the forms, the foundational and supreme concepts of reality. His mind has long been suited to lean toward the forms: his “innate disposition makes it easy to lead to the form of each thing which is” (486d). Such a person, fully developed, is a true philosopher, a rare and infinitely wise individual.

Completing the long road of becoming a true philosopher is an incredible accomplishment. However, it does not make one king as well. To become king one’s nature must be further “fitted [...] to take the lead in a city” (474b-c). This means political savvy and charisma. Besides the difficulty of inheriting the proper nature,
another reason for the low probability of Philosopher Kings actually existing is that achieving political power is dependent on outside circumstances. One born with a philosophic nature must also be born into a wealthy and powerful family. Not even that is enough, because the mindset of the masses and the political climate must also be appropriate for such a man to assume power. As a solution, Plato even suggests banishing from the city everyone over the age of ten and reeducating this young population! All that is to say the hurdles are high and numerous for one who aspires to be a Philosopher King. But the goal, for Plato, is the most worthy and rewarding one imaginable.

Especially impressive is that once power is attained his ability to reshape the city and humanity is awesome:

They would take the city and the people’s characters as their sketching slate, but first they would wipe it clean—which is not at all an easy thing to do. And you should be aware that this is an immediate difference between them and others—that they refuse to take either a private individual or a city in hand, or to write laws, unless they receive a clean slate or are allowed to clean it themselves.

[...] They would erase one thing, I suppose, and draw in another, until they had made people’s characters as dear to the gods as possible (500d-501c).

The awesome power of the Philosopher King goes further than taking political action: it shapes humanity. One can only compare this ability to that of a god. No wonder a system so different from the one practiced in Plato’s Athens could result from his rule.

The Philosopher King is the catalyst that enables Plato’s ideal city to come into being. To get a good grasp on this, I would like to take the reader through what I believe is mostly familiar territory: the purpose and beginning of Republic. Socrates
is challenged by Plato’s brothers, Glaucon and Adeimentus, to give a full account of justice. He must explain not only why is it beneficial because of the good reputation it brings to the just man but also why it is good in and of itself, even if it brings negative consequences from the society in which the just man lives. Socrates proposes to answer this challenge by describing to them a just city: it is easier to identify justice in a city as if "we were told to identify small letters from a distance, and then noticed that the same letters existed elsewhere in a larger size [...]" (368d). Glaucon and Adeimentus agree. The result of their inquiry is the perfectly just city, a city in which everyone lives a simple life free of luxury. Their entertainment consists of love and conversation. The people peacefully enjoy their simple existence and pass it on to their progeny. But Glaucon does not find this description adequate and says the city is fit only for pigs. People need luxuries. Therefore, the three embark on creating a more realistic city. The result of this second inquiry is a just city in which everyone maximizes their contribution to society by specializing in the one task for which they are best suited. People fall into three major classes, the guardians or rulers, the auxiliaries or soldiers, and the artisans or craftsman. What is more, the people accept this hierarchical order because they have been told a noble lie, which essentially gives a religious foundation for the political system. (More on this later).

The following book, Book Five (of ten), is spent discussing the likelihood of such a city actually coming into existence. Note that the first city, the austere city of pigs, is perfectly just but did not include classes or Philosopher Kings. Even the second city, the one in which the many are ruled by their passions and a military and ruling class are necessary to order society, does not need a Philosopher King to
run it. It is only when prodded by Glaucon to alter the city so as to make it possible to create in reality that the Philosopher King comes into play. This is the third city. Socrates responds to Glaucon’s challenge by saying, “well, there is one change we could point to that I think would accomplish this. It certainly is not small or easy, but it is possible” (473c). That is,

> Until philosophers rule as kings in their cities, or those who are nowadays called kings and leading men become genuine and adequate philosophers so that political power and philosophy become thoroughly blended together [...] (473c-d).

So, this change is admittedly unlikely, but, nevertheless possible. The concentration of political power and philosophical knowledge in one person is certainly conceivable. In fact, Socrates says that humankind will never escape from misery until this change takes place.

Let us now turn to a comparison between the Sage King and the Philosopher King.
In this very first comparison of the paper I will attempt to offer a tentative interpretation of the authors’ respective views regarding their ideal leaders, the Sage King and the Philosopher King, understanding that it may be necessary in some cases to refer back to the Confucius portion of the text. This initial comparison will, eventually, grow into a larger, more comprehensive analysis. Given that this is the most difficult part of my project I will attempt to proceed with caution. My conclusions will be incomplete and imperfect, but nonetheless, I hope they represent a crucial step in furthering my own and the reader’s understanding. Recall that, like the Philosopher King, the Sage King is rare. Yet Sage Kings have existed, as Confucius regards them as historical figures. In fact, the Book of History or Documents (a book of nearly as much importance as the Book of Songs) provides more detail into the reigns of the various Sage Kings of the early Zhou dynasty.¹⁴¹ Again, these Kings are considered to have been actual people. This is quite different from Plato’s Philosopher King who has never existed, and according to Socrates, probably never will. Confucius is almost as skeptical that he will meet a Sage King but dedicates his life studying their ancient teachings.

The nature of the wisdom responsible for these teachings and the fountain of the Sage King’s authority are quite different from those of Plato’s Philosopher King. Instead of a fabricated myth or legend about gods, the Sage King’s authority comes directly from Heaven (tian 天), and he humbly obeys heavens will. This is one

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¹⁴¹ I refer here to the Western Zhou (1066-771 BC)
reason among many discussed later that Confucius is able to base political leadership in honesty, rather than deception as Plato does.

Yet, despite the Sage King’s true supernatural authority, his knowledge is far less complete than that of the Philosopher King. While the Philosopher King knows the forms, the very foundations of existence, the Sage King has “not put on proud airs” or “change[ed] former ways.” He is not “clever or knowing;” instead, he “follow[s] God’s precepts.”\textsuperscript{42} This is a radically different character and quantity of knowledge. These different conceptions of knowledge, as will be explored in more depth later, results from the different amounts of power Confucius and Plato attribute to different hierarchies of virtues. Confucius values compassion (\textit{ren} \(仁\)) more than wisdom.

For this reason the Sage King comes across as a humble, guiding force, while the Philosopher King is a creative, aggressive legislator. The Sage King bows to heaven, while the Philosopher King represents heaven on earth, the leader “chosen” by the mother of all things. The Philosopher King has the ability to “wipe the slate clean” and write a new human nature. The Sage King has no such power. He passively guides his subjects to greater good. He does not remold them in his image.

Perhaps Plato is simply more ambitious. Perhaps this is why his republic has remained a fiction. Plato’s republic requires a Philosopher King to initiate it—there can be no republic without such a leader. Confucius’ society on the other hand has \textit{already} been founded by a similar individual. Though it would like to have men like them again, it does not need Sage Kings. The customs the Sages have passed on had

\textsuperscript{42}Waley, \textit{Shi Ching} (Book of Songs), Song 243; Cf, Woodend, 8.
been preserved enough to allow Confucius and the people of his day to know more or less what should be done and to live accordingly to a certain extent.

One thing Confucius inherited from the Sages was his view of human nature. We find in the next section that Plato has quite different views on this important topic.
3. NATURE AND EDUCATION

Plato’s views on human nature and education are best illustrated through a discussion of the guardians, rulers one step below Philosopher King. Like junzi 君子 guardians are born right. They are the most elite of the three classes in Republic and have the greatest responsibility, governance. Thus, that their nature be good and their rearing excellent is of the utmost importance; “then our task, it seems, is to select, if we can, which natures, which sorts of natures, suit people to guard the city” (374e).

The characteristics desired are many:

Philosophy, then, and spirit, speed, and strength as well, must all be combined in the nature of anyone who is going to be a really fine and good guardian of our city (376c).

The guardian, then, is a well-rounded leader, capable as a soldier, and versed in both the military and philosophical arts. Such abilities are essential for the governors of a city with a complex internal structure that must also regularly repel invaders.

One way in which the strength of the guardian class is guaranteed is the extensive system of testing, which begins from early childhood:

We must discover which of them are best at safeguarding within themselves the conviction that they must always do what they believe to be best for the city. We must watch them right from childhood, and set them tasks in which a person would be most likely to forget such a conviction or be deceived out of it. And we must select the ones who remember and are difficult to deceive, and reject the others. (413c-d).

The goal is to challenge the young so that they reveal their true colors. Their nature then comes to light. Those that stay bright despite multiple washings are those
worthy of the highest service to their city. Plato is operating on the assumption that we find out who people really are during trying times. But testing is not enough.

During and after testing, future and potential guardians are educated and instructed. This is done with great care, because “the beginning of any job is the most important part,” and the young are so “tender” and “malleable” that they take on “whatever pattern one wishes to impress on [them]” (377b). Specifically, the promising natures are impressed with physical training and music:

What, then, will the education be? Or is it difficult to find a better one than the one that has been discovered over a long period of time—physical training for bodies and musical training for the soul? (376e)

Plato chooses these two forms of education because he views them as having complementary effects. They pull a person in two different directions and leave him well rounded and vibrant. Physical training invigorates the courageous part of the soul, while music tempers the passions. Too much physical training yields an overly belligerent temperament, while too much music makes a coward:

Then it is the person who makes the best blend of musical and physical training, and applies them in the most perfect proportion to his soul, that we would be most correct to describe as completely trained in music and as most in harmony [...] (412a).

The goal is harmony and balance, which makes for good leaders. What kind of musical training has such an effect?

Plato’s conception of music is somewhat different than ours. For when Plato speaks of music, he emphasizes the lyrics, which were narratives.43

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43 Bloom, 449.
So our first task, it seems, its to supervise the storytellers: if they make up a good story, we must accept it; if not, we must reject it. We will persuade nurses and mothers to tell the acceptable ones to their children, and to spend far more time shaping their souls with these stories than they do shaping their bodies by handling them. Many of the stories they tell now, however, must be thrown out (377b-c).

The content of the stories is to be guarded most carefully. Children should only hear stories that glorify virtue. Heroes should not be depicted losing their composure. Children must not hear, for example, the account of Achilles wailing in the *Iliad* (388a-b ). Also, only good things must be attributed to the gods—no jealousy or spite, etc. Once that which is appropriate is determined, stories and music are to undergo no further change. For Plato, invention is the mother of license.

What the overseers of our city must cling to, not allow to become corrupted without their noticing it, and guard against everything is this: there must be no innovation in musical or physical training that goes against the established order (424b).

Innovation in music yields innovation in customs and manners, hairstyles, etc., which undermines the social order.

Contrarily, when done right good music and good stories have an incredibly positive effect on children and thereby society as a whole:

So whenever children play in a good way right from the start and absorb lawfulness from musical training, [...] lawfulness follows them in everything and fosters their growth, correcting anything in the city that may have been neglected before (425a).

Proper behaviors, then, become natural. For Plato, music is a surefire means to achieving what Confucius called ritual propriety (*li* 禮):
The silence appropriate for younger people in the presence of their elders; the giving up of seats for them and standing up in their presence; the care of parents; hairstyles; clothing; shoes; the general appearance of the body; and everything else of that sort (425 a-b).
4. NATURE AND EDUCATION

COMPARISON

I should now like to attempt a brief comparison of the ideas of Plato and Confucius regarding nature and education. First, I offer a brief recap of the Confucian stance on this issue, recognizing that in many cases the complexity of these issues will make it necessary for the reader to look back to the Confucius chapter for further clarification.

As told in the Analects everyone is born with a certain character, known as one’s innate characteristics (zhī 質), which limits what one may achieve during one’s life. Zhi 質 are one’s unrefined, more animalistic side. Through education, especially poetry, one refines one’s innate characteristics and grows more apt at interpreting and navigating the world. Good music, too, has a positive effect on its listeners. Harmony and form in sound can lead to good harmony and form and behavior. Ritual propriety (lǐ 礼) is complimented and enhanced or even caused by such auditory experience.

Confucius and Plato agree that some people are born with better natures than others. This is the basis of Plato’s class system and Confucius’ reason for being able to foresee limitations of his followers’ potentials. They also agree that without refinement natures remain brutish and that too much refinement is bad. Too much refinement, according to Plato, causes one’s soul to be soft; an over-refined individual is pusillanimous. For Confucius, over-refinement makes one an “officious scribe” (6.18). The way to avoid this, for both Plato and Confucius, is a balanced education.
Notably, physical training is all but absent from Confucius’ teachings. He certainly did not see it as an equal partner of poetry or music. Nonetheless, it is impressive how much the two agree on the power of music and lyrics to shape individuals and society. Plato’s “music” includes both aspects of Confucius’ cultural refinement (wen 文), music and poetry. Thus, Plato’s “music” and Confucius’ wen 文 (cultural refinement) are sufficiently analogous to make comparison worthwhile.

Wen 文 is refinement through music and poetry. The key document which the junzi 君子 must study is the Book of Songs, a book of poetry that provides a practical education in virtue, relationships, and politics. It explicitly informs its students “where to stand,” i.e., proper ways of paying respect to elders and superiors, along with proper ways of treating others, improving oneself, and taking action. Music, of course, being the more abstract and mystical of the two, plays a complementary role. Listening to simple music with perfect form has the effect of instilling proper behavior, i.e., ritual propriety (li 礼). Thus, ensuring that the people listen to the proper music is a major task of the ruler. Its effect on the public is so great that it has the law-like effect of bringing harmony to society.

This effect is remarkably similar to the one described by Plato. When lyrics celebrate virtue and give heroic exemplars for children, children naturally imitate these examples and thereby become well behaved, respectful, and productive members of society.

There is little difference between Plato’s lyrics and the Book of Songs. The divergence lies in that though the Book of Songs is poetry, they lie somewhat closer to guidelines that were meant to be interpreted and practiced immediately. They are
proverbs for the good life. In this way the *Book of Songs* is slightly more practical than Plato's stories. Yet the effect that Plato's lyrics will have on children will be quite similar to the effect of the *Book of Songs* on adults. I do gather that Confucius has in mind a more mature audience, even grown *junzi* 君子 benefit from the study of the *Book of Songs*. Still, their similarities are revealing and may shed light on a common thread between many or all ancient approaches to education. While their views on education are similar, when it comes to virtue they could hardly differ more.
5. JUSTICE, VIRTUE AND THE SOUL

I would now like to discuss the Platonic soul in detail, especially as it is manifested in the guardians. It has three parts: the wise, the courageous, and the desirous. This is why it is commonly called the “tripartite soul.” The wise part reasons, the courageous part braves, and the desirous part desires. Plato’s evidence that the soul has three parts is his observance of internal conflict. Since one thing cannot be both something and its opposite at the same time, internal conflict illustrates that there are multiple parts of our selves. For instance, if one sees something really interesting that he wants to look at but knows it is wrong to do so, there is a conflict between the desirous and rational parts of the soul:

And don’t we often notice [...] that when appetite forces someone contrary to his rational calculation, he reproaches himself and feels anger at the thing in him that is doing the forcing; and just as if there were two warring factions, such a person’s spirit becomes the ally of his reason? (440b)

In the preceding example courage sides with the rational against the desirous. In a different circumstance one’s courageous part could seek a fight, and the wise part could restrain it with the wisdom that it would be harmful to fight. Regardless, we know what the well-ordered or just soul looks like. Reason rules courage and desire. And courage always sides with reason in suppressing the appetitive part. The guardian’s soul is this way.

First, guardians tame their appetites. This is no small feat considering what the soul is like:

Fashion a single species of complex, many-headed beast, with a ring of tame and savage animal heads that it can grow and change at will [...] Now, fashion another single species—of lion—and a single one
of human being. But make the first much the largest and the second, second in size. [...] Now, join the three in one, so that they somehow grow together naturally.

The beast represents the desirous part, the lion the courageous, and the human the rational. The multi-headed, multifarious beast is trained to be restrained by reason (the human part), instead of eating and having sex at will. As Cephalus says in Book One, “when the appetites cease to stress and importune us, [...] we escape from many insane masters” (329c). Free from these masters the guardians are free to act in accord with reason. This is known as “self-mastery” (430e). It is a big step on the path of a guardian’s development.

The spirited element is illustrated as a lion or a snake. The lion is bold, courageous, and noble, while the snake is petty and spiteful. Those ruled by this element are honor-seeking military men at best and belligerent egoists at worst. The guardians exhibit the positive aspect of this element, courage:

The preservation of the belief, inculcated by the law through education, about what things, and what sorts of things, inspire terror [...] through pains, pleasure, appetites, and fears and not abandoning it (429c-d).

In other words, the brave hold on to their beliefs and their attachment to their goals even in the most trying circumstances. This is certainly an important characteristic for a governor to have and allows the guardians to be the great generals that they are. To keep it from doing harm and having free reign, the spirited element, like the appetitive element, is governed by the rational one (375a).

The wise, reasonable part reigns. Wisdom is knowledge, which comes from learning, especially the knowledge of “good counsel” or the knowledge needed to be
a good political officer (428a). Guardians are naturally philosophic in nature and receive much education in warfare and matters of state. They have all the knowledge necessary to administer and protect the laws of the city (412c). Wisdom, however, consists of more than gaining information one previously lacked. Having information put into one’s head is like giving sight to the blind. The truly wise individual is educated by being ‘turned towards the light’ or the Form of the Good. He uses his own sight to contemplate it. The Form of the Good is described as having power like the Sun in the following way:

Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their existence and being are also due to it; although the good is not being, but something yet beyond being, superior to it in rank and power (509b).

Thus, because of this wisdom the rational part is most powerful and is the rightful ruler of the soul:

“Then isn’t it appropriate for the rationally calculating element to rule, since it is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul; and for the spirited kind to obey it and be its ally?” (442e).

Wisdom’s place is clearly at the top. Such an arrangement is the only one suitable for a highly competent human being.

If the arrangement of the three parts is sound, i.e., the reasonable part rules, the courageous part does its job, and the desirous and the courageous agree to be ruled, then the soul is just. Internal justice like justice in society is a kind of specialization:
He does not allow the elements in him each to do the job of some other, or the three sorts of elements in his soul to meddle with one another. Instead, he regulates well what is really his own, rules himself, puts himself in order, [...] (443d-444a).

Such an arrangement in the city and in the individual is efficient, and the just man is the most efficacious. His calculating part makes the decisions on behalf of the whole without getting caught up in pride and pleasure. Such well-ordered, just individuals belong at the top of society. This ensures that their reason is given power to do what is best for the city.
I will now attempt a brief comparison of Platonic and Confucian virtues. This is especially difficult, and I expect to come to little more than a tentative understanding. First, I offer a brief recap of the Confucian virtues, recognizing once again that in many cases it will be necessary to look back to the discussion of Confucius for further clarification. Recall that, for Confucius, there is a hierarchy of virtues. One starts with one’s innate characteristics (zhi 質) and refines it with cultural refinement (wen 文) or music and poetry. One can gain knowledge (zhi 智) by reading history and gaining practical experience. Ren 仁, the highest virtue, is exhibited by love and authority on cultural affairs. If present to the fullest degree in one man, it gives him the power to order society through non-action. The masses defer to his example. All of these virtues are aided and improved upon by li 禮. Indeed, it is impossible to travel far on the road to becoming a junzi 君子 without practicing the observance of ritual propriety (li 禮).

Plato’s three parts of the soul correspond only loosely to Confucian ideas. Desire is not spoken of much in the Analects. But, courage corresponds to innate characteristics (zhi 質). Uncultured zhi 質 and courage are brutish in both Confucius and Plato. Wisdom is, of course, directly discussed by both thinkers. For Plato it is the virtue of virtues. For Confucius it is of secondary status.

Interestingly, the virtues are developed in a clear incremental order in Confucius. Each action is part of the piece-meal process of development. Though
there is a hierarchy of virtues in Plato, it does not seem that they are developed individually or in any specific order.

Self-mastery corresponds most closely to Confucius’ li 禮. After all, it is far from proper in the Analects for one to engage in eating and having sex or even doing the tiniest detail of daily activity in just any way, especially selfish or indulgent ways. On a deeper level, ritual propriety orders all of one’s good qualities. Remember that “deference unmediated by ritual propriety is lethargy” and “boldness unmediated by observing ritual propriety (li 禮)is boldness” (8.2). Thus, it is akin to temperance, a kind of order and harmony in the soul. Justice, too, finds its closest counterpart in ritual propriety (li 禮), the great Confucian orderer which encompasses everything. The junzi 君子 does his job of learning and leading excellently. The difference is that it is not as narrowly one job as Platonic justice calls for. Nonetheless, both thinkers greatly value propriety and justice.

In the Analects “courage” itself is discussed little, and its angry side (zhi 质) is basically dismissed as a sign of underdevelopment, as discussed in the previous comparison. The ancient western virtue of courage or sticking to one’s goals in all circumstances as Plato discusses it, however, is not separated as a specific virtue in the Analects, but similar characteristics appear regularly and are valued greatly. Confucius places much importance on the ability to hold onto the right goals through tough situations. It is a hallmark of his philosophy: determination, persistence, slow growth, success. The junzi 君子 engages in this process with all of his being. His goal is li 禮, ren 仁, or sheng 聖 (Sagacity). Many others travel this road
but start from a more distant point. The bravest, we might say, are those that travel the furthest from their place of birth.

From a first and more limited view the wisdom of the guardian and that of the junzi 君子 are not radically dissimilar. The wisdom of each corresponds to practical governance. Plato’s “good counsel” is a form of wisdom that the guardians have, which is much like wisdom (zhi 智) for Confucius. For Plato, however, wisdom can and should be increased to an extreme. One can actually recognize and know the Good in its fullness. This is the wisdom of the Philosopher King, and in this sense it is the virtue of virtues. Yet, in the Analects the aspiration to transcendental knowledge is not mentioned, and wisdom of the practical kind, zhi 智, is of secondary status. The reason why wisdom is so valued in Plato and undervalued in Confucius is because they have different conceptions of it. Plato attributes far more power to wisdom than Confucius does. Plato’s knowledge simply encompasses much more than Confucius’. For Plato, with knowledge one can know the truth, absolutely.

For Confucius, wisdom (zhi 智) gives one foresight and allows one to solve problems, even political problems, effectively. This is nothing like Platonic wisdom, which is complete, beautiful, and perfect to those who recognize it. There is a right way for Plato. How else could a project like Republic be useful? No one in the Confucian vision, on the other hand, can be said to have absolute knowledge. Even King Wen did not grasp heaven’s will with his intellect. He simply obeyed heaven’s command. Zhi 智 then, for Confucius, is of lesser importance. It is nothing compared to ren 仁, which has the power to passively order an entire society based on one
man's supreme example. This vision of ren 仁 is given the central importance in the
Analects that reason is given in Republic. For Plato, wisdom in the right hands can
recreate society and humanity in the vision of the Form of the Good, bringing them
as close to perfection as possible. For Plato wisdom and reason reign supreme.
Though the distinction doesn't exist in ancient Chinese, heart and mind seem to be
facing off. Both thinkers agree that there is a supremely powerful human virtue.
Confucius puts it in the heart, while Plato puts it squarely in the mind. As we will see
these differences bear heavily on the philosophers’ respective views of love.
7. LOVE

What follows is a discussion of each of the thinkers’ views on love and compassion. Unlike the other sections in this portion love will be approached from a comparative viewpoint from the start. This is without a doubt the most complicated and challenging territory of this essay. The great complexities may be somewhat alleviated by revisiting the previous section on ren 仁. A brief recap here will remind the reader that ren 仁 is the supreme Confucian virtue, which encompasses both authoritative conduct and humanity. Those who possess it are cultural and political leaders and great examples that the entire populace is drawn to emulate. During my discussion of ren 仁 I focused on its authoritative side. This was mainly because it is the less obvious and less appreciated aspect of the virtue. The reader should not forget, however, that the humane, compassionate, loving side is of equal importance. Compassion and love for others is the hallmark of ren 仁.

At first glance, love or compassion as we understand it seems to be absent from Republic. I found this surprising and sought to search for a parallel to ren 仁. This parallel is eros. Though eros is quite different from ren 仁, the purpose of sketching it here is to give a sympathetic treatment of Plato, to pin down his conception of love, to understand its unconventionality, and make a fruitful comparison with Confucius.

Love is discussed only briefly in Republic; therefore, one must consult Plato’s later dialogues to fully understand his view. Republic does, however, lay the foundation: all three parts of the soul have eros, a sexual desire for something
beautiful, including the rational part (580d). Plato expanded the common meaning of *eros*, by inferring that *eros* entailed a desire for reproduction and attributing it to the rational part of the soul. This argument can be made with the help of *Symposium*.\(^\text{44}\)

We may start with the question of whether the well-ordered soul causes one to partake in the other-regarding behaviors necessary for justice. In other words, does the Philosopher King need to be compelled to rule the city? Will his sense of justice be enough for him to pay back what is due to his city? Plato’s answer to the latter is yes. His motivation is more than paying back what is due, however. It fulfils a desire of the rational part of his soul or *eros* for wisdom. This rational *eros* stimulated by the Form of Beauty causes them to “neglect the normal requirements of instrumental prudence” and to try to imitate the forms in reality.\(^\text{45}\) This irrational desire of the rational part is linked to the desire for immortality, which can be achieved in two ways. One is through intrapersonal propagation or extending the qualities one values about oneself onto one’s successive future selves—in other words, the self as it proceeds through time, i.e., survival. The other way is through interpersonal propagation or bringing offspring into the world.

As one gets closer to knowing the Form of the Good one’s own traits and the traits they value more greatly resemble said form. This is known as the ascent of desire, which eventually leads to a new kind of interpersonal propagation, the propagation of oneself in other people. Not making new people but making people

\(^{44}\) Given the extreme difficulties and complexities of this topic, in what follows I rely heavily on Terence Irwin’s *Plato’s Ethics*.

\(^{45}\) Irwin, 305.
The two kinds of interpersonal propagation are outlined in *Symposium* as follows:

Now, some people are pregnant in body, and for this reason turn to women and pursue love in that way, providing themselves through childbirth with immortality and remembrance and happiness, as they think, for all time to come; while others are pregnant in soul—because there surely are those who are even more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies, and these are pregnant with what is fitting for a soul to bear and bring to birth. And what is fitting? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, which all poets beget, as well as all the craftsmen who are said to be creative.

(208e-209a)

Often through their art, “legislators, poets, and others achieve their desire for immortality by impressing the effects of their own actions on the minds and characters of others.” This is said to be better than traditional procreation:

[... ] such people, therefore, have much more to share than do the parents of human children, and have a firmer bond of friendship, because the children in whom they have a share are more beautiful and more immortal. Everyone would rather have such children than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind (209c).

Changing others by influencing them with art, words, law, etc. is similar to intrapersonal propagation (survival), because intrapersonal propagation is the desire to extend one’s traits onto one’s future self, a self that does not yet exist. But, since one cannot ensure one’s own survival, it makes sense that one would impress oneself onto other people. This is how one expresses his desire for happiness when properly enlightened.

46 IBID, 309.
47 *Symposium* 208d-209a; Irwin, 309.
48 Irwin, 309-10.
Now, this all seems wildly self-interested, but it lends itself to a less self-interested interpretation. For if Plato propagates in Glaucon, Glaucon receives Plato's care, because Glaucon is now related to Plato as Plato's future self is related to Plato.\(^{49}\) Although this means that one's concern for another is based on his success in making the other like himself, others benefit greatly when those ruled by their rational part are those propagating. They desire to make others similar to them, i.e., ruled properly. Therefore, this love justifies friendship, but what about the care for all people included in traditional views of morality? It seems that there is a way in which this care can be extended at least to all of the community to which one belongs. Indeed, Philosopher Kings propagate themselves onto the community through legislation. This is a good and moral act because the Philosopher King improves the community and, thus, aims at their good.\(^{50}\)

This is obviously quite different from the love of the *Analects*. First it will suffice to say that selfish motivation for compassion is completely absent from Confucius. The idea is antithetical to his philosophy. There is no evidence in the *Analects* that one's personal quest for immortality is a motivation for doing good. Doing good is being good. A *junzi* 君子 needs no guarantee that he will be remembered beyond his lifetime to be himself. For Confucius, introducing a selfish motive for love is like inventing a reason other than living for plants to reach toward the Sun.

\(^{49}\) IBID, 311.  
\(^{50}\) IBID, 316.
Confucius does, however, express the aim that the good deeds a great person performs last for generations (6.22). This is somewhat parallel to the motivation in Plato for one to make oneself last forever. The difference is that for Plato, the emphasis is on oneself and the positive effects are of secondary importance, while for Confucius, one wants the good to last for generations regardless of oneself. In other words, Plato aims at personal immortality, while Confucius aims at lasting good for society. This should not come as a surprise given that ren 仁 is synonymous with generosity and selflessness. This is characteristically Chinese and Confucian. Recall that ancient Chinese does not distinguish between “I” and “we.” The communal nature of society makes it impossible for the selfish desire for immortality to be the basis of love. The term ren 仁, often translated as “humanity,” means that one’s affections extend to all of humanity. Its written character, 仁, is made up of a person (人) and the number two (二): one is not a person until he forms relationships with others. Plato seems to think that the individual comes first and that the relationship one has with others follows. Indeed, for Plato, the relationship one has with oneself is of primary importance. After all, the relationship one has with others is only important because it is analogous to the relationship one has with oneself (if Plato propagates in Glaucon, Glaucon receives Plato’s care, because Glaucon is now related to Plato as Plato’s future self is related to Plato). Plato’s eros is clearly selfish.

51 Ames and Rosemont, 54.
52 IBID, 48.
53 Irwin, 311.
Another difference is that, for Plato, one becomes great and then makes others greater by making them more like oneself. For Confucius, one becomes great by helping others become great:

6.30 Authoritative (ren 仁) persons establish others in seeking to get there themselves.

One does not become great and then impose his personality on others. Growth is communal. People grow together not onto one another. The difference is, perhaps, subtle. Plato’s philosopher makes others like himself; Confucius’ junzi 君子 guides the people on the right path while becoming a junzi君子 and then sets an example that is emulated. Plato puts something good in people, while Confucius brings it out of people.

Therefore, ren 仁, perhaps because it has nothing to do with sexual desire, is more closely related to compassion than eros. It means to “love others” (12.22) and to follow the golden rule (12.2). A ren 仁 loves others directly and treats them well everyday in everyday situations. Plato’s eros, on the other hand, is indirect: A loves B when B starts to instantiate the Form of Beauty as A does. A really only cares for A, but now that B has become like him he cares for B too. This is conditional love. The love of ren 仁 is unconditional.

These visions of love are closely linked to conceptions leadership, which I will take up again later. Confucius’ term, ren 仁, was brought to the world to show rulers another way of ruling. If you treat the people well they will defer. Violence is unacceptable. The Confucian leader leads by example, while the Platonic leader
imposes himself upon the world through legislation. Confucius despises legislation, and does not seek to shape or rebuild people. Confucius leads people to be their best, while Plato seeks to change and mold them. Plato, by proposing an authoritarian love, a love where the better changes the former to be more like himself, takes away the critical component of freedom. The people in whom one propagates do not choose to be more like the person propagating in them. Deception and brute force are acceptable means to this end for Plato. For Confucius, however, the junzi 君子 and Sage King gently guide the people to the right path.

Force and deception are unacceptable. While the power of Confucian leaders is, perhaps, irresistible, the people choose to embrace it, because it is right and good. Confucian leaders are honest. They guide the people by being themselves truly.

If it was not clear whether or not Plato’s justice results in the other-regarding behaviors necessary for morality, there is no question about ren 仁. A key part of ren 仁 is ritual (li 禮), which is almost entirely concerned with other-regarding behaviors: how to stand, how to dress, how to address, when and how to bow, gift-giving and receiving. A ren 仁 has mastered li 禮 and must be most moral and just.

In sum, it is clear that ren 仁 is a more moral and compassionate love than Plato’s eros. After all, ren 仁 is about setting an example. The leader is so wonderful, loving, and respectful that people cannot help but want to imitate him. They cannot help but adore and defer to him. They feel ashamed if they do not do their best to live up to the standard he sets. Ren 仁 takes people as they are and brings the best out of them. Plato’s love, on the other hand, is about making others like oneself. It is
about changing them, “making people new.”\textsuperscript{54} I account for this difference in the fact that the two thinkers are discussing different kinds of love. Plato’s \textit{eros} is a sexual desire for something beautiful, be it of the rational part or not. Thus, Plato’s love has a romantic element that is absent from Confucius. This does not get Plato completely off the hook, however. We can understand his erotic conception of love, but why is a compassionate \textit{ren}-like love absent? In the end, love is a slippery and difficult term to discuss. Certainly, in this comparison there is much ambiguity at work, and my conclusions cannot be as firm as I would like them to be. Nonetheless, we can clearly see the difference between Confucius’ inclination for guidance and Plato’s tendency to rewrite people like blank slates—a difference important for the next section on governance.

\textsuperscript{54} IBID, 308.
8. GOVERNANCE: DECEPTION AND NOBLE LIES

*Republic* may not be the most accurate title for Plato's *locus classicus*. It is the name given by Cicero that bears the weight of tradition, but does not have the correct connotation. The word “republic” implies a state in which the members have a certain equality. This is not the case in *Republic*, and a more proper rendering of the Greek “Politeia” may be “Regime”\(^{55}\) or “Political System.” Indeed, the political arrangement of the ideal city is the most prominent feature of the work.

Primary to Plato’s order is his conception of human nature: most people are ruled by their appetites and do not know what is best for them. So, if a political leader *tells* them what is best for them, even if it is in fact best for them, they will be unlikely to see the truth of his prescription. Therefore, deception is necessary:

It looks as though our rulers will have to employ a great many lies and deceptions for the benefit of those they rule (459c).

One benefit is the maintenance of the strict three-part class system of workers, soldiers, and rulers. People are placed into a category based on early childhood testing and do one job for the rest of their lives.

These three groups correspond to the three major types of people: the desirous, the courageous, and the wise. The structure of the city is inextricably tied up with the virtues of temperance, courage, wisdom, and the overarching virtue of justice. Indeed, the city may be seen as a way to personify the virtues into classes so as to facilitate the discussion of their appearance in the individual soul. A full discussion of them is crucial to understand the city:

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\(^{55}\) Bloom, 439-440.
But now, the city, at any rate, was thought to be just because each of the three natural classes within it did its own job; and to be temperate, courageous, and wise, in addition, because of certain other conditions or states of these same classes (435b).

The natural classes are the craftsman (workers), the auxiliaries (soldiers), and the guardians (rulers). They each do their own job of working, fighting, and ruling respectively. As a result, the city gains the attributes of temperance, courage, and wisdom. Because the workers agree that it is proper for them to be ruled and to have no voice in politics, the city is temperate. Because the soldiers hold onto the law and fear things appropriately, the city is courageous. Because the rulers are prudent and highly educated, the city is wise. We shall now look at each class in turn.

The city is temperate because the masses, which work and pursue their appetites, agree to let the rulers govern the city without interference.

Don’t you see, then that this too is present in your city, and that the appetites of the masses—the inferior people—are mastered there by the wisdom and appetites of the few—the best people? (431c-d).

The masses are ruled by their appetites, but since the rulers rule the masses, the city remains stable and well governed.

And moreover, if there is any city in which rulers and subjects share the same belief about who should rule, it is this one. Or don’t you agree? (431d-e).

This deference allows for peace and harmony in the city. The masses mind their own business pursuing their craft, be it shoemaking or construction or cooking. In their
spare time they dress themselves in nice clothing and jewelry and eat delicate food and desserts.

The auxiliary class is the soldier class. Because of it the city is courageous.

So courage, too, belongs to a city because of a part of itself—because it has in that part the power to preserve through everything its belief that the things, and the sorts of things, that should inspire terror are the very things, the sorts of things, that the lawgiver declared to be such in the course of educating it. Or don’t you call that courage? (429b-c).

Courage is the defining characteristic of the soldiers. In battle they never lose sight of their goal, to uphold the law and protect the city. Soldiers live austere lives of service. They are not allowed to profit from their work or engage in leisure activities. They eat in mess halls and live in barracks even during times of peace. Sparta seems to be Plato’s model for this group.

The guardian class is wise. It leads.

I think the city we described is really wise. And that is because it is prudent, isn’t it?

Prudence is proper deliberation about the city as whole:

Knowledge [...] that does not deliberate about some particular thing in the city, but about the city as a whole, and about how its internal relations and its relations with other cities will be the best possible [...] it is the craft of guardianship, and the ones who possess it are those rulers we just now called complete guardians (428c-d).

Guardians handle the affairs of state. Their craft is politics. This class is the most highly educated and most carefully selected because their job is so important.

With a philosophic nature and proper education comes access to the truth. By putting such people in charge, the political system simulates in those ruled by
their courageous or appetitive part the effects of being ruled as the leaders are, i.e.,

by the rational part:

In order to ensure, then, that someone like that is also ruled by something similar to what rules the best person, we say that he should be the slave of that best person who has the divine ruler within himself (590c-d).

For Plato, the hierarchy is clear. Those ruled by their appetites should be slaves to those ruled by their reason.

Each of these classes doing the one activity that corresponds to their virtue is justice.

And surely what we laid down and often repeated, if you remember, is that each person must practice one of the pursuits in the city, the one for which he is naturally best suited (433a).

No craftsmen rule at all. The soldiers, too, have no say in the affairs of state. The law and the lawmakers tell them what to fear and how to defend the city. It is proper for a guardian to be a general but not to fight or practice any craft. Therefore, everyone focuses their complete attention on mastering the one job that allows them to contribute the most to the city. Like cogs in a machine their purpose is to do one job excellently, so that the whole system is vibrant and functions smoothly. This is a great strength:

After our consideration of temperance, courage, and wisdom, I think that what remains in the city is the power that makes it possible for all of these to arise in it, and that preserve them when they have arisen for as long as it remains there itself. And we did say that justice would be what remained when we had found the other three (433b-c).
Justice is the foundation, and the virtues of the classes arise from it. Without it none of the other virtues are possible.

The Noble Lie

Now the city has achieved these critical criteria, temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. But why do the people agree to be ruled in this way? This is where deception comes in. Believing that the people will not accept the system, unless there is a quasi-religious aspect to it, Plato devises a “noble lie,” which serves this purpose:

I will first be trying to persuade the rulers and the soldiers, and the rest of the city, that [...] they were [...] down inside the earth being formed and nurtured, and [...] the earth, their mother, sent them up, so that now, just as if the land in which they live were their mother and nurse, they must deliberate on its behalf, defend it if anyone attacks it, and regard the other citizens as their earthborn brothers (414d-e).

This first part of the lie unites the city and serves as a creation story for its origin. All of its members were born of the same mother, the earth. Therefore, they are not only bound to the land, but also to each other.

The next part is the “myth of the metals,” a lengthy passage that designates the classes and their maintenance:

“Although all of you in the city are brothers,” we will say to them in telling our story, “when the god was forming you, he mixed gold into those of you who are capable of ruling, which is why they are the most honorable; silver into the auxiliaries; and iron and bronze into the farmers and other craftsmen. For the most part, you will produce children like yourselves; but, because you are all related, a silver child will occasionally be born to a golden parent, a golden child to a silver parent, and so on. Therefore, the first and most important command from the god to the rulers is that there is nothing they must guard better or watch more carefully than the
mixture of metals in the souls of their offspring. If an offspring of theirs is born with a mixture of iron or bronze, they must not pity him in any way, but assign him an honor appropriate to his nature and drive him out to join the craftsman or the farmers. On the other hand, if an offspring of the latter is found to have a mixture of gold or silver, they will honor him and take him up to join the guardians or the auxiliaries. For there is an oracle that the city will be ruined if it ever has an iron or bronze guardian.” So, have you a device that will make them believe this story? (415a-b).

According to this passage, the most important task of the rulers is to make sure those whose natures are suited for a given class end up in that class. This prevents someone of lesser ability from taking the reigns of government and ensures that the talent of a gifted person is not wasted in the fields. Why does Plato think the people will not accept such a system if they believe it was invented by men? He does not give a specific answer, but the supernatural character of the story—the god and the oracle—makes convincing the people easier. For the people, especially a crude, selfish people, are unlikely to put their reason ahead of their passions and are more willing to heed the demands of gods than men. What is more, the implicit threat of destruction or fear is an effective means of persuasion. Although none of the supernatural story is true, the people benefit from the implementation of such a system. Thus, it is for the people’s benefit regardless of its honesty. For Plato, those with superior knowledge are justified in leading the masses with lies. But how will the conditions necessary to implement the noble lie ever come to be? Plato goes to extremes:

Everyone in the city who is over ten years old they will send into the country. They will take over the children and far removed from current habits, which their parents possess, they will bring them up in their own ways and laws, which are the ones we described before. And with the city and constitution we were discussing thus established in the quickest and easiest way, it will itself be happy and bring the greatest benefit to the people among whom it comes
Plato essentially proposes to reengineer an entire populous against their will. How would Confucius feel about that?
9. GOVERNANCE
COMPARISON

In order to continue our comparison and come to a fuller understanding of the differences between these authors, we will examine their views on government. Confucius’ political system is different than Plato’s in important ways that help us to recognize some of the more illusive divergences in their projects. Interestingly, Confucius and Plato both agree that written and penal law are harmful. They both express concerns that such practices lead to the people becoming obsessed with circumventing it and engaging in self-interested lawsuits. Instead, they favor tradition, norms based in culture. The difference is that \textit{li}, as previously outlined, is promulgated by the leaders example. It is a set of norms, traditions, and values shared by the entire society for a long time. It serves to regulate the behavior of individuals and the groups they make up, be they familial, professional, or governmental. The leader may alter them slightly, and he also serves as a constant reminder of proper behavior. The people imitate him, and the empire is harmonious. Plato seeks a similar outcome by different means. Since the tradition he invents is nonexistent during his day, he must start from scratch. That means creating a lie and a quasi-religious foundation for society. As a result, \textit{li} is a more authentic foundation in that it results from the long evolution of actual traditions.

One thing that ensures Confucius’ society is peaceful is deference. At the center of the pattern of deference is the emperor, with the nobles, ministers, household stewards, and commoners following (16.2). However, unlike guardians and Philosopher Kings the greatest leaders in the land do not have absolute power.
They expect to be challenged and disagreed with regularly. A good advisor openly challenges his lord and is expected to resign if he is not heeded in certain, important instances: “In striving to be authoritative in your conduct (ren 仁), do not yield even to your teacher” (15.36). What is more, rulers are expected to follow the advice of their advisors and the wishes of the people: “Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) [do not] give the great ministers occasion to harbor ill will because they are ignored” (18.10). This is quite different from Plato’s society where the political voice of the masses is, essentially, mute. In Confucius’ ideal society there is a lot of back-and-forth between the upper and lower orders of society. Roles are fixed but the barriers are somewhat permeable in both directions.

Interestingly, Confucius seems to have mixed feelings on Plato’s conception of justice as specialization. Confucius agrees that people should behave in a pre-defined way, especially towards others given their societal role: “Ministers minister, fathers father, sons son” (12.11). However, he does not believe that such limitations should apply to the activities in which one partakes. The reason is that being well-rounded is a virtue. Specialization in profession or study is petty:

2.12 The Master said: Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) are not mere vessels.

The vessel is a recurring metaphor for someone who is good at one job. Being trained for a specific job is seen as quite distinct from true education. Confucian education is for the sake of “personal cultivation”, or “building character,” not
“acquiring specific skills.” The personal growth that results from engaging in a wide range of activities is important, not the activities themselves. So, Confucius would certainly agree that Plato’s guardians should guardian (rule), and he probably would appreciate their well-rounded education. But Confucius would allow craftsman to practice their craft (or two) and study and think about affairs of state and expect and demand a certain autonomy over their own lives. Like the class system itself, specialization is not as rigid in the Analects.

This brings me to my last point, the importance Confucius places on the trust of the people. It is more valuable than food and arms (12.7). Trust is mutual, not one-sided like in Plato where the rulers rule and the lower classes are compelled by an illusion to follow. Confucian trust results from the virtue and good leadership of the rulers, not a religious myth that says they are superior. I believe this mutual trust allows Confucian society to be more flexible and therefore more enduring. This may be why, though both authors talk of inevitable decline, Confucius’ is gradual, unlike the catastrophic changes between democracy and tyranny, for example, that Plato describes. After all, little like Plato’s system has ever existed, while some version of Confucian society has been in place for 1500 years. What lessons can we learn from these two systems, one fact, one fiction?

56 Ames and Rosemont, 233.
III. THE LESSONS AND LIMITS OF COMPARISON

1. LESSONS

Several differences between the philosophies of Plato and Confucius have emerged in this paper. As we have seen, their ideal rulers, the Philosopher King and the Sage King, differ greatly. The values they hold above all others, wisdom and ren (仁), though correspondingly powerful, are radically different. The aspect of love that they see as primary mirrors this divergence; Plato focuses on the generative and Confucius on the brotherly. These differences are reflected in their vision of society. Plato calls for a top-down society in which the philosophers hold absolute power and the masses are compelled to obey based on a supernatural myth. Confucius favors a society in which the ruler’s virtue causes the people to defer on their own accord without deception. Though both have been labeled “authoritarian” by today’s standards, they are more different than alike. What can we gather from such divergent philosophies? What lies at the heart of these differences, and how can each of these thinkers help us understand the other?

One piece of the puzzle is their different conceptions of the nature of virtue. Plato holds that once one is born with virtue it can be extracted for the good of society through education and service. Potential guardians are tested as children, and those that hold firm to society’s values in the face of temptation and adversity go on to further tests and education until the true guardians are found. While the tests and education are important, the emphasis is on one’s nature. The character of one’s soul as reflected in its corresponding “metal” is the determining factor. The tests are simply meant to reveal it. Those whose souls reveal gold stay shiny and
new, so to speak, for the rest of their lives. Their virtue is exercised but not constantly maintained or improved once the educational program has been completed. For Plato, then, one who is born right is close to the end of the road—at least much closer than Confucius would say.

In contrast Confucius emphasizes nurture. One’s nature is a limiting factor, but so few people actually reach their potential or even come close that one need not pay much attention to it. Action, for Confucius, is the deciding factor in acquiring virtue and excellence. The junzi 君子 starts with one tiny action, sitting up straight, for example, and proceeds by adding and complicating his actions down to the right facial expression until he has mastered his body and emotions and thereby his soul. This takes constant attention: “Exemplary persons 君子 do not take leave of their authoritative conduct (ren 仁) even for the space of a meal” (4.5). A junzi 君子 spends his whole life in the details. Eventually, these deliberate actions are internalized and nearly perfected but almost no one, besides the Sage King, “walks this path every step from start to finish” (19.12).

These two visions of the nature of virtue lead to rather different political implications. Plato emphasizes the need for early testing and classes, while Confucius prefers more mobility and interaction between classes and wider education and cultivation across society: “In instruction, there is no such thing as social classes” (15.39). Virtue structures society and informs leadership.

For Plato, since virtue is inherent, and the best virtue is wisdom, which is not demonstrable to those who lack it, Philosopher Kings must rule behind a veil of lies in order to be effective. The superiority and wisdom of the Philosopher King is not
demonstrable to the people because it is inherent and not acquired through practice. That is to say, it is very difficult to tell the difference between a wise person and an unwise person just by looking at him. This is why Socrates needs lengthy questioning in order to determine if his interlocutor really knows something and the reason Plato needs elaborate tests to find the golden souls. Reason, the power behind the virtue sought, is elusive. What is more, even if wisdom were demonstrable the people wouldn’t accept it. They are too ignorant and indulgent for that. This is why the noble lie is necessary. It is the only way to secure order, especially given that the love of the Philosopher King stems from his desire for immortality. His rational eros seeks to place his imprint on others and society as a whole, regardless of their wishes.

One-sided love goes hand-in-hand with one-sided politics. The Philosopher King holds absolute power. The foundation of this power is a lie. With deception comes the need for fixed classes. Information must be controlled, because the people cannot find out about the myth. More importantly, the wishes of the masses must not be allowed to influence government. The hidden virtue of the greatest citizens causes deception after deception in society as the masses’ political voice diminishes.

Confucius, who emphasizes selfless love and action, thinks the people can be made to understand the greatness of the junzi 君子 and thereby defer. His ren 仁 and li 禮 can be demonstrated non-rationally through great, benevolent, and proper actions and rituals. This is evidence enough. When they see him dressed in fine robes with an “air of dignity” they are impressed (20.3). Word spreads that this
leader is exemplary. His decrees are put in place and the whole empire enjoys a better life and aspires to improve. This virtue and its demonstrability allows Confucius to base his society on a foundation of trust instead of lies.

Are these differences in philosophies differences in opinion or is there something more fundamental underlying the philosophies? This is a question that is difficult to resolve, but the works themselves are suggestive of deeper patterns of divergence.
2. THE LIMITS OF COMPARISON

Language

Plato’s project seems to exhibit the quest for certainty characteristic of western philosophy. As Ames and Rosemont point out:

The dominant mode of learning in the West, throughout its history, has been to acquire knowledge about the world, to learn the way the world is; and to describe that world in grammatical sentences, expressing complete thoughts, sentences which are true or false.57

When in Book Eight Plato introduces a novel mathematical calculation to account for the perfection and decline of the political system outlined, he shows a weakness/strength for certainty. As Allan Bloom explains in a footnote,

The surface reason for the number’s appearance here is to relate the cosmic principles of science to this perfect regime, to establish a harmony between the knowledge of nature and of politics. In this way the highest human things would not be merely the playthings of chance, and there could be perfect technical control over the condition of decent political life.58

Plato seeks mathematical perfection and total control. This contrasts with Confucius who seeks a flexible, (merely) good, society. This imperfect flexibility is illustrated in li 禮, which encompasses nearly all modes of behavior. Plato may be attracted to li’s 禮 breadth, but unlike Plato’s system, li 禮 is permitted and encouraged to evolve. A true junzi 君子 not only masters his culture but also leaves his mark on it. He forges its path in a new direction. What is more, the nature of Chinese language does not permit emphasis on absolute truth and certainty. Like

57 Ames and Rosemont, 32.
58 Bloom, 467
the brushstrokes of characters everything is in a state of flux. Nothing is written in stone. When one refers to “that tree” in ancient Chinese he refers to that tree now, not that tree tomorrow, not that tree in a year—those are different trees. English is quite the opposite. This is a case where the difference in the languages is fundamental to the difference in their philosophies. It is something I certainly cannot entirely capture but that runs through this entire work.

**Terms**

There are more difficulties with language. When Plato speaks of wisdom he is talking about the power of reason to access truth itself. The mind converses with the forms. Those with such abilities are far superior to those without them. Confucius on the other hand, sees wisdom (zhi 智) as synonymous with knowledge of history and governance and the ability to make good decisions based on that knowledge. It is a kind of craft like the guardian’s good counsel. From the shared term, “wisdom,” come two very different ideas that, as a result, are assigned different levels of importance. Plato’s wisdom is the supreme virtue, while Confucius’ wisdom (zhi 智) is important but not outstanding.

As discussed previously, their notions of love are also quite different. Confucius’ is unselfish, while Plato’s is selfish. Confucius’ is not sexual, while Plato’s is. In this sense they are not talking about the same thing. To identify them both using the English word “love” is an oversimplification. This obviously presents difficulties when it comes to making evaluations and judgments. Statements like

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59 Ames and Rosemont, 21.
Confucius’ love is more/less x than Plato’s love are less meaningful, because neither of them used the word “love.” They used 仁 and ἔρως. Therefore, one needs to, in a sense, operationalize the terms. Confucius’ love becomes ren, the compassionate, humane, non-romantic love, and Plato’s love becomes eros, the passionate, sexually driven side of love attributed to the rational part of the soul. There numerous pitfalls and trapdoors when trying to compare the two terms, but such risks are unavoidable.

Despite obstacles with language, there seems to be enough ground for a rough comparison. Neither author, after all, is writing in English, which is the mediating language in which the terms are operationalized and discussed. Comparing them may not be more difficult than talking about either of them separately in English. I hold that this process has been sufficiently fair to both philosophers for my conclusions to be sound.

Societal Considerations

Plato lived in democratic Athens. In order to illustrate the authoritative, Spartan society which he desired he had to make suggestions that clashed with Athenian norms. Trying to create an authoritative tradition and culture where none existed led to some of the works most shocking aspects, such as the noble lie and banishment of those over the age of ten.
Confucius, on the other hand, lived in a society where authority and ritual (*li*) had once been established. They had simply deteriorated and been ignored during his life, while violence became the norm. When Confucius calls for tradition, he primarily means bringing back the old, Zhou values his society once held with improvements and alterations. Take deference for example, in Confucius’ day heads of state knew that the Zhou royal family was the rightful center of deference, but they chose to place themselves above it and trample the laws of filial responsibility. If Plato had already been living in a more monarchical or aristocratic society what would his project look like? He may have had an easier time fitting his ideal with reality, which would have resulted in fewer shocking and disturbing suggestions. The noble lie may well have vanished and there would be no need to banish everyone over the age of ten because the reeducation would be of a lesser degree instead of total.

Nevertheless, it may be that since the authors faced these different challenges, we gain a clearer picture of the true nature of their thought. The democratic city forces Plato to tell us how he truly understands authority and the masses, while the large complicated states of Confucius forced him to choose between going further from the feudal Zhou ideals or coming back to them. He chose the latter. Both authors had to consider their current societies, but they approached them very differently, which reveals deeper divergences in their perspectives.

*Size and population*
Another consideration is that geographical size and population density may have a lot to do with the degree of control and rigidity in *Republic* as opposed to the flexible, deferential society we find in the *Analects*. Plato was writing about a polis, while Confucius was writing about large kingdoms. Would Plato’s prescriptions have been different if his project was to unite all of Greece under one political system? This is essentially what Confucius set out to do for China. His aspiration was for the various kingdoms and feudal lords to join under one royal family as they had in the early Zhou period. Deference is a practical necessity in that case. Even in China today, with its heavily populated cities and less developed countryside, the one party ruling from Beijing leaves a lot up to its provincial governments, autonomous and semi-autonomous regions. It is simply extremely difficult for a centralized government to exercise control over such a big country from one location. Confucius’ plan may have been quite different for a small, dense city-state.

Yet there are reasons to believe it may not have been so different. There were cities in Confucius’ day that may have been candidates for more rigid control, but that he still would have liked to have been ruled in a deferential, ritual manner. This is indication that there is something much deeper than the political, and societal issues facing these authors that lead to their profound differences.

*Final thoughts*

Despite these difficulties in comparing thinkers from distant lands and traditions, comparison between Confucius and Plato is still possible and fruitful. The above discussions have been evocative enough to give us a decent picture of the core differences between the two men and the traditions they helped found:
Confucius, the enduring and flexible Chinese—Plato, the restless and productive West. It is not my purpose to judge which is superior, but I will leave you with the words of Confucius, himself:

15.33 When Persons come to a realization but are not compassionate enough to sustain its implementation, even though they had it, they are sure to lose it.

9.4 There were four things the Master abstained from entirely: he did not speculate, he did not claim or demand certainty, he was not inflexible, and he was not self-absorbed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


