

Confucius and Confucianism

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Confucius (K'ung Fu-tzu) was born of a rather impoverished family of noble descent in the state of Lu (in modern Shantung). He quickly achieved a reputation for scholarship and learning. During his life, he witnessed the disintegration of unified imperial rule. He was a great admirer of the Duke of Zhou, and sought to convince various nobles to rule according to certain social customs he associated with early Zhou culture. These customs emphasized moral responsibility and the concept of the *chün tzu*. The *chün tzu* was any refined gentleman who embodied the virtue of benevolence while he maintained traditional rites, customs, and filial piety toward his ancestors, family, and the gods. Stereotypically, this gentleman was marked by his white beard, fine clothes, and long fingernails. Confucianism might be seen as a philosophy in which politics and government are an extension of morality and tradition. As long as the ruler remained benevolent, the government will naturally work toward the good of the people (Lau n. p.). A Confucian philosopher strove to be responsible, controlled, and temperate.

Confucius spent ten years traveling through the whole of China's various states. He had ambitions of attaining a political position at one of the Chinese courts, but he never succeeded in this endeavor and spent most of his life as a teacher. Realizing that the warlike leaders paid no attention to his philosophy, Confucius returned to Lu, and he spent the rest of his life training a group of gifted and devoted students. The importance of Confucius lies in having been one of China's first great teachers as well as a political philosopher. His policy was to accept anyone as a disciple provided that the student was genuinely eager to learn, and this idea was revolutionary in a society in which education was the exclusive privilege of the aristocracy. He is also one of the first Chinese philosophers to leave behind a collection of teachings that can be reliably ascribed to his authorship. This is the *Lun yü*, or the *Analects* as the work is commonly known in English.

In the Western Han, Confucianism became generally associated with a reverence for "ancient" books and "ancient gods." It later grew to be the official state philosophy of the Chinese empire; it retained this preeminent position up until the twentieth-century. Confucianism ultimately became the basis of a state religion. While it was based on the ancient gods and rites, it was associated closely with philosophical ideals as well. Inevitably, the Master's teachings became modified over the course of time. The official Confucian state religion, organized and maintained in Han times, ruthlessly exterminated local cults and destroyed the temples of wayside gods. All religious authority was centralized and focused in the capital city, while unorthodox belief was treated as mere superstition (Schafer 61). *The Analects* (Lun Yü) is a collection of Confucius' sayings gathered in a single text, which is the only reliable record of his philosophy. The other "Confucian Classics" were compiled centuries after his death. *The Analects* is one of the pillars of Chinese culture and have been widely read across

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the centuries. The only other comparable book in Western Culture is the Bible (Lau, n. p.).

Mencius: Confucius inspired an entire school of Chinese thinkers. Probably the most illustrious thinker in his school was **Mencius**. Much like Confucius, Mencius traveled in different states for several years attempting to persuade rulers to adopt his philosophy with little success. He is best known for his argument that human nature is inherently good. He argues that humans are born with the capacity for distinguishing between right and wrong. Individuals may not know from childhood which acts are acceptable and which ones are not, but all children are capable of feeling shame, and once they learn which acts are good or bad, they have a natural tendency to approve of the former and disapprove of the latter. His argument was aimed at countering the then-current theory that human nature consists only of evil appetites, but he also sought to reinvigorate the traditional idea subscribed to Confucius that morality was decreed by heaven. Mencius successfully broke down the rigid intellectual barrier between human tendencies and heavenly decrees. He argued that morality is as much a part of human nature as selfish appetites, and the biological drives are as much a part of heavenly decree or the natural world as morality is. Another of the Mencius' noteworthy arguments is his idea that the function of a ruler is to further the good of his subjects. If a ruler abuses his power, he is no longer acting as a ruler. Instead, he is just a "fellow," and he has lost the mandate of heaven. The people then have the right to rebel against him. Many of Mencius' ideas can be found in his "dialogue" concerning the transfer of rule from Yao to Shun.

Influences of Confucianism: In many ways, Confucian philosophy is a middle-ground between the harsh doctrines of the [Legalist school](#) of philosophy and [Taoism](#). Legalist philosophy adheres strictly to rules and custom, but it emphasizes punishment and discipline, and it lacks the Confucian emphasis on kindness and contemplation. Likewise, the Confucian emphasis on rational practicality and common sense is something that Taoism lacks.

On the other hand, Taoist philosophy is in many ways much more flexible than Confucianism. Taoist writers seek to avoid being "boxed" by rules, definitions and empty words. They encourage a sort of intuitive and non-logical way of seeking balance in the world by resisting the desire to interfere with normal processes of nature. Taoism emphasizes *wu wei*--enlightened non-action rather than needless bustle and "busy-work" for its own sake. Legalism emphasizes *wu yu*--active attempts to modify human behavior for the better by restraining the evil impulses of humanity in a rigid hierarchy of law. Confucianism, while not completely incompatible with either philosophy, suggests that thoughtful contemplation is necessary in making decisions rather than blindly following rules (the Legalist philosophy) or letting luck and intuition dominate human behavior (the Taoist philosophy). Confucianism thus rejects the Taoist notion that virtue should be an almost-instinctive and unthinking reaction in the good man. While Confucianism shares the legalist desire to maintain tradition and behave according to appropriate ritual and precedent, Confucius rejects the rhetoric and imagery of violent

conformity so often founded in Legalist documents.

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