

An Analysis of Confucian Toleration

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I. Introduction

This paper aims to sort out a Confucian view of “toleration”, mainly focusing on two of the pre-Qin Confucian cardinal classics, namely, *The Analects* and *Mencius*. Basing on the analysis within the Confucian context, this paper also tries to give a further analysis of “toleration” beyond the Confucian context itself.

There are diverse understandings of the meaning of “toleration”. Michael Walzer defines “toleration” mainly in the sense of inter-communal relationship: “a peaceful coexistence of groups of people with different histories, cultures, and identities”. (Walzer, 1997:2) In this paper, however, toleration refers to a peaceful coexistence both in the senses of persons and communities, in the situation of differences.

The Confucian idea of “a harmony in differences” (*he er bu tong*) resembles Walzer’s understanding of “toleration”. In *Analects* 13:23, Confucius states that “the exemplary persons (*Junzi*) seek a harmony in differences”. It means that when facing differences—which can be different personalities, opinions, and ways of life and so on—exemplary persons can still sustain a harmonious relationship among each other. According to the basic Confucian analogy of individuals to communities, this ideal mode of interpersonal relationship can be legitimately applied to the relationship between different communities, which are composed of individual persons. That is to say, when there are differences among different communities—

which can be different histories, cultures and so on—these communities can sustain a peaceful and harmonious relationship. In a word, both in the senses of interpersonal relationship and the relationship of communities, “harmony in differences” can be understood as an ideal of Confucian toleration. I agree with Walzer and take the following argument as a preposition in this paper: “Peaceful coexistence is always a good thing”. (Walzer, 1997: 2) However, can this ideal mode of toleration—“a harmony in differences” actually be achieved in the Confucian context? To what extent can it be approached and where do the limits lie? From a contemporary perspective, is it possible to break through these limits and how? In the second section, I will discuss the reasons that underpin “a harmony in differences” in the Confucian context. Then in the third section, I will analyze what Confucianism cannot tolerate and the possible reasons. Finally, in the fourth section, I will discuss toleration beyond the Confucian context.

II. The Confucian “Harmony in Differences”

Toleration often connects with differences, because if there are no differences, there will be no oppositions and nothing to tolerate. Therefore, toleration can often be understood as a certain attitude or practices toward differences. Understood as an attitude, toleration can be ranked as a continuum.

In *Analects*, there are cases when there is a very positive attitude toward differences. For example, Confucius said, “When I walk along with two others, I am bound to find a teacher.” (*Analects* 7:22) It can be interpreted like this: one can always learn something from someone who is different from oneself. Rather than ignoring and avoiding differences, one can positively consider differences to be sources of inspiration and

improvement. This state of mind is similar to one of the possibilities of toleration Walzer describes, which is “openness to the others; curiosity; perhaps even respect, a willingness to listen and learn.” (Walzer, 1997:11) What underlies this particular attitude is a positive recognition of the existence and equal status of a different other, which can be a different person or something else.

There are specific cases when the principle of “a harmony in differences” is carried out. In *Analects*, Confucius makes comments to many figures, some of which are given very high judgment, even if they are not Confucians in many ways. A historical figure Confucius often mentions is Guanzhong. On the one hand, he criticizes Guanzhong for his inobservance of proper rituals (*li*) (*Analects* 3:22); while on the other hand, he highly praises Guanzhong as possessing the virtue of humaneness (*ren*)⁽¹⁾, because he exerted a great influence on bringing order to the empire and thus secured many people’s lives (*Analects* 14:16, 14:17). For Confucius, who highly emphasizes proper rituals, Guanzhong is not a person who perfectly conforms to the Confucian norms and hence differs from the ideal Confucian model. However, because of his great deed in saving people’s lives, which is an important part of the understanding of “humaneness” as “to love people” (*Analects* 12:22), he can definitely be tolerated and his status is by no means inferior to Confucians.

Differences are sometimes just diversity in the surface, while they share a same foundation. In Mencius, Boyi, Yiyin and Liu Xiahui are three figures Mencius often mentions. Boyi “abode in an inferior situation, and would not, with his virtue, serve a degenerate prince.” Yiyin “five times went to Tang, and five times went to Jie” (who is one of the most notorious tyrants in Chinese history). And, Liu Xiahui “did not disdain to

serve a vile prince, nor did he decline a small office". Thus, these three persons pursued their aim in very different or even opposed courses. However, these differences are not as crucial as it seems and can be tolerated, because the aim of the three was one, which is to achieve the virtue of "humaneness". Mencius comments that on the same foundation of "humaneness", the differences in the means and courses are not a problem at all and can thus be tolerated. (*Mencius* 12:6)

Sometimes, disputes are inevitably caused by the differences. When disputes arise, the influence of "virtue (de)" is highly advocated and regarded as the most proper and effective solution. Mencius says, "When one subdues men by virtue, in their hearts' core they are pleased, and sincerely submit, as was the case with the seventy disciples in their submission to Confucius." (*Mencius* 3:3) To a great extent, this solution resembles a "fair play" in virtues: in situation of opposition and disputes, no matter how diverse the competitors' backgrounds are, the one who has a greater virtue power would "win". This also entails that when facing opposition and disputes; one should concentrate more on a self-reflection on her own doings and then a self-improvement of her virtue, instead of focusing on opposed others' faults and problems. In this way, hostility and aggression caused by differences can be alleviated. In the Confucian context, this thinking is also being applied to the inter-communal relationship.

The power of virtue, instead of arms, is emphasized and promoted in the situation of disputes between two communities. "If remoter people are not submissive, all the influences of civil culture and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so" (*Analects* 16:1). "Remoter people" refer to people in other communities. Compared to a resort to sword and fire,

the emphasis of moral power's influence is a more tolerant way to resolve communal disputes.

III. What Can Not Be Tolerated

The section II points out where a harmony in differences is possible in the Confucian context. In this section, I will provide cases to analyze the boundary of toleration in the Confucian context.

Not all kinds of differences can be tolerated and harmonized in Confucian context, since many differences are morally ranked. Sometimes it is necessary to avoid the differences, if they are considered as morally injurious. Confucius says that if the heresies (doctrines which deviate from what is considered as morally right) are attacked, the harm to the society would cease. ⁽²⁾ (*Analects* 2:16)

However, what specific kinds of differences are considered as harmful and thus can not be tolerated? I will argue that when there is no consensus in regarding "filial love (xiao)" as the fundamental value, a certain "other" can not be tolerated in the Confucian context.

Confucius' judgments of one of his disciples—Zaiwo to some extent can help illustrate the point. There is a famous dialogue between the two about the "three years' mourning for parents". In Zaiwo's opinion, the period of three years is too long in the sense that the observances of rituals would be ruined and the social production would be abandoned. In a word, the social order and public interest would be harmed, and thus the period of three years should be curtailed to only one year. Just because of this point of view, Confucius criticizes Zaiwo as not humane (*bu ren*), which is a very harsh critique in the Confucian context. However, in

fact, the disagreement between them is not about whether filial love is something one should value—Zaiwo does not deny it (and what he denies is the authority of a particular length of the mourning period)—but about whether it ought to be regarded as a supreme value: for Confucius, even though in the three years' period, other social goodness would be harmed; a truly filial child would not consider it at all, because nothing is more important than the full performance of filial love. In this case, moreover, even if one considers Zaiwo to be unfilial merely according to his opposition to the three years' mourning for parents, it will only follow that he should be criticized as being unfilial. However, he is labeled as being not humane in Confucius' last comment. That is to say, for Confucius, to be unfilial, or strictly speaking, the non-recognition of filial love as a supreme value means being not humane. Here, filial love, instead of humaneness, essentially constitutes the foundation of toleration.

One may find that Mencius can not tolerate Mozi for the similar reason. Mencius abuses Mozi as a beast and takes it to be his mission to get rid of Mozi's doctrine, which advocates a "universal love (jian ai)" . (*Mencius* 6:9) Obviously, a harmony in differences is impossible between Mencius and Mozi, even though Mencius realizes that for Mozi, "if by rubbing smooth his whole body from the crown to the heel, he could have benefited the kingdom, he would have done it." (*Mencius* 13:26) Why? Because there is a fundamental disagreement between the two doctrines about whether the particular love toward one's parents, and for Mencius, filial love ought to be taken as a supreme value, which is superior to a universal love toward human beings.

Generally speaking, what both Confucius and Mencius can not tolerate in interpersonal relationship is the denial of filial love as a

supreme value. In other words, filial love is essentially the foundation for Confucian toleration. The way of thinking is similar when Confucians consider the relationship between the communities. Communities with a culture recognizing and promoting the value of filial love can be tolerated; otherwise, there can be no toleration.

In the Confucian context, there is a specific differentiation between two distinct communities—"the barbarian nations" (yi, di) and "our great nation" (xia). Essentially, this is not a geographical differentiation, but a cultural one. The culture of "the barbarian nations" does not share a dominant Confucian feature, in the sense that they do not regard the filial love as a key value in their societies. For Confucians, because of this cultural difference, "the barbarian nations" are culturally inferior to "our great nation". Confucius says that though "the barbarian tribes" have their own rulers, they are not "as viable as the various Chinese states without them" ⁽³⁾ (*Analects* 3:5), because even the various Chinese states had no rulers, they still had an order of family which is sustained by filial love.

Basing on the point that "the barbarian nations" do not have a culture highly values the filial love; there seems even a generalization in Confucian context that they are inferior in every aspect. The customs such as "wearing unbound hair" and "the lappets of the coats buttoning on the left side" in "the barbarian nations" is unbearable. (*Analects* 14:17) Mencius denies the possibility of a mutual learning between "our great nation" and "the barbarian nations": only the latter must imitate and learn from the former's culture; while there is nothing worthy for the former to learn from the latter. He says, "I have heard of men using the doctrines of our great land to change barbarians, but I have never yet heard of any being changed by barbarians." Moreover, if the "barbarians" cultures and ways

of life are followed, that change is definitely not a good one. (*Mencius* 5:4)

To sum up, when Confucians take “filial love” as the foundation of toleration, they are less likely to treat those “dissidents”—who deny filial love as the fundamental value—as equals and more likely to regard them as morally and culturally inferior, thus the possibility of toleration is decreased.

IV. Beyond Confucianism?

In the sections above, I provide an analysis of Confucian ideal of toleration, about its possibility and also its limits. It follows that the Confucian toleration is only possible on the basis of the recognition of filial love, which is a core value for Confucianism. The “others” who neglect and deny the foundation of filial love can not be tolerated in the Confucian context.

It can be argued that the toleration discussed above is mostly in the sense of an attitude, while not in the sense of actions or practices. The reason is that Confucianism was only one of the “one hundred schools” at that time. It neither has a dominant influence over other schools, nor any critical political influence. However, after a few hundred years, especially after the implement of the policy of “dismissing other schools and promoting Confucianism (罢黜百家, 独尊儒术)” in Han dynasty, Confucianism has become a dominant ideology and exerted a powerful and everlasting influence in real life political practices. Since then, the Confucian toleration was not only in the sense of attitude, but also actions. Historically, the toleration toward different schools was dramatically declined. Also, the toleration toward “the barbarian nations” was seriously decreased.

Now, considering the issue of toleration beyond the Confucian context, can we also get some inspiration? How is toleration or “harmony in differences” or “peaceful coexistence” possible? Though I take it as a preposition in this paper that toleration is a good thing, it does not entail that a standpoint of relativism is endorsed nor any kind of difference is celebrated. Quite contrary, I agree with Walzer that “to argue that different groups and or/individuals should be allowed to coexist in peace is not to argue that every actual or imaginable differences should be tolerated.” (Walzer, 1997:6) Toleration is a principled attitude or practice, which has its foundation. However, what ought to and can be the right foundation for toleration? This huge issue is beyond the task of this paper. But, if we combine the Confucian context and take it as a particular case, the inspiration may be that when human equality is better recognized and respected, there is more room for peaceful toleration: when Confucianism regards “humaneness” as the foundation, more openness is given toward differences, because under this circumstance, there is no sharp distinction about who is superior or inferior. While when Confucianism bases toleration exclusively on the foundation of its particular value—“filial love”, it more easily turns out to be an authoritarian way of thinking, which considers itself to be the only standard and the different others to be inferior in status. Thus, the peaceful coexistence is seriously challenged—dissidents are called “beasts”, which is deprived of human dignity, and communities with other cultures are despised as uncivilized and inferior by the significant and dominant culture. From a contemporary point of view, the respect of human equality is best outlined by Taylor as recognition and respect of “a universal potential” “for forming and defining one’s own identity, as an individual and also as a culture.” (Taylor,1992: 42)

Notes

- (1) In this paper, I translate the Confucian notion of “ren” as humane (adjective) or humaneness (noun) or humane person (noun) according to different contexts.
- (2) This is my own translation, according to Yang Bojun’s Chinese translation. There is also another kind of interpretation, as Legge provides, “The study of strange doctrines is injurious indeed!” The difference of the two translation is caused by the difference understanding of the character “gong”, which in the former is understood as “attack”, while in the latter as “study”. However, I think this difference in the understanding of this chapter is not crucial in the whole argument, because either translation argues that heterodox doctrine is harmful to some extent.
- (3) This translation is borrowed from Roger Ames.

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