John Holowaty

LAS 341

Peter Barr

February 24, 2015

# Confucian, Taoist, and Personal Ethical Values

Confucianism and Taoism are both ways of life derived from ancient Chinese scriptures and teachings. Both, Confucianism and Taoism, have been referred to as religions, as well as philosophies. Each are very heavily characterized by the connection between man, nature, and the universe. However, even though these two religions were founded during the same era, and by similar cultures, they have many differences when it comes to their moral and ethical values. Both can connect to my personal values in their own way. I was brought up in a family that is very religious, as I was baptized in the Lutheran church at the age of two weeks old. Since that day, I have always been somewhat involved in the church. That, as well as my parents and extended family, has molded my moral and ethical views on life.

Confucianism was created around the 6th-5th century BC, and revolves around the teachings of the philosopher, Confucius. Although he was not the one who formed the religion, he is known to be the one who retrieved and transmitted the philosophy. This religion has been followed and practiced by the Chinese for more than 2 thousand years. It focuses on humanness, and the connection between man, nature, and the universe, as does much of ancient Chinese thought. There are five principal virtues of humanity, named Wuchang, which includes: humaneness, righteousness, proper rite, knowledge, and integrity. Loyalty to family, as well as the devotion to take care of them, is one of the most important aspects of Confucian values. There are four ancient Confucius narratives that help guide those who follow, these include: Da xue, Zhong yong, Lunyu, and Mengzi. The Da zue, or “Great Learning”, links the human government with the personal integrity of rulers. The Zhong yong, or “Doctorine of the Mean”, talks about the way of Heaven, including motion, spiritual beings, and religious sacrifices. The Lunuyu, “Conversations”, consists of direct quotes from ancient Confucius, recorded by disciples. And lastly, the Mengzi, which is the longest of the four, emphasizes the essential goodness of human nature.

Similar to Confucianism, Taoism is an ancient Chinese religion that was founded around 550 BC in China. Another similarity is that it focuses around the connection between man, nature, and the universe. The word Tao, or Dao, can be translated as “way”, “path”, or “principal”. The main focus of the teachings of Tao Te Ching is on the spiritual harmony within the individual. This philosophy has no god, substance, or being that is worshipped, rather, it is a way of life. It has a five part scheme that is used to explain events that happen in each individual’s life, this is called Wu Xing. Ranging from yang to ying, the Wu Xing is made up of mu, huo, tu, jin, and shu. On one side of the scale there is yang, or good, and on the other side is yin, or bad. Taoists believe in the philosophy of ying and yang, which represents perfect balance. The natural order of the universe states that with every good, there is bad, and with every bad, there is good.

(1) The first Confucian story, taken from *The Works of Mencius*, we are shown an example of the Confucius virtue of humaneness. This story is about a king who has a decision on his hands, which is to spill the blood of an ox to gain respect and loyalty from his people, or to not kill the ox, on the account that he “could not bear its frightened appearance, as if it were an innocent person going to the place of death.” This helps us answer the question of if one is obliged to try to save life. In the Confucian culture, each person follows a set of values, all in hopes to reach the point of Ren. To achieve Ren is to master the way of virtue, morality, compassion, and love. In the case of the babies being killed in Ethiopia, a good Confucian would not allow this, and would do whatever it took to save this you boy, who was sentenced to death for the simple fact that his top teeth came in before his bottom teeth. On the other hand, there are Taoist beliefs. While the Confucius way of thought is to follow the specific principals of humaneness, righteousness, proper rite, knowledge, and integrity, the Taoist way is to become one with the Tao. Becoming one with Tao, or path of life, the individual must fully grasp the concept that the universe is in perfect balance. For this reason, I do not believe that Taoists would agree with the act of killing young children for the sake of the community. However, they would not intervene with the act. The reason for this being that they believe that there is good in all bad things, and bad in good. Their belief in individual detachment would provoke a Taoist to be a bystander in a situation such as this. A quote from *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* helps illustrate the belief, “If I were to follow after her [Chuang Tzu’s wife] bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don’t understand anything about fate. So I stopped.”

(4) If the baby turned out to be a mass murderer, the Confucian belief would cause them to protect the well-being of their family, and community. This means that if there truly was a possibility of the baby being a horrific human, then a Confucian would do what was best for their family and put it to death. A Taoist would, once again, stay as a bystander and not intervene because they would believe in the concept of yin and yang, and the fact that the universe will balance itself out on its own.

In the case of the Ethiopian way of murdering young children for certain physical defects, I agree more with the Confucian thought, and intervene with the act. This is because I believe that every human deserves the rightful chance to live, and we should not be the judge of whether or not the baby is evil due to its physical features. However, if the child did grow up to be a mass murderer, I would do what is right for my family and community and remove the child. But if, and only if, there was a known fact that this child was demonic, or had harmful intent; not on the basis of his teeth growing in differently.

In my life, pieces of both of these philosophies are very evident. For as long as I can remember, I have been taught a minor form of Taoist ethics. This has come in the form of one simple phrase in which I had been taught by my parents before I was even given the ability to speak. This phrase is well-known as the “Golden Rule”. This golden rule says, “Treat others the way you would like to be treated.” It wasn’t until I read more about Taoist belief that I truly realized that they are very similar. Going throughout life, we encounter many events that will tip our world upside down. However, in these times of yin, one must treat others as they would like to be treated. Another phrase that my mother use to say here and there, comes from the movie “Annie”. The line is, “the sun will come out, tomorrow”. Though this is a very cliché phrase, it is as concept that has forever been in the back of my mind, and one that has kept me sane during tough times in my life. On the other hand, Confucius thought also ties into my personal ethical values. Loyalty to family is a very distinct value of Confucianism, and is a core value in my own life. At the age of 11, my mother and father made the decision that they could no longer go on with their marriage, so they came to my three siblings and me and told us that they were getting a divorce. Being the middle child, and the oldest son, instinctively felt that I needed to take on the role of being the man of the house while we were living with our mom. At this time I was enrolled in Sunday school at my church, so one of the first things that I did was went to my Pastor and asked for guidance. As an 11 year old, my pastor told me that the best thing that I could do was to stay tight with my siblings, and make certain that no matter what I did, I needed to keep my brother and sisters close because they needed me more than ever. From that day forth, I have always been the one that my siblings would come to for anything, whether that meant they were sad about the divorce and they needed a shoulder to cry on, or something in there life was bothering them. By becoming somewhat of a leader, I gained the ethical values of loyalty, love, and compassion, similar to that of the Confucius teachings.

In conclusion, the two philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism have very similar, yet distinct ethical values. However, both focus on ancient Chinese teachings that focus on way of life, and the connection between man and the universe. Each of the two philosophies are evident in my personal ethics, values, and approach on life.