

## Chapter 2: Ancient Chinese Philosophy

**Overview:** Ancient Chinese philosophy is a subcategory of Eastern philosophy, which developed in South/East Asia. Western philosophy, on the other hand, developed in Ancient Greece, and is discussed in the next chapter. Eastern philosophy is generally more focused on human living and personal development, while Western philosophy is generally more focused on outward analysis and abstractions.

**Major Ideas:** After reading the material in this chapter and hearing the lecture, you should understand the following major ideas in depth, but other parts of the reading may appear on the assessment (besides names and dates).

*Lau-Tzu and Confucius*

The Tao

Yin and Yang

Wu Wei

Chung Yung

Humanism

Li

## Lau-Tzu and Confucius

Let's begin our foray into our first philosophical archetypes with just a bit of housekeeping. Please note that on the PowerPoints for each archetype the major ideas are divided into one of the three branches of philosophy: epistemology (knowledge), metaphysics (reality), or value theory (values). This division is to show you how each idea might be *categorized*. Philosophy is like math to some extent—to understand the more difficult ideas later, it helps to understand the basic categories/branches now.

For example, you will see that this week's idea, the Tao, is categorized under metaphysics. According to Taoists (discussed in more depth below), there exists a greater force or power within everything that guides all life in the universe called the *Tao*. Because the Tao is about the nature of existence (what is real), it can be categorized as metaphysical.

It might also help to keep in mind that anything we believe can be categorized under the branches of philosophy. Free will or lack thereof? That's metaphysical. Should you devote your life to social justice? That's value theory. Do you think that students don't learn best in a traditional classroom? That's epistemological.

But enough with the housekeeping, let's turn to this week's content.

The belief systems/religions that developed in ancient China are varied and complex, and this chapter cannot do justice to that variation and complexity. However, this chapter will give you an overview of two of the most influential philosophies that developed in ancient China: Taoism and Confucianism.

The founder of Taoism is often said to be Lau-Tzu, our first archetype. The founder of Confucianism is Confucius, our second archetype. Sometimes these philosophers are referred to as *sages*, or people who focus more on living their philosophies than thinking about them. This

label marks a difference from Western philosophers who, as we'll see, are often more focused on thinking ideas through than acting on them.

## **Lau-Tzu and Taoism's Origins**

Taoism is usually associated with Lau-Tzu (575 b.c.e.), but some scholars trace the origin of Taoism to a Chinese philosopher named Yang-Tzu. Yang-Tzu's focus was on our inability as humans to have much of an effect on the world around us (as we'll see, this perspective is deeply opposed to Confucius' view, which is much more social). Thus Yang-Tzu recommended becoming a recluse, disconnecting from the world. Many of the early Taoists were, in fact, recluses. Yang-Tzu also felt that people don't value life itself as much as they could—the everyday experience of life—and instead they value material things.<sup>1</sup> The theme of material things hindering our ability to be happy and at peace will come up again when we discuss the Buddha—it is a common theme in Eastern philosophy.

Although Lau-Tzu ultimately took Taoism further than Yang-Tzu, they both agreed on a central truth: that we should harmonize ourselves with nature and seek a peaceful state of mind.

Unfortunately, we actually know very little about Lau-Tzu the person. His name literally means "Old Master." Some accounts tell us that Lau-Tzu was an old man when Confucius was alive. Others tell us that he lived hundreds of years earlier, others hundreds of years later. This ambiguity is why I have Lau-Tzu's existence to be *around* 575 b.c.e.

One of the problems in tracing Lau-Tzu's history is that some historians date the Tao Te Ching (a book supposedly written by Lau-Tzu) to a period that does not quite correspond to when he was thought to be alive. The Tao Te Ching is today seen as one of the founding texts of Taoism.<sup>2</sup> It could be that Lau-Tzu wrote the book as some notes or ideas,

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<sup>1</sup> See the chapter on Chinese religions in: Hinnels, J. R. (Ed.). (1984). *A Handbook of Living Religions*. New York, NY: Penguin.

<sup>2</sup> Lau-Tzu (2006). *Tao Te Ching*. S. Mitchell (Ed.). New York: Simon and Brown.

then later his students recorded the notes more formally. In fact, this interpretation fits with the traditional story we hear about the origin of the Tao Te Ching.

As the story goes, Lau-Tzu had had enough of society and was seeking exile from human civilization. This behavior is in harmony with the attitudes of the early Taoist recluses. On the way out of town, however, he was asked by a guard to write his teachings down. At first he protested, but the guard insisted. Finally Lau-Tzu did write down his wisdom and teachings. What he wrote down is supposedly the Tao Te Ching, which again is now one of the defining books of Taoism.

By many accounts, Lau-Tzu developed his philosophy in a time of political turmoil known as the *Warring States* period of Chinese history. As we will see, philosophers generally develop their positions in response to the world they are born into. Sometimes understanding their world helps us to understand their philosophical position.

## **The Tao**

In the Tao Te Ching, Lau-Tzu uses short sayings and poetry (sometimes called *aphorisms*) to express several core Taoist ideas. Probably the most significant idea expressed in the book is the Tao itself, usually translated into English as *the way*. One of the primary teachings of the Tao Te Ching—as we read in the first line of the text—is that the Tao cannot be expressed in words. The Tao is something greater. Words can help us understand it, but the Tao goes beyond words.

But why should we talk about it then? Why does the belief system exist at all if we can't speak about it accurately? Well, first of all, recall that according to the story above Lau-Tzu did not, in fact, want to write the Tao Te Ching. He did not, apparently, want to talk about it due to language's limitations. However, it is probably fair to say that most Taoists find language to be *useful* in some cases, but not fully representative of reality. Indeed, many parts of the Tao Te Ching seem

to be designed to get readers to stop reading and reflect in the present moment. For example, here is a famous phrase from the book:

He who speaks does not know, and he who knows does not speak.

While some may see this as a needlessly dense phrase, reflecting upon it might lead us to the conclusion that people who have a lot to say (like politicians) may not be the ones we really want to listen to. However, this conclusion, and others we might draw, goes beyond the literal meaning of the phrase itself.

Useful though it may be, language still cannot fully represent the world for a Taoist. The Tao is still behind everything (all aspects of existence) in the Taoist worldview: it underlies the very words that tell us it is greater than words. In this sense, language is useful because it can lead us in the right direction. But whatever word you use to represent the Tao will not be the actual Tao. With these points in mind, here's another example from the Tao Te Ching where words are used cryptically to represent a truth that goes beyond words:

Thirty spokes unite around one hub to make a wheel.  
It is the presence of the empty space that gives the function of a vehicle.  
Clay is molded into a vessel.  
It is the empty space that gives the function of a vessel.  
Doors and windows are chisel out to make a room.  
It is the empty space in the room that gives its function.  
Therefore, something substantial can be beneficial.  
While the emptiness of void is what can be utilized.

Because the Tao is supposedly in everything, these analogies help us understand that the Tao is present in physical objects (like the wheel) but also (and perhaps more importantly) in the empty space within which those objects exist. The Tao is present, in other words, in what can be seen and what cannot be seen directly.

Lau-Tzu's point about the limitations of language is not felt just in the East. If you have faith in a higher power of some sort (or faith in love, humanity, etc.), can you put your belief into words in a way that is clear? Even if you feel you can explain your faith, I would bet that it would still be difficult and that there are aspects that are not describable.

Other philosophers in the West, too, have concluded that language limits us, without reference to any sort of higher power like God or the Tao. For example, the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951 c.e.) argued that language is like a ladder: it can help us see beyond words themselves, but once we get beyond them, we can kick away the words, just as we might kick away a ladder once we reach a higher place from which we don't plan on coming down.<sup>3</sup>

For those of you looking for a more concrete way of understanding the Tao, it is often classified as *pantheistic*. Pantheism is the belief that the higher power or force in the universe is within everything—the trees, the clouds, you, your father, me, a pen, and so forth. In other words, pantheism is the view that *God is identical with the universe*. When Taoists say that the Tao is all around is, within everything, they are expressing pantheism. I am using the term *God* loosely here. By contrast, consider that if you believe God created our universe and that he occasionally interacts with us through miracles and prayer, you are a *monotheist*, a belief suggesting that God is separate from the universe.

## **Yin and Yang**

Another idea that is expressed frequently in the *Tao Te Ching* is the yin and yang. If the Tao is the underlying force (or way) of the universe, then the yin and yang is how that force gets expressed—as two complementary but opposite, subordinate, metaphysical forces. Notice that the Tao and yin and yang are both metaphysical ideas, since they are making claims about reality.

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<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein touches on these ideas in several books, but the one with the most prominent discussion is probably: Wittgenstein, L. (1973). *Philosophical Investigations* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). G. E. M. Anscombe (Ed.). London, England: Pearson.

The yin refers to the passive, feminine, dark force, and yang refers to the dominant, masculine, light force. However, do not make the mistake of thinking that the feminine yin force is somehow inferior to the masculine yang force. The yin and yang are complimentary—like positive and negative electricity—not antagonistic. The ideas are also not necessarily aligned with male and female. Men, women, non-binary folks, etc., could exhibit yin *or* yang traits, or something in between.

Yin and yang can almost be thought of as a correction mechanism. If there is too much yang, the yin will come back in and balance things out. And if there's too much yin, then more yang will be needed for balance. The universe will correct itself, so we should just follow the path of the Tao through fluctuations of yin and yang—as though we are floating in the ocean, letting the waves come and go.

**Table 1.** Ocean Waves as Representation of the Tao<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from [https://clipart-library.com/newhp/682-6829445\\_ocean-clipart-black-and-white.png](https://clipart-library.com/newhp/682-6829445_ocean-clipart-black-and-white.png)

Even human history can be seen through this lens. The most powerful empires on earth have all fallen at some point despite their former dominance—ancient Greece, Rome, Persia, Mongol, etc. The rise of these empires could be described via yang (aggression, dominance, etc.) but then the fall could be described via the correction mechanism of yin.

Or consider yin on a less grand scale. Consider yin in conversation. When a conversation gets heated (too much yang), what is the best solution? Sometimes it's best just to shut up, to stop talking. Step back and re-assess the situation. You can't always change the other person's mind and to continue talking is to add too much fuel to the fire.

A nice reference point in Western culture for yin and yang is good and evil, which is an integral part of the three primary Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, good and evil is a bit different than the yin and yang. While both good and evil and yin and yang require some sort of balance, good and evil are generally not seen as equally desirable depending on the circumstances. No one would ever desire more evil to balance out the good, but in Taoism, it is common for people to desire (in the sense of welcoming) more yin to balance out the yang. To be fair, devotees of Abrahamic religions can sometimes be heard saying that you cannot *know* good without knowing evil, but that's different than welcoming yin as a correction to yang.

And this brings us to the next major idea for this chapter, wu wei.

### **Wu Wei (action based on yin)**

Although wu wei literally translates from Mandarin as non-action, the meaning of the phrase goes beyond that, and does not actually mean literally doing nothing. Instead, wu wei refers to a perspective on life in which one's actions are supposed to be in line with the yin force, the passive force in the universe. Notice that with this idea, we have stepped into value theory, because now we are talking about how people *should* behave, what values they should adopt.

Lau-Tzu's cultural tradition is particularly relevant here. The Warring States period of Chinese history, as the name implies, was a period of much yang, the dominant, masculine force. There was a lot of fighting. There were many power struggles. Since people of his time were fighting for control (yang), Lau-Tzu proposed the opposite (yin), or the way of non-action (we wei). Again, here non-action means that, rather than attempt to gain direct control over the environment, we should take subtle, indirect actions. Our actions should be motivated by yin.

According to some accounts, Lau-Tzu proposed to people in power that they enact governmental policies based on yin. Unfortunately it does not seem that anyone in power took Lau-Tzu's advice, which is likely one of the reasons that he sought exile.

A potential counter could be raised here against Lau-Tzu. Isn't Taoism about just allowing the yin and yang to play out naturally? Isn't Lau-Tzu being a bad Taoist by trying to force the yin onto the culture of his time? This seems like an unfair criticism since Lau-Tzu, like many Taoists, was simply *guiding* the universe toward balance. One can guide or act without being forceful, which is exactly what the wu wei is all about.

But what would wu wei look like in other contexts? If some teenagers leave beer cans on your favorite beach, the yang approach would be to yell at them or threaten them. But the yin, wu wei approach would be to calmly pick up the beer cans and put them in the trash, avoiding a confrontation.

To some, this philosophy (wu wei) sounds crazy. Would inaction have worked against Adolph Hitler? Probably not. However, there are historically recent examples of wu wei, the most famous being Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948 c.e.) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968 c.e.) Both of these influential people believed in *non-violent resistance*, what might be seen as a type of wu wei.

We will briefly take a look at King.<sup>5</sup> King is obviously famous as part of the civil rights movement for speaking out against racism. Motivated by a belief in a benevolent creator, he believed that we are all equal in the eyes of God, black or white, man or woman. However, he also believed that change must be achieved in lawful, peaceful ways. He believed that we should not stoop to the level of those we are fighting against. In other words, he followed the *turn the other cheek* philosophy of Jesus from the New Testament (the second major part of the Bible), rather than the *eye for an eye philosophy* of some parts of the Old Testament (the first part).

When we consider some of what King went through, like his house being bombed and his ultimately being assassinated, it's perhaps even more admirable that he was able to follow a non-violent path. Others, famously Malcolm X (1925-1965 c.e.), saw the situation very differently than King, and at least at certain times fought violence with violence (yang with yang).

Sometimes people like King are accused of needlessly creating moral tension. In King's time, such people suggested that King was making racial relations worse by putting them out in the open for everyone to see and discuss. But his reply was that he was *exposing* moral tension. The moral tension about race is always lurking beneath the surface, he argued, but he is exposing that tension so we can acknowledge it and figure out how to address it as a society.

One of King's great successes with non-violent resistance was the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It took 7 long years, but it led to the desegregation of the transit system.

### **Confucius (551-479 b.c.e.)**

Born into the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history, which came right before the Warring States period, Confucius had a deep influence on Chinese social life that is still felt today. The primary text of

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<sup>5</sup> For more info see: King Jr., M. L. (1998). *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* C. Carson (Ed.). New York, NY: Warner Books.

Confucianism is The Analects, and contains the wisdom of Confucius as written down by his students while he was alive and after he was alive.<sup>6</sup> Confucius is the latinized name of *Kung Fu Tzu* or Great Master Kung.

Although he had a great education and became a teacher, teaching earned him little money and he was forced to take on other jobs. Before he died, there is evidence that he had many students who traveled around with him. However Confucius himself never achieved a very high office in government. He spent many years of his life trying to effect change in society through the right leadership, but he was never able to find a leader who would listen to him.

Unlike many people, Confucius prioritized everyday actions and positive personality traits over intelligence and ingenuity. In other words, Confucius would be more impressed by someone like Martin Luther King Jr., who put his ideas into action, than someone like Albert Einstein, who is seen as a genius for how smart he was. Confucius just wanted people to get along, respect others (especially family), and continue to follow the ways of the past.

Most of Confucius' ideas fall into the realm of value theory—he was all about values, how people should behave. In fact, today his philosophy is often classified as a moral theory called *virtue ethics*. First of all, a moral theory is a theory that tries to explain morality. While common views are that morality is relative or subjective, it's important to note that these are theories, not facts (and we will discuss relativism in the next chapter). Another theory of morality, as noted, is virtue ethics: the idea that morality is based on positive character traits, often referred to as *virtues* (like courage, honesty, respect for elders, etc.). While virtues should be developed through practice according to this theory, negative character traits, called *vices* (like dishonesty, anger, jealousy, etc.), should be avoided. This theory puts emphasis on character over consequences or rules (like the 10 commandments).

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<sup>6</sup> Confucius. (2008). *The Analects*. R. Dawson (Trans.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Virtue ethicists differ in terms of what they find virtuous, and what they see as a vice. As we will see in a couple of chapters, some of the ancient Greek philosophers were virtue ethicists as well. Confucius' virtue, as noted, was focused on increasing social harmony in general. However, because of his focus on human life, Confucius is also often seen as a *humanist*, one of the major ideas for this chapter.

## **Humanism**

Humanism, the general view that we should focus on bettering human living conditions, is enjoying a resurgence in some circles in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, some atheists are drawn to humanism since it gives them a non-religious moral framework from which to draw. One atheist even wrote a bible for humanists.<sup>7</sup>

Confucius was more active as a teacher than was the sage Lau-Tzu. Confucius' humanism emphasized the idea that humans could change and better their present circumstances through their own intelligence and effort. Confucius was, in modern terminology, a down-to-earth philosopher. He reasoned that we shouldn't think about things outside of the realm of immediate human existence. Confucius stressed the superiority of social concerns over individual achievements. Again, he would be happier to see a party at which everyone is enjoying themselves respectfully, than to see a child learning to play Mozart at a young age.

Due to the moral and cultural decline of the China Confucius was born into (again, the Spring and Autumn period), he saw himself as the preserver of a dying culture. He taught his students about the old ways. He thought that the social hierarchies of the ancients were what kept society intact. To us, this might seem a conservative position—keep the old, reject the new—but during his time it was a more radical position. For example, Confucius advocated moving away from worshipping

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<sup>7</sup> Grayling, A. C. (2013). *The Good Book: The Humanist Bible*. New York, NY: Walker Publishing Company.

spirits and ghosts—something that was still highly valued by much of his culture—and embracing that part of Chinese wisdom that focused on ceremony and personal virtue.

It may sound strange to say in a society like ours in 21<sup>st</sup> century America where God is such a common idea, but Confucius and other current humanists simply do not care whether or not God exists. Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't; but it doesn't really matter, humanists argue. Whether God exists or not, we can still try to reduce crime and violence, donate to charities, improve the nation's infrastructure, can't we? The here and now matters (earth), not what comes next (heaven, hell, another life, etc.)—at least, according to humanists like Confucius.

Confucius' ideas were also quite sexist, unfortunately, by our standards. That is, he taught that everyone should know their place in social hierarchies. This teaching implies that the status of women as inferior to men should be maintained: women are in charge of the household duties and should not be allowed to take part in government and other non-family social roles.

However, it would be unfair to target Confucius alone for sexism when things were different back then, not just in that society but in others too. Sexism was the norm in many ancient cultures. The topic of sexism and women in general will be addressed later in the semester when we discuss the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote an entire book about women that fueled feminism.

In any case, Confucius was not saying that we should keep the old ways simply because they're the old ways, but because some of the old ways are eternally true. He puts it this way in a quote from *The Analects*:

He who by reanimating the old can gain knowledge of the new is fit to be a teacher.

Understanding the way to apply the old to the new is the key for Confucius. Sometimes past realities can be improved by reflecting on

their usefulness in the present. If Confucius were around today, he would probably see people walking around campus texting as not virtuous (including the professors that do it), and he would probably suggest that people engaging in that behavior learn some respect for the fellow humans around them.

### **Chung Yung (the Golden Mean)**

Again, Confucius was not coming up with new ideas, but figuring out ways to preserve the old. One of the ideas he preached and practiced is what's known as the golden mean or *chung yung*. Before we get there, however, we have to look at Confucius' view of the Tao. But wait a minute, wasn't Confucius a humanist who rejected metaphysical ideas like God? So why, then, would he care about a metaphysical idea like the Tao?

The answer is that Confucius likely did not see the Tao in a metaphysical way as Lau-Tzu did. Rather, Confucius used the Tao as a linguistic tool that was common to many in his culture to help emphasize his ideas. Similarly, you may still here an atheist say things like "Oh my God" or "That is good for your soul" even if they don't believe in God or souls. Language can be useful, and ideas that have been around for a long time don't die easily, and Confucius understood all that.

Unlike Lau-Tzu, Confucius saw the Tao, or the way, as something that we reach through individual balance and social harmony. Let's focus on the individual balance for now (*chung yung*) and in the next section we will move to the social harmony (*li*).

From an individual perspective, one of the many interesting things Confucius said about the Tao from *The Analects* is:

The intelligent go beyond and the stupid do not come up to it.

Obviously most people realize the problems with stupidity, but it's not too often that we hear someone say that you can be too smart. And that's exactly what Confucius is saying. In his view, if you're too smart, it means that you might be too focused on your own greatness or inventions, and this will take you away from reaching balance.

This idea, chung yung, takes us back to virtue ethics. Confucius is saying that to be good people, to be virtuous, we must be balanced in our behavior. We shouldn't drink too much, yet we shouldn't be afraid to lose control and drink when the time is right. We shouldn't be too angry, and yet we shouldn't be afraid to get angry when the situation demands it (like if a child's learning depends on it, for example). This quote from The Analects gives us an idea of the path to chung yung:

Perhaps others can do it the first time; I must do it ten times;  
perhaps others can do it the tenth time; I must do it a thousand  
times. But he who really has the perseverance to go all this way—  
be he foolish he will become clear headed; be he weak, he will  
become strong.

However long it takes to get there is not important for Confucius, what matters is that you do, in fact, persevere to find balance and reach virtue. Confucius gave labels to those who reach chung yung and those who don't. The superior man (chun tzu) is one who is virtuous and finds personal balance, whereas the inferior man (hsiao jen) is not virtuous and does not find balance.

The superior man is concerned with justice of the people around him, while the inferior man is concerned with profit. The superior man wants those around him to live in happiness and harmony, the inferior man sees those around him only in terms of how he can use them. The superior man is quiet and serene, he speaks only about what he knows and the rest he is very cautious about. The inferior man is always anxious and pretends to know what he actually does not know. The inferior man has no control over himself while the superior man is in control. The superior man is independent. If he needs to, he can undergo

long periods of poverty or long periods of prosperity. The superior man does not search for faults in other people, but only within himself.

This idea of balancing ourselves, finding the golden mean in our behavior, is also Confucius' way of applying the yin and yang. Again, unlike Lau-Tzu, he did not see the Tao *or* the yin and yang as metaphysical forces, but as familiar concepts he could use to help people and societies become more balanced.

I mentioned above that, like Confucius, Aristotle too was a virtue ethicist. And Aristotle, too, believed in the golden mean, as we will discuss later.

For Confucius, being virtuous doesn't end with chung yung; that's just the beginning. For Confucius, humans are constantly in communion with others, and even as we shape ourselves, we are shaping ourselves in relation to the world around us, which brings us to li.

### **Li (Ceremony)**

Confucius felt that ceremony or *li* was extremely important, insofar as it establishes and maintains social harmony. We can stray from the Tao in a collective sense if we do not follow ceremony and its many forms. However, it is important to note that for Confucius the li included not just more traditional ceremonies—like Christmas, El Mes de la Patria (in Mexico), or birthdays in our time and place—but also good manners. Following the li is a complex process that requires balanced individuals (abiding by chung yung) working together.

It's not hard to see why Confucius might think that ceremonies bring people together when we reflect on the way that families come together today for holidays like Thanksgiving. But for Confucius, li goes beyond just the major holidays. We must *always* be working to keep the social harmony—saying please and thank you, opening the door for our elders, loving and respecting our parents, helping strangers in need, and so forth. Here's another quote from The Analects for emphasis:

When parents are alive, they should be served according to the rules of propriety (social custom). When they are dead, they should be buried according to the rules of propriety. After they are buried, they should be sacrificed according to the rules of propriety.

Controversially even in his time, Confucius believed that for the sake of social harmony, ancient ceremonies involving animal sacrifice should be carried out. After all, Confucius saw himself as a preserver of the old ways, and some of the old ways involved sacrifice.

Still, Confucius did not recommend following li at *all* costs. For if a person does not have a love for humanity, what good is following the li? Confucius thought that human social change had to occur from the inside out. First, you cultivate a love for humanity within yourself (the chung yung), then you work on having good family relationships, then good friend relationships, then good community relationships, and so forth. Eventually all these good relationships can lead to a good society. Even if a perfect society isn't ultimately possible, Confucius thought that it would be an improvement just to try.

As different as it might seem to our top down view of government in many societies today, Confucius had a bottom up view: he thought that a good government grows out of right conduct, which begins at the level of one-on-one pleasantries (like smiling and saying thank you), particularly within a family.

Confucius himself was aware of the limits of his entire belief system, of the limits of education, of the limits of knowledge and learning. Our efforts to produce a well-functioning society can never produce an *ideal*, perfect society, but it was still worth the effort, in his view. Confucius thought that by following the old ways, things would simply be better. Not perfect, but better.