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Confucianism and Pragmatism: Similarities in Notions of Selfhood and Society

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Confucianism and Pragmatism: Similarities in Notions of Selfhood and Society

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Introduction

In this paper I will explore the similarities and differences between texts associated with Confucius and the work of three notable pragmatists: William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey. My goal is to expose the fundamental metaphysical similarities between these philosophies and explore how these commonalities lead all four thinkers to adopt similar notions of the self, as relational, which in turn influences their views on society similarly.

For each thinker, I will attempt to articulate that their conception of selfhood is relational and that this sparks in them a tendency to view societies as communities that should be kept strong and harmonious through various processes of cooperative social interaction. I will show that each philosophy holds generally similar views to this extent; however, as I will illustrate, they do differ to varying degrees. The most notable differences being in the ideal societies envisioned by Confucius and each of the pragmatists. Confucius prefers a static and stratified social order, while the pragmatists like societies with as much internal interaction as possible, at the expense of stratification. I will argue that this significant difference is due, in part, to a more fundamental metaphysical difference between these two schools. Confucians refer to a universal cosmic order which people, and ultimately societies, can align with to increase harmony. This is exhibited in passage [8.19] in the *Analects*, “The Master said, ‘Great indeed was Yao as a sovereign! How majestic was he! It is only *Heaven* that is grand, and only Yao *corresponded* to it. How vast was his virtue!’”¹ Pragmatists, on the other hand, reject such universal concepts and see only disadvantages to social stratification.

¹ Confucius, *Confucius: Four Books and Five Classics*, trans. James Legge (Delphi, 2016), 86. (Emphasis added.)

For this discussion I will focus primarily on Confucian texts ranging from 6th-4th centuries BCE in an attempt to capture what would have been close to Confucius's personal philosophy. I will primarily draw upon the *Analects*, with supplementation from the *Great Learning* and *Doctrine of the Mean*, as well as the *Book of Changes (I Ching)*, which although likely predates Confucius by a few centuries, did serve to influence his philosophy. There have, of course, been notable advancements in Confucian thinking since and although I won't cover them here, I imagine an exploration of neo-Confucian ideas in relation to pragmatism would be most fruitful. Additionally, since I will be working with translations of these texts, there is an inherent difficulty in trying to understand the intended meaning of the words as their Chinese authors meant them. To minimize the effect of this language barrier, as well as the risk of blatant mistranslations, I have utilized multiple translations of the *Analects* throughout my research: those by Robert Eno, James Legge and D.C. Lau, and two translations of the *I Ching*: those by Alfred Huang and Richard Wilhelm.

The three pragmatists I have chosen have all contributed to pragmatist philosophy in different ways. William James pioneered many unique aspects of pragmatist metaphysics and is the first I will discuss. Although his work on society and politics is limited, it will still be fruitful to examine him as an introduction to the ideas that pragmatism promotes. George Herbert Mead is the second I will cover. His work in the field of psychology is inundated with his philosophical insights on the self, the social environment, and formal society. John Dewey is the last I will explore and is the most prolific of the three. The scope of his work is broad and condensing his standpoint into the short length I have certainly does him a disservice. Regardless, his thoughts on society and his political philosophy are the most developed of all the pragmatists. Although

these three thinkers will provide a healthy variety of pragmatist thinking, I have unfortunately had to exclude other notable pragmatists like Josiah Royce whose ideas parallel Confucius's as well.

Confucianism

Confucius was a thinker in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, who, having witnessed what a lack of social organization could lead to, decided to bring about a grand reformation. Living in the Zhou dynasty, Confucius saw a divided empire, controlled by corrupt aristocrats all independently vying for power. Laws kept people in line, but there was a lack of morality that he saw as holding his society back. Virtue (*de* 德) is what lies at the center of Confucian philosophy.

Material wealth is no consideration of one's worth, rather a poor person in Confucian terms is one who lacks virtue. By emphasizing this, Confucians along with Daoists shifted the paradigm for personal achievement away from wealth. For them, life's goal is to be in a place of morality and goodness.

Ren & Li

Ren (仁) is an integral concept to Confucianism, generally denoting goodness, benevolence, or good moral virtue. *Ren* can be displayed in a variety of ways but it is often applied, like with many of Confucius's concepts, to the context of the community. *Ren* is a mindset of benevolence, a person with *ren* does not act out of selfish desires, but rather accepts their role in the social order and helps others achieve their potential. This is illustrated in passage [1.2] in the *Analects*, “[1.2] Filiality and respect for elders, are these not the roots of *ren*?”² As well as in [6.22],

² Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation*, 2.21, 2015. I have cited Eno as the author of his translation of the *The Analects* since I refer to his commentary often.

“People who are *ren* are first to shoulder difficulties and last to reap rewards. This may be called *ren*.”³ And in [6.30], “Now the man of perfect virtue [*ren*], wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge of others by what is nigh in ourselves; — this may be called the art of virtue [*ren*].”⁴ A person of *ren* is a catalyst of harmony within the social order, striving selflessly to engender a positive influence and better society. These are the general themes that surround *ren*, and are those I will be focusing on; however, the concept is complex and can be interpreted differently.

Li (禮) is another term important to Confucianism and its relational aspects. The English transliteration is shared with another Chinese term (理) which speaks to a tangible omnipresent universal structure. The meaning of *li* in the Confucian sense has varied but it is more morally charged.

Originally *li* (禮) meant religious sacrifice, but aligning with the rest of his philosophy, Confucius applies *li* to a moral context.⁵ The main aim of Confucianism is to instill a sense of morals in society and order it in a harmonious and humanistic way. Confucius regards *li* as pertaining to this social order, with his usage of the term meaning something closer to, “rites,” “decorum,” or “civility,” i.e., the conduct one must adhere to create and maintain a well ordered and harmonious society. Indeed, Confucius dedicated the majority of his teachings to issues of

³ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 27.

⁴ Confucius, *Confucius: Four Books and Five Classics*, 74.

⁵ Wing-Tsit Chan, ed., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 1. Princeton paperback ed., 4. print (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), 790.

morality, personal ethics, and governance, and *li* takes an important role throughout. “Virtue” (*de*) also lies at the center of Confucian philosophy, and has close ties to *li*. It is something that the ideal person, the *junzi* (gentleman) exhibits, and is integral to unlocking one’s best potential. A *junzi* who is driven from a place of virtue practices *li* in everything they do and is venerated for doing so. As passage [2.1] in *The Analects* states regarding the benefits of *de* for rulers, “When one rules by means of virtue [*de*] it is like the North Star – it dwells in its place and the other stars pay reverence to it.”⁶

To Confucius, acting with *li* from a place of *ren* is not only a path destined for acclaim but one that would bring about a more honest, harmonious and humanistic society. This would primarily be achieved through individuals cultivating a sense of camaraderie and belonging by strengthening social relations in their community, especially within their family, “[2.5] Meng Yizi asked about filiality. The Master said ... ‘Never disobey ... While they are alive, serve them according to *li*. When they are dead, bury them according to *li*...’”⁷ Confucianism relies strongly on social relations to achieve its ideals and *li* is instrumental in maintaining habits conducive to forging them. As Legge states, “Confucius felt that *li* should emphasize the spirit of piety and respect for others through rules of conduct and ceremonies ... *Li* is beneficial to society because it guides people to recognize and fulfill their responsibilities toward others.”⁸ To act with *li* means embracing one’s identity in their community and undertaking the necessary actions to serve their role, whether it be as a parent, child, or leader.

⁶ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 5.

⁷ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 5.

⁸ Confucius, *Confucius: Four Books and Five Classics*, 1259.

The emphasis placed on community and the collectivistic quality of *li* is a defining feature of Confucius's political philosophy. Confucius regards a good society as a vast interconnected community, with each individual contributing their best effort to impart a positive effect on it. *Ren* and *li* play a part in this, but fundamentally this view is shaped by its reliance on a unique conception of the individual or “self” as dependent on social relations to flourish and thrive. Such relational conceptions of the self essentially hold that the defining feature of a person is the unique bundle of relations they possess with other things. Some variations of this concept even go so far as to say that the individual can’t exist without them, but Confucius's position is never so explicitly drastic. To better understand this defining underpinning of Confucian political philosophy, we will focus on where this idea is most evident: in Confucius's definitions of the ideal person and in the different terms he uses for pronouns such as, “I,” or “Me.” We will begin by examining the ideal person Confucius outlines in *The Analects*.

Junzi

The *junzi* (君子) is the most referenced exemplar within the *Analects*. Literally meaning “lord’s son,” the term is generally translated as “gentleman,” denoting an ethical or morally upstanding person. In practice the *junzi* is a model Confucian—someone who is worthy of being taken after. A *junzi* practices virtue in everything they do and is venerated for doing so, “[4.11] The Master said, the *junzi* cherishes virtue, the small man cherishes land. The *junzi* cherishes the examples men set, the small man cherishes the bounty they bestow.”⁹ Wealth or power are not important to a *junzi*, and *ren* is central to their modus operandi, “[4.5] If one takes *ren* away from a *junzi*, wherein is he worthy of the name? There is no interval so short that the *junzi* deviates

⁹ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 15.

from *ren*.¹⁰ Core to the essence of a *junzi* is *ren*, and therefore they possess a notably relational existence as a catalyst for benevolent action within their community. As passage [17.24] states, “[the *junzi*] ...hates those who proclaim other men’s faults; he hates those who occupy inferior positions but who slander their superiors; he hates those who are valorous but lack *li*; he hates those who are bold but lack understanding.”¹¹ The antithesis to the *junzi* is someone who undermines the social order out of envy, one who acts courageously but without proper conduct, or one who does not abate their resoluteness with insight. In contrast, the responsibility of the *junzi* is to promote social harmony from whichever station they inhabit and selflessly bolster the social order by helping others achieve their potential. As [14.27] states, humbleness is a necessary quality for a *junzi*, “The Master said, The *junzi* is ashamed when his words outstrip his actions.”¹²

Despite adherence to a moral code being central to a *junzi*, they are not blind rule followers acting purely from ethical doctrine. *Junzis* are expected to be socially sensitive and ethically adept enough to adapt their moral actions to best benefit any situation. As illustrated in [9.24] Confucius emphasizes this quality as a necessity for a *junzi*, “The Master said, Exemplary sayings: can one fail to follow them? Yet it is adapting them that is important. Lessons of obedience: can one fail to approve them with pleasure? Yet it is applying them to fit that is important. Those who approve without fitting and follow without adapting – I can do nothing

¹⁰ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 14.

¹¹ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 99.

¹² Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 78.

with such people.”¹³ This adaptability allows a *junzi* to be effectively supportive within any social situation. Moreover, this quality speaks to a *junzi*'s role as a relationally active member of society, always aiming to better the given situation regardless if it means bending their morality and never being out of touch with the current social context. Clearly, the *junzi* is a relationally abundant figure, involved deeply with their community and striving to strengthen it through *li* and *ren*, two strongly relational concepts. To Confucius, the model person is a relational one.

Ji

We can gain further insight into Confucius's relational conception of the self by examining the three terms he uses for “self” in The *Analects*. *Ji* (己) represents the most basic form of a person, or as Thompson phrases it, “the naively self-centered empirical self, associated with sense perception and the feelings.”¹⁴ Many scholars offer [12.1] as a notable passage that utilizes *ji* in this sense, “The Master said, To subdue one’s self [*ji*] and return to propriety [*li*], is perfect virtue. If a man can for one day subdue himself [*ji*] and return to propriety, all under heaven will ascribe perfect virtue to him...”¹⁵ Here, in his instruction on attaining perfect virtue and becoming a *junzi*, Confucius refers to the act of subduing one’s “self” through *li*. *Ji* is treated as a basic and un-virtuous state of being that can be willfully controlled and improved through acting with *li*, a process that mainly involves founding and upholding good interpersonal relations and being socially conscientious. *Ji* is a close-minded and relatively isolated state of being, one that has yet to be “relationalized” through *li*. This usage of *ji* is exhibited further in

¹³ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 43.

¹⁴ Kirill O. Thompson, “Relational Self in Classical Confucianism: Lessons from Confucius' *Analects*,” *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 3 (2017): 6.

¹⁵ Confucius, *Confucius: Four Books and Five Classics*, 109.

passage [15.20], “The Master said, ‘What the superior man [*junzi*] seeks, is in himself [*ji*]. What the mean man seeks, is in others.’”¹⁶ Here *ji* is distinctly referred to as a self that exists separately from others that must be improved. Passage [4.14] continues in this vein, “The Master said, ‘Do not be concerned that you have no position, be concerned that you have what it takes to merit a position. Do not be concerned that no one recognizes you [*ji*], seek that which is worthy of recognition.’”¹⁷ Again, *ji* is treated as an undeveloped state of being, one without merit or quality. Confucius encourages people to focus on bettering themselves and avoid paying attention to the superficial societal outcomes that will result from their improvement. Indeed, by bettering one’s *ji* through *li* one will naturally be regarded positively and be rewarded with higher status. Although *ji* is the least relational of the Confucian concepts of self it is not completely removed from relations. As Thompson notes, “In Confucius's usage, *ji* never refers to a bounded, private self. Rather it always indicates “self” in relationship with others; it presupposes others and relations to have meaning and content.”¹⁸ This is illustrated in passage [1.8], “Take loyalty and trustworthiness as the pivot and have no friends who are not like yourself [*ji*] in this.”¹⁹ As well as in passage [14.42],

Zilu asked about the *junzi*. The Master said, “Cultivate in yourself [*ji*] respectful attentiveness.”

“Is that all there is to it?”

“Cultivate yourself [*ji*] to bring comfort to others.”

“Is that all there is to it?”

¹⁶ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 85.

¹⁷ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 15.

¹⁸ Thompson, “Relational Self in Classical Confucianism,” 6.

¹⁹ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 2.

“Cultivate yourself [*ji*] to bring comfort to the people...”²⁰

Confucius refers to *ji* as something to be improved upon explicitly for the benefit of others—a relational motivation. Additionally, the quality of “respectful attentiveness” speaks to the social conscientiousness of the *junzi*, a way of being that presupposes a social context. Indeed, even *ji* does not exist independently of its surroundings. This is an important point of distinction in Confucius's conception of the self, as there is never a point where one exists completely free of relations, even in their most isolated state. This is distinct from the views of rationalists like René Descartes who viewed selves as separate and fundamentally different from the universe at large. I will examine this conception in greater detail as well as outline a potential Confucian response to it in my discussion of William James.

Wu

Confucius also uses the term *wu* (吾) for “self,” but always in a more relationally connected sense than *ji*.²¹ For instance in [1.4], where master Zeng describes maintaining three points of social virtue relating to *wu*, all of which are deeply relational, “[1.4] Master Zeng said: Each day I [*wu*] examine myself upon three points. In planning for others, have I [*wu*] been *loyal* [*zhong*]? In company with friends, have I [*wu*] been *trustworthy* [*xin*]? And have I [*wu*] practiced what has been passed on to me?”²² The first point of social virtue, (*zhong* 忠) roughly translates to “loyalty” but goes beyond simply denoting allegiance and involves the Confucian theme of embracing and fulfilling one’s place in society to contribute to a harmonious social order. As Eno

²⁰ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 81.

²¹ Thompson, “Relational Self in Classical Confucianism,” 7-8.

²² Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 5.

states, “[*zhong* denotes] not only loyalty to one’s superiors or peers, or to individuals, but also to office; an alignment of self with the interests of others, or of the social group as a whole.”²³ This theme is core to Confucianism and the term is found frequently within the *Analects*.

Trustworthiness (*xìn* 信) is another common term in the *Analects* and speaks to a quality of reliability or supportiveness for others to count upon.²⁴ As Eno states, “[*xìn* is] derived from the concept of promise keeping, meaning reliability for others, but also unwavering devotion to principle.”²⁵ Passage [15.6] illustrates this, “‘If your words are loyal [*zhong*] and trustworthy [*xìn*] and your conduct sincere and respectful, though you be in distant barbarian states, you will be effective. If your words are not loyal and trustworthy and your conduct not sincere and respectful, though you be in your own neighborhood or district, can you be effective?’”²⁶ Effectiveness in this case refers to a power of social agency, or the ability to achieve one’s goals unobstructed by social factors. This means if one is a trustworthy and sincere person, their presence will be only appreciated and no one will attempt to hinder the execution of their goals. For a model Confucian who strives to positively influence the social order this is an important quality to possess.

Lastly, the act of practicing and thereby integrating another person’s teachings into oneself is a strongly relational exercise. The transfer of knowledge alone involves a relational connection from teacher to student, but further, the emphasis placed on “practicing the lesson”

²³ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, vii.

²⁴ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, vii.

²⁵ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 2

²⁶ Confucius, *Confucius: Four Books and Five Classics*, 49.

speaks to the importance of integrating such lessons into one's own behavior, i.e., into one's self. Clearly, all of these points of virtue involve relations with others and Confucius's decision to use *wu* in relation to them speaks to the social quality of this term for self.

Passage [3.12] also utilizes *wu* while speaking to the importance of maintaining social appearances, “‘Sacrifice as though present’ – sacrifice to the spirits as though the spirits were present. The Master said: If I [*wu*] don't participate in a sacrifice, it is as though there were no sacrifice.”²⁷ This is a notable passage as it displays Confucius's priorities with respect to spiritual practice. Although religious practice had lost some of its esoteric sacrality by Confucius's time, attaining access to heaven (*Tian*) through private religious meditation still appealed to him.²⁸ Sacrificial ceremonies held little religious significance for Confucius though, as he did not view monetary sacrifice as a means of fostering spiritual growth. To him, the primary utility of such practices was as a social occasion to practice *li* and facilitate the forging of social relations. If one doesn't attend the sacrifice to benefit from this aspect, it is essentially useless to Confucius. His choice to use *wu* in this strongly social situation speaks further to its relational qualities.

Wǒ

Lastly, Confucius uses the term *wǒ* (我) for “self” in a variety of situations. *Wǒ* doesn't denote a state of isolation like *ji*, but neither is it always used in distinctly relational contexts like *wu*. *Wǒ* is a more flexible term, for instance, in passage [7.19] *wǒ* is not used in the context of

²⁷ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 11

²⁸ John Didier, *In and Outside the Square: The Sky and the Power of Belief in Ancient China and the World, c. 4,500 BC - AD 220. Volume I: The Ancient Eurasian World and the Celestial Pivot*, 192nd ed. (Sino-Platonic Papers (East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania), 2009), 75–76.

any first-hand relations, “The Master said, ‘I [wǒ] am not one who was born in the possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity, and earnest in seeking it there.’”²⁹ Although the self is open to relations through the act of learning, it is taken in reference to a historical context without direct reference to explicitly social affairs. Passage [14.28] also exhibits the use of wǒ in a less relational context, “The Master said, ‘There are three points to the *dao* [way] of a *junzi* that I [wǒ] have been unable to reach: to be *ren*, and so not beset with cares, to be wise, and so not confused, to be valorous, and so not fearful.’”³⁰ Confucius describes himself using wǒ with regard to wisdom and valor, two concepts which are considered more personal and not necessarily relationally engaged. *Ren* is the possible exception in this passage, as the term is generally used in the context of benevolence towards others or courteous social conduct, but still, it is overall of a more internal nature than *li* for instance. Despite these un-relational use cases, wǒ is still most commonly implemented in social contexts. In passage [18.8] Confucius uses wǒ while referring to himself as a master and rule maker, both roles of notable social interconnectedness, “as for me, I [wǒ] differ from them all. I have no rule of what is permissible and what is not.”³¹ And in passage [7.20], wǒ is relationally engaged within both a social and pedagogical context, “The Master said, ‘When I [wǒ] walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I [wǒ] will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them.’”³² Confucius describes the process of cultivating the self through learning from

²⁹ Confucius, *Confucius: Four Books and Five Classics*, 78.

³⁰ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 78

³¹ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 78

³² Confucius, *Confucius: Four Books and Five Classics*, 79.

those around him, choosing which traits are virtuous and assimilating them into himself. In this example, Confucius's *wǒ* is literally being constructed via social relations.

Clearly, we can see the concept of the relational self being demonstrated in the *Analects*. *Ji*, *wu*, and *wǒ* all refer in different ways to a self that is relationally connected, and the model Confucian, the *junzi*, is a person that is especially relationally engaged. Confucius's political philosophy is shaped by this understanding of selfhood, for to create a virtuous society he first needs virtuous communities, to create them he needs virtuous people, and virtuous people are relational.

Confucian Governance

The starting point for Confucian political philosophy is the family, the most basic social unit, of which larger social structures are made up of. To Confucius, the family is not only the foundation of the society but a microcosm of its ideals as well, so if one hopes to instill a truly pervasive social order, proper familial conduct is necessary. As stated in the *Great Learning*, “Only after one’s person is refined may one’s household be aligned. Only after one’s household is aligned may one’s state be ordered. Only after one’s state is ordered may the world be set at peace.”³³ Although this quote cannot be ascribed to Confucius with certainty, this attitude prevails in the *Analects* as well: good behavior should be applied first to the family.

This is primarily the case due to Confucius's view of society as an extension of the familial community. If one seeks to better society at large, they must simply regard the rest of the populace the same as they do their families, thereby extending their virtuous familial relations to

³³ Confucius, *The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean: An Online Teaching Translation*, trans. Eno Robert, 1.0, 2016, 11–12.

the public. Although this can be practiced by anyone, this behavior is especially important for rulers—who are the focus of Confucius's political philosophy. This is because, out of any individual, rulers can have the greatest potential impact on a society. Indeed, they are the key to instilling good morals with maximum efficiency, “[13.11] The Master said, ‘If good men were to govern a country in succession for a hundred years, they would be able to transform the violently bad, and dispense with capital punishments.’”³⁴ For a moral ruler to instill their virtue in a society is remarkably easy, all they need to do is extend their good familial behavior to the masses, “[2.21] Someone addressed Confucius, saying, ‘Why do you not engage in government?’ The Master said, ‘The *Documents* says, ‘Filial, merely be filial, and friends to brothers young and old.’ To apply this as one’s governance is also to engage in government. Why must there be some purposeful effort to engage in governance?’”³⁵ To Confucius, governing properly is as simple as extending the proper conduct one practices with their family to the rest of the state, doing so would naturally disseminate a ruler’s virtue amongst the populace, “[12.19] If you desire goodness, the people will be good. The virtue of the *junzi* is like the wind and the virtue of common people is like the grasses: when the wind blows over the grasses, they will surely bend.”³⁶ By exhibiting familial virtue from a place of *ren* and with *li* rulers can, with minimal effort and without strict enforcement, instill a sense of virtue in their society.

Indeed, *li* and *ren* are the root of the ideal Confucian society. By facilitating good social connections a society can become a strong self-regulating community, with virtuous people

³⁴ Confucius, *Confucius: Four Books and Five Classics*, 120.

³⁵ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 8.

³⁶ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 63.

helping others to be virtuous. If a ruler or a number of *junzis* embody virtue, then the rest of the populace will naturally fall into accord, “[2.3] The Master said: Guide them with policies and align them with punishments and the people will evade them and have no shame. Guide them with virtue and align them with *li* and the people will have a sense of shame and fulfill their roles.”³⁷ Once people begin to embody *li* and *ren*, maximizing their potential on the path of the *junzi*, they will naturally find their ideal place in the social order. This results in a stratified society where citizens accept their societal roles happily and a state of social harmony is created. Confucius mentions this process multiple times throughout the *analects* but passage [12.11] illustrates the importance of this idea, “Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about governance. Confucius replied, ‘Let the ruler be ruler, ministers ministers, fathers fathers, sons sons.’ The Duke said, ‘Excellent! Truly, if the ruler is not ruler, ministers not ministers, fathers not fathers, sons not sons, though I possess grain, will I be able to eat it?’³⁸ For Confucius the ideal society is composed of virtuous, interconnected, interdependent people all executing the social role best suited to them. This is a notably relational existence for Confucian citizens and indeed treating individuals as relational actors is a requirement for this society, as it is the modifying capacity of relational connections that allows for virtue to radiate from *junzis* and impact those around them.

Apart from the social cohesion that results from from this role-focused society, there is an additional reason for why this type of social order appeals to Confucius. A metaphysical theme of Confucianism is maintaining alignment with the cosmic order. Doing so predisposes people to good fortune and success. When a society embodies this morally rich meritocratic social order

³⁷ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 5.

³⁸ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 62. This theme is present in passages 6.8, 8.8, 12.20. Passages 3.1 and 3.2 also stress this indirectly.

through *ren* and *li*, its citizens align with the cosmic order, promoting harmony. I will explore this idea in greater detail in my discussion of William James, but apart from the social aspects that facilitate societal harmony, the Confucian society also appeals to this metaphysical idea.

Pragmatism

Despite its founding in the late 19th century, American Pragmatism holds surprisingly similar views to Confucianism. Its roots are deeply humanistic with its focus being on the practical betterment of human existence and much like Confucius, pragmatist thinkers strove to make their philosophy as applicable and implementable into society as possible. Additionally, throughout its development, pragmatism has maintained a relational conception of the self. This idea was first introduced into pragmatist thinking by William James (1842-1910), a major pragmatist figure and the originator of many of its relational ideas.

William James

The root of James's relational thinking is found in his personal philosophy: *radical empiricism*, which was, as much of pragmatism is, a counter to the rationalist ideas popularized by Descartes. Radical empiricism champions the epistemological conclusions drawn from lived experience as opposed to those derived from introspective reasoning, and on metaphysical concepts it favors pluralism as opposed to universals. The most frequently cited definition of radical empiricism is found in James's lecture "The Meaning of Truth," where he states that radical empiricism consists of a postulate, "*that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience.*"³⁹ A fact, "*that the*

³⁹ William James, "The Meaning of Truth," para. 11, accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5117/5117-h/5117-h.htm>.

*relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves.”*⁴⁰ And a Conclusion, “[*that*] parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe ... possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure.”⁴¹

James’s postulate doesn’t stray far from traditional empiricist views. To James, working with lived experience is the only way to draw meaningful philosophical conclusions. His fact however, highlights a personal bend to his philosophy. In radical empiricism the relations between things are just as important as the things themselves, a position not held by traditional empiricists, “ordinary empiricism, in spite of the fact that conjunctive and disjunctive relations present themselves as being fully coordinate parts of experience, has always shown a tendency to do away with the connexions of things, and to insist most on the disjunctions.”⁴² James’s conclusion further emphasizes this viewpoint, relations give the universe a continuous and interrelated structure. Indeed, everything is affected by something else and is reliant on other things to have existed in the way it does. It is this pervasive network of both things and their relations that we experience in life. Moreover, according to James, we exist as much in the relations between things as we do in the things themselves,

Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically ... like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as

⁴⁰ James, “The Meaning of Truth,” para. 12.

⁴¹ James, “The Meaning of Truth,” para. 13.

William James. “A World of Pure Experience” in *Pragmatism and classical American Philosophy*. Stuhr, John J. (Oxford University Press, 2000), 534.

well as retrospectively. It is 'of the past, inasmuch as it comes expressly as the past's continuation; it is 'of the future in so far as the future, when it comes, will have continued it.

To James, we live in a continuous series of present moments constantly being outdated and replaced by new ones. Our current moment, a causal continuation of the previous one, is rendered in its specific configuration due to the relations it had in the past, while simultaneously, it spills forward into the future causing the next moment that is to come. These causal connections that tie the past, present, and future together are as much a part of lived existence as the objects they affect. Thus for James experience is a continuous stream. This basal metaphysical viewpoint is the foundation for the rest of James's philosophy. With its deep reliance on relations as a fundamental element of the universe it is no surprise that their importance in every aspect of life was championed by this pioneering pragmatist.

One place where relations have a tangible impact on the human experience is in the mind. In stark contrast to the Cartesian understanding of consciousness, James holds that the mind is not a place of pure, isolated, cognition. Rather, it is dependent on its surroundings to a large degree, with every thought impacted by previous experiences. James states that no person can have the exact same experience twice, "we might in ordinary conversation speak of getting the same sensation again, we never in strict theoretic accuracy could do so"⁴³ for even if the sensory experience were duplicated exactly, our brains would have already been modified by the first experience and thus we could never experience something for the first time again. This exemplifies James's position on the relationality of consciousness. It is in no way separated or

⁴³ William James, "The Stream of Thought," in *Pragmatism and classical American Philosophy*. Stuhr, John J. (Oxford University Press, 2000), 165.

removed from ordinary reality and it possesses no special purity as is often the case in modern western philosophy.

Since the works of René Descartes, western philosophy has tended to view the mind as consisting of a separate and often superior substance to that of the material world. In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes severs the mind's link to the world by arguing that the senses are unreliable and that we are bound to be misled if we base knowledge off of sensory information, stating, "I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain."⁴⁴ For Descartes the solution is to retreat further into the mind. According to his metaphysics, people possess an innate ability to recognize truths, so using rational thought alone to deduce truth is the only reliable way to gain epistemically sound knowledge. Moreover, Descartes propounds that the mind consists of a different substance than the body. He argues that if he had no physical body he would still be able to think, concluding that thought and consciousness are phenomena distinct from the physical world,

I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that "I," that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body ... and is such, that although the ... [body] were not, ... [I] would still continue to be...⁴⁵

⁴⁴ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Pr, 2013), 16.

⁴⁵ René Descartes, *A Discourse on Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (Project Gutenberg), part IV, para. 2, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59/59-h/59-h.htm>.

Since the mind does not depend on the physical world in any way, and since it is dangerous to rely on sensory experience for knowledge, Descartes' metaphysics ultimately serves to isolate the mind completely from the perceivable physical world.

Such ideas obviously stand to conflict with any notion of a relational self which requires the mind to be influenced by the world through the senses. They are also fundamentally antithetical to the human-focused philosophies of pragmatism and Confucianism since they devalue experience. James's experience-based metaphysics was a direct challenge to the prevailing Cartesian ideas of the time and it is likely he would have found an ally in Confucianism.

Although questions of consciousness were not explored in detail by Confucius, the Cartesian standpoint is far less compatible with early Confucian metaphysics than pragmatist views. Confucianism, like pragmatism, rejects many such dichotomies that pervaded western philosophy throughout much of the early modern era. Mind and body, subjective and objective, divine and mundane, are just a few that have been deconstructed by pragmatist thinkers. Confucianism rejects some of them too and that of humanity and nature perhaps most of all. As Ames notes, both pragmatist and Confucian thinkers did not believe in an ontological separation between humans and the rest of nature—there was no special status granted to human consciousness.⁴⁶

Despite mind-body dualism never being explicitly mentioned in Confucian texts, many do convey a sense of equality between humanity, the natural world, and the divine world. As

⁴⁶ Roger T. Ames, Yajun Chen, and Peter D. Herschok, eds., introduction to *Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism: Resources for a New Geopolitics of Interdependence*, Confucian Cultures (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021), 22 and 37.

Weiming states, “The human form of life envisioned by Confucius is not anthropocentric. Rather, it is anthropocosmic in the sense that there is implicit mutuality, constant communication, and dynamic interaction between the anthropological world and the cosmic order.”⁴⁷ This view pervades ancient Confucianism with passages exhibiting this theme present in the *Analects* and other Confucian classics like *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and *Mencius*. Humans are seen as embedded within the cosmos, a part of a greater universal process, and generally, to achieve success one must align themselves with the order of the universe. As Havens states, “This idea of anthropocosmic arises out of the Confucian emphasis within cosmology of the ideal harmony between *Tian* (heaven/ nature) and *ren* (persons), the *ren-Tian* continuum, and the triad (*Tian*, *ren*, Earth)”⁴⁸ Although this motif of maintaining cosmic harmony is more prevalent in Daoism, Confucianism exhibits it as well, for instance, this passage from the *The Doctrine of the Mean* speaks to the external benefits of maintaining a properly ordered internal state,

Pleasure and anger, sorrow and joy: before they emerge they are called centered; emerging by the proper rhythms they are called harmonious. Centered: this is the great root of the world. Harmonious: this is the ultimate *Dao* [way] of the world. Reaching centered harmony, heaven and earth take their proper places and the things of the world are nurtured thereby.⁴⁹

The significance of this alignment is also exhibited in the *Book of Changes (I Ching)*—a pre-confucian divination text composed of hexagrams that is often accompanied by Confucius's philosophical commentaries on their meanings. The second hexagram *kūn*, is generally

⁴⁷ Tu Weiming, “Chinese Philosophy: A Synoptic View,” in *A Companion to World Philosophies*, ed. Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2017), 7–8.

⁴⁸ Timothy Havens, “Confucianism as Humanism,” *CLA Journal*, 1, 2013, 1.

⁴⁹ Confucius, *The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean: An Online Teaching Translation*, 26.

interpreted as speaking to humanity's proper position in the cosmological order, especially with regard to *Tian* (heaven), which was originally a sort of supreme deity or natural force which could impart its heavenly order upon the world. As Wilhelm notes about it, "nature creates all beings without erring... It tolerates all creatures equally: this is its greatness. Therefore it attains what is right for all without artifice or special intentions. Man achieves the height of wisdom when all that he does is as self-evident as what nature does."⁵⁰ Huang also interprets this hexagram in a similar way, "a superior person should possess the virtues of straightness, uprightness, and submissiveness, like Earth responding to Heaven [*Tian*]; then one is able to carry out the will of Heaven [*Tian*] spontaneously, without effort."⁵¹ The benefits to achieving this level of harmony with the cosmos were thought to be quite tangible. If one inhabited the proper position in relation to *Tian* and Earth they were predisposing themselves to good fortune. As Huang states, *kūn* indicates, "...that the Duke of Zhou assisted his brother, King Wu, in planning an expedition against the tyrant of the Shang dynasty. The Duke of Zhou advised King Wu to cultivate the virtue of earth ... Then the expedition could be conducted with no effort, and nothing would remain unfavorable."⁵² Although the *I Ching* is not an explicitly Confucian text, its themes were still very much present during Confucius's time and were incorporated into his philosophy. As Eno notes, to Confucius *Tian* is less of a supreme deity and more the

⁵⁰ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd. ed, Bollingen Series 19 (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1990), 14.

⁵¹ Alfred Huang, ed., *The Complete I Ching: The Definitive Translation*, [10th anniversary ed.] (Rochester, Vt: Inner Traditions, 2010), 91.

⁵² Huang, *The Complete I Ching*, 91.

“unmotivated regularities of Nature.”⁵³ Passage [17.19] in the *Analects* illustrates this view of *Tian*, “The Master said, ‘Does *Tian* speak? Yet the seasons turn and the creatures of the world are born. Does *Tian* speak?’”⁵⁴ Despite its non-conscious status, to oppose *Tian* is still antithetical to the Confucian way, “[16.8] Confucius said, The *junzi* holds three things in awe. He holds the decree of *Tian* in awe, he holds great men in awe, and he holds the words of the Sage in awe. The small man does not know the decree of *Tian* and so does not hold it in awe, he is disrespectful towards great men, and he disgraces the words of the Sage.⁵⁵ To go against the order of *Tian* is to promote disharmony. As Ames notes, this overarching theme is pervasive in every aspect of Confucianism, “the Confucian in confronting the existential human situation is always negotiating between some universal rule and the particular circumstances, bending the rule where necessary but still maintaining its guiding importance.”⁵⁶

These are all examples of Confucianism’s anthropocentric view—a standpoint which could not fathom human consciousness as isolated and certainly not as superior to the cosmos. Rather, humans are considered a part of it. This worldview is far more compatible with James’s than Descartes’ and is naturally conducive to relational concepts of selfhood, as human experience is not isolated in any way from the rest of experience and is free to engage relationally with it.

However, this metaphysical similarity between James and Confucius goes only so far, as although both standpoints recognize humans to be embedded in the universe, pragmatists reject

⁵³ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 120.

⁵⁴ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 98.

⁵⁵ Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*, 92.

⁵⁶ Ames, Chen, Y., and Hershock, introduction to *Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism*, 6.

universal concepts like *Tian* or any notion of an overarching cosmic order. This is due to pragmatism's empiricist roots which lead it to renounce universals in favor of the tangible, individual, parts of experience. As James states,

Empiricism is known as the opposite of rationalism. Rationalism tends to emphasize universals and to make wholes prior to parts in the order of logic as well as in that of being. Empiricism, on the contrary, lays the explanatory stress upon the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction. My description of things, accordingly, starts with the parts and makes of the whole a being of the second order.⁵⁷

To James, grand concepts like *Tian* are not considered useful and certainly not superior to the individual aspects of reality. This is quite important as this metaphysical distinction bears heavily upon the differences between Confucian and pragmatist views on society. As mentioned at the end of my section on Confucianism, the theme of cosmic alignment also plays into the Confucian understanding of social order. Although *ren* and *li* are utilitarian moral concepts they are also thought to transcend the physical cases of their use and connect to this greater natural order, promoting harmony in society. As such, a properly ordered Confucian society reaps additional benefits from its alignment with the cosmic order. Since pragmatists reject ideas like *Tian*, they see no special benefit to a static, stratified, social order and ultimately tend to reject it.

Returning to relational themes in James's view of the self, another place where relations play a key role is in governing our selective attention. James notes that, "consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree."⁵⁸ Non-consciously, our minds naturally assign more or less attention to sensations depending on how immediately

⁵⁷James, "A World of Pure Experience," 181–82.

⁵⁸ James, "The Stream of Thought," 161.

relevant they are to our current situation. Indeed, the sensations actually noticed by our conscious minds are a remarkably small slice of those we receive in total, “we find it quite impossible to disperse our attention impartially over a number of impressions ... We actually ignore most of the things before us.”⁵⁹ The decisions made by our minds on what to filter out and what to pay attention to depends primarily on our personal idiosyncrasies. James gives the example of four men going on a trip to Europe, who, given their different interests, returned with vastly differing memories of the locations they visited. From the Jamesian standpoint these interests were certainly formed in a relational way, due to the influence of people or past experience. James also gives an another relational reason for why selective attention can vary. He states that the very process of reason utilizes and influences one’s selective attention,

Reasoning depends on the ability of the mind to break up the totality of the phenomenon reasoned about, into parts, and to pick out from among these the particular one which, in our given emergency, may lead to the proper conclusion. Another predicament will need another conclusion, and require another element to be picked out.⁶⁰

Selective attention is situationally dependent. Depending on the situation the mind may find some bits of sensory information more useful than others. Since the process of reasoning is incessant and the phenomena we reason about change moment to moment, one’s mind is constantly modifying its selective attention in response to its ever-changing situation. This further illustrates that to James the circumstances surrounding a person can have a profound impact on their consciousness and their experience. Unlike the Cartesian view of the mind, James sees it as deeply connected to its surroundings; it is a product of its environment and is malleable by its circumstance.

⁵⁹ James, “The Stream of Thought,” 178.

⁶⁰ James, “The Stream of Thought,” 179.

Another example of James's relational understanding of the mind is his concept of live and dead wires. James holds that whenever we are met with a statement proposed to our belief, it can either scintillate with us—making an immediate connection with our consciousness—or make no special connection and remain as dull and inaccessible as any other. He states,

if I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi's followers), the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act.⁶¹

James utilizes these concepts of live and dead connections to illustrate that people tend to believe in and act on propositions that are “alive” to them, often despite lacking adequate evidence. Importantly, whether a postulate is live or dead to a person depends on its unique relation to them. Between this and selective attention a person's experience according to James is fundamentally shaped by the things and relations around them. There is no doubt that, to James, people inhabit a relational state of being.

James on Society

Although he never wrote at length on social or political issues, in his famous lecture “The Will to Believe” James does give us a hint of his views regarding social structures in his defense of the importance of trust,

A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a

⁶¹ James, William, “The Will to Believe,” in *Pragmatism and classical American Philosophy*. Stuhr, John J. (Oxford University Press, 2000), 230.

ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted.⁶²

Here James extends his view of the universe—as fundamentally interconnected—to society as well. He highlights the importance of trust and cooperation as necessary social features for complex societal structures. This standpoint obviously highlights the importance of relations in society and bears similarities to Confucian sentiments about the importance of individuals being in alignment with the interests of their social group to ensure social harmony.

More of James’s political views have been uncovered in his *Nachlass*, but the wide variety of ideas found there might only serve to further complicate the already enigmatic state of his politics. As Livingston notes, “James has been described alternately as a libertarian, a republican, a radical democrat, a conservative, a socialist, an anarchist, and simply an adherent of ‘the genteel democratic liberalism characteristic of his class and his era.’”⁶³ A consistent theme in James’s politics though is his tendency to reject authority and favor individualism, an inclination which grew towards the end of his life. As Livingston notes of Historian Deborah Coon’s research,

Over the course of the 1900s, James came to affirm “a type of pacifist, communitarian anarchism—strongly individualist, but holding community to be important.” This anarchism valued local, decentralized, and autonomous communities ... as the ideal form of association to protect individuals from becoming reduced to “a mere series of interchangeable cogs in a vast military-industrial machine.”⁶⁴

⁶² James, “The Will to Believe,” 239.

⁶³ Alexander Livingston, *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7.

⁶⁴ Livingston, *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism*, 8.

This attitude fits well with his philosophy, which defends the importance of the individual's experience without ignoring the importance of its surroundings. It also exposes his humanism, as his greatest fear is ultimately the degradation of the quality of human experience. This disdain for the collectivism that large-scale industry and government requires, sets James apart from Confucius as well as the other pragmatists. Indeed, Confucius, Mead, and Dewey have no issue with vast social organizations as long as they are structured properly, but James rejects them altogether.

George Herbert Mead

Although George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) studied with William James and fellow pragmatist Josiah Royce for a year in 1887, the bulk of Mead's pragmatic work was produced after 1894 during his time at the university of Chicago where he developed a close friendship with major pragmatist John Dewey. As is evidenced by the similarities in their work, Mead and Dewey took great inspiration from each other. Indeed, both favored a reconstruction of philosophy; however, Mead differed from Dewey in the scope of his philosophic exploration, focusing more on fundamental philosophical issues like meaning and consciousness while Dewey wrote on everything from aesthetics, to politics, to education. It is for this reason that we will explore Mead's work before delving into Dewey who, out of all the pragmatists, yielded the most comprehensive and exhaustive political philosophy.

Mead was subject to an ever evolving philosophical identity. As Campbell notes, his views shifted and morphed, "Mead was, Dewey tells us, 'always dissatisfied with what he had done; always outgrowing his former expressions,' and consequently he was 'reluctant to fix his

ideas in the printed word . . .”⁶⁵ This vicissitude happens to fit well with his philosophical views on the self, but rendered his collection of published works scant and scattered. Many of his unfinished works have since been published posthumously thanks to the combined efforts of his students, family, and contemporaries. The most pertinent piece of his corpus to my purposes is *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, a book published in 1934 consisting of a series of lectures Mead gave in the 1900s on social psychology—a relatively scientific topic but, as Hall notes, one still rich with Mead’s philosophical views, “his was a distinctly social, rather than a natural, science. For Mead, the natural sciences were themselves construed in terms of the principles of his social theory.”⁶⁶

Mead’s view of the self is by far the most relational of all the pragmatists. Despite his constantly evolving views the social nature of existence always remains of central importance to him. We will begin by exploring his thoughts on language, which is fundamental to his concept of the self and its development

Mead starts his discussion of language by mentioning the importance of Wundt’s concept of gestures, giving the example of two dogs squaring off: whenever one moves the other observes its gesture and adjusts accordingly, “the act of each dog becomes the stimulus to the other dog for his response.”⁶⁷ Mead calls this instinctive back-and-forth a “conversation of

⁶⁵ James Campbell, “Mead’s Life: Cultural Context and Philosophical Background,” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy*, by John J. Stuhr (Oxford University Press, 2000), 179.

⁶⁶ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, SUNY Series in Systematic Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 80.

⁶⁷ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles William Morris, Facsim. ed., Works of George Herbert Mead 1 (Chicago (Ill.) London: University of Chicago press, 197AD), 42.

gestures,” noting that it is core to the social process and that it demonstrates the constant state of readjustment that two beings in a social interaction are subject to.⁶⁸ Mead notes that such social scenarios do not require rational thought to be in either of the animal’s minds, they can play out entirely instinctively; however, it is possible for ideas and emotions to underpin gestures, and these can often be inferred. Mead draws a distinction between an angry dog and an angry human, “in one case the observer sees that the attitude of the dog means attack, but he does not say that it means a conscious determination to attack on the part of the dog. However, if somebody shakes his fist in your face you assume that he has not only a hostile attitude but that he has some idea behind it.”⁶⁹ Both exhibit hostile gestures but the human’s has some additional meaning underlying it that both you and the human understand.

The reason why people can understand the meanings of other people’s gestures is because they can affect the exhibitor in the same way as the observer. For instance, when we speak an insult to ourselves we can imagine how another might react to it, determining the feeling and meaning it carries. Mead terms such gestures “significant symbols” stating, “gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in an individual making them the same responses which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in ... the individuals to whom they are addressed.”⁷⁰ It is through this process that we can estimate the meanings of gestures by simulating their potential impact in a social scenario. Over time we accumulate a repertoire of significant symbols and their meanings, which grows our minds. Verbal language is a system of

⁶⁸ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 42.

⁶⁹ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 45.

⁷⁰ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 47.

communication composed of these significant symbols, and due to its widespread use, is a key component in the development of the self,

We are, especially through the use of the vocal gestures, continually arousing in ourselves those responses which we call out in other persons, so that we are taking the attitudes of the other persons into our own conduct. The critical importance of language in the development of human experience lies in this fact that the stimulus is one that can react upon the speaking individual as it reacts upon the other.⁷¹

Already there is intense relationality at play here. To Mead, the meanings of our gestures are entirely contingent upon how they are received in a social context. He even goes so far as to claim that meaning of any sort is always contingent on the surrounding context, being “dependent upon the relation of an organism or group of organisms to it.”⁷² Moreover, only through social interaction, or its simulation, is growth of the mind possible. Certainly, social relations are more important to Mead than to any other pragmatist.

Gestures are the most fundamental form of social expression for Mead, and “roles” are the next step up. Mead argues that much like how we collect the meanings of gestures, we also adopt patterns of habitual action, or roles, from people. For instance, when playing, a child can adopt the role of a policeman, a cashier, or a mother, each with its own unique set of gestures and reactions. In each case however, the child must not only understand the specific attitudes of the role but also how others will respond to it. Mead illustrates this with an example of a person playing baseball, “each one of his own acts is determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that

⁷¹ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 69.

⁷² Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 80.

team...”⁷³ To function in a social context one must not only understand the gestures and reactions related to one’s own role but also those related to everyone else’s, and given this, one must then be able to estimate how one’s actions will be received by everyone else.

Through this process one can adopt a role in society, but to cultivate a fully developed “self” within the social order one must go a step further. As Mead states, one must incorporate the attitude of their community into their own, merging with the community’s directives,

If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense ... he must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself ... take their attitudes toward ... the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which ... they are all engaged; and he must then, by generalizing these individual attitudes of that organized society or social group ... act toward different social projects which at any given time it is carrying out...⁷⁴

To Mead, to become a fully formed “self” one must understand the general attitudes of one’s community and adopt them as one’s own, becoming a part of the social organism and working towards its goals. This internalization of the generalized attitudes of one’s society cultivates the relational part of the self, what Mead refers to as the “me,” however he does acknowledge another, less relational, element of the self he calls the “I.”

Mead explicitly shies away from a discussion on the metaphysical distinctions between the two, instead basing his understanding in a more naturalistic, scientific context.⁷⁵ Mead states, “the ‘I’ reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the ‘me’ and we react to it as an ‘I.’” Unlike the “me” the “I” is not the roles and attitudes one has adopted but a different, independently cognitive, part

⁷³ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 154.

⁷⁴ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 154-55.

⁷⁵ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 173.

of ourselves. When one reflects upon who they are, they do so as the “I” reflecting upon the “me.” When we remember ourselves, we do so as the “I” looking back upon the “me,” which was the “I” of a previous moment. The “I” is one’s immediate, first-person point of view, which examines the attitudes, roles, and gestures one has accumulated, estimates who one is by measuring one’s relationship to the social context, and automatically makes the moment-to-moment decisions on how to react to the current situation. As Mead states,

The “I” both calls out the “me” and responds to it. Taken together they constitute a personality as it appears in social experience. The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases. If it did not have these two phases there could not be conscious responsibility, and there would be nothing novel in experience.⁷⁶

It should be noted that Mead doesn’t mean to imply that the “I” is in some way the “true” inner self. It is in no way more essential than the “me” just because its viewpoint grants us self-consciousness. For without the socially derived “me” the “I” would have nothing to conceive of, nothing to react to, and no knowledge of what it is in relation to other things or how it should act. It would lack the conscious responsibility Mead mentions. The “I” does bear some similarities to the Confucian concept of *ji* (己), in that it is a basic, isolated, un-relationalized notion of the self. Unlike *ji* the “I” isn’t directly improved on by forming social relations, for Mead, socialization cultivates the “me.” Regardless, on their own neither *ji* or the “I” is sufficient to be called a self for they lack an important relational aspect. The “I” needs the “me” and although Confucius doesn’t bifurcate his conception of the self like Mead, he is adamant about the role relationality plays in fulfilling the self, making it clear that *ji* on its own is not developed enough to be called

⁷⁶ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 178.

a full self. Indeed, for both philosophies, socialization plays an integral role in the emergence of selfhood.

The Confucian concept of *ren* is another parallel between Mead's notion of self-development and Confucianism. Hall explores the use of *ren* as a verb to denote the transformative process of a person realizing their potential. Essentially this is the path of the *junzi*, which involves one integrating themselves into society to promote social harmony and selflessly bolster the social order by being supportive to others. As Hall states, "*jen [ren]* is fundamentally an integrative process. It is the transformation of self: the disciplining of the 'small man' (*hsiao jen [ren]*), with his disintegrative preoccupations with selfish advantage, towards the sensibilities of the profoundly relational person."⁷⁷ When viewed from this perspective, the process of *ren* bears striking similarities to Mead's process of cultivating the "me." Hall continues,

The force of this emphasis on interpersonal action is captured in what D.C. Lau rightly calls the "methodology of Jen [*ren*]": altruism (*shu*).

"*Shu* is the method of discovering what other people wish or do not wish done to them. The method consists in taking oneself 'what is near at hand' as an analogy and asking oneself what one would like or dislike were one in the position of the person at the receiving end."⁷⁸

This is remarkably similar to how the meanings of gestures and roles are inferred and adopted in Mead's philosophy. For both philosophies, estimating how others would react to one's own actions is a fundamental part of the cultivation of the self. Additionally, Hall notes that in many scholar's understandings the process of *ren* facilitates both changes made by the environment upon the individual and vice-versa, "the process of person making entails inner- and outer-

⁷⁷Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, 115.

⁷⁸Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, 116.

directedness. In this process one both influences one's environing others and is influenced by them.”⁷⁹ Hall continues that Mead echoes this sentiment in his understanding of self-development, “the response of the “I” involves adaptation, but an adaptation which affects not only the self but also the social environment which helps to constitute the self; that is, it implies a view of evolution in which the individual affects its own environment as well as being affected by it.”⁸⁰ Indeed, the similarities between the process of *ren* and Mead’s cultivation of the “me” are strong.

Similar to Hall’s understanding of *ren*, Chen, Y. has another understanding of the Confucian process of self-development which parallels Mead’s process of social integration. He terms this process “practice,”

To a large extent, practice or action refers to individual self-cultivation, moral practice, and moral fulfillment in the Chinese tradition ... one gradually internalizes the system of meanings embedded within traditional culture into one’s individual mind so as to achieve a complete harmony between a human being and norms and to achieve the complete freedom of a human being as well.⁸¹

“Practice” is a process that involves the internalization of social values and is deeply tied to the cultivation of the self. This is remarkably similar to Mead’s process of societal integration, whereby one adopts the generalized attitudes of one’s community, simultaneously integrating with it and developing one’s self to the fullest extent.

⁷⁹Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, 118.

⁸⁰ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 214, **quoted in** Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, 118.

⁸¹ Yajun Chen, “The Core of Pragmatism and Its Echo in Chinese Philosophy,” in *Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism*, ed. Roger T. Ames et al. (University of Hawaii Press, 2021), 34.

Mead on Society

Although politics wasn't the focus of Mead's work, *Mind, Self, and Society* does contain a significant number of his views on society and much like those of James and Confucius, they hinge on the relational conception of the self. Indeed, to Mead there is no self without society, but neither could there be society without the self. Like James, Mead recognizes that broad scale cooperation between integrated individuals is a necessity for complex social structures,

The complex co-operative processes and activities and institutional functionings of organized human society are ... possible only in so far as every individual involved in them or belonging to that society can take the general attitudes of all other such individuals with reference to these processes ... and to the organized social whole of experiential relations and interactions thereby constituted—and can direct his own behavior accordingly.⁸²

Only fully socially integrated individuals with their like-minded attitudes can cooperate on the scale necessary to form a large society. This view, which considers a sense of collectivism necessary to maintain complex social structures, echoes the sentiments of Confucius who espoused the importance of individuals putting the community before themselves.

Like Confucius, Mead sees that creating strong relational bonds between individuals is the key to a harmonious society. For Mead, strong individualism breeds attitudes of self-superiority which lead to internal conflict. Indeed, anything which serves to divide and hinder the free sharing and amalgamation of attitudes Mead views as incredibly detrimental to both the health of the social order and the possibility of individuals developing completely, “if individuals are so distinguished from each other that they cannot identify themselves with each other, if there is not a common basis, then there cannot be a whole self present on either side.”

⁸² Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 155.

Mead cites caste-based societies as the worst offenders, since the social categories they promote deny large parts of the populace from integrating with each other. The complete impossibility of a peasant identifying with a king leads neither to develop a complete sense of self and increases the chances of dangerous ethical differences forming. For Mead, ethical ideas depend entirely upon his process of social integration, as “every human individual must, to behave ethically, integrate himself with the pattern of organized social behavior...”⁸³ When subgroups form in societies they can diverge ethically with disastrous results. Mead gives the example of warrior castes often preying openly upon subordinate ones, demonstrating the complete lack of ethical consonance within such societies.⁸⁴

Mead notes that societies have tended away from this style of social organization over the course of history and takes this as a sign of natural progress. For example, the concept of the national army did away the distinct warrior class,

there was the possibility of everyone’s being a warrior, so that the man who was a fighting man was still a person who could identify himself with the other members of the community ... the normal relationship between the fighting man and the rest of the community was one which bound people together, integrated the army and the body of the state, instead of separating them.⁸⁵

Another case is modern education, which “rests on this possibility of the adult finding a common basis between himself and the child.”⁸⁶ Towards the end of the second millennium, children came to be treated as “little adults,” who required training and education to impart upon them the

⁸³ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 320.

⁸⁴ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 319.

⁸⁵ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 319.

⁸⁶ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 317.

proper roles and attitudes required by society.⁸⁷ Essentially, modern education is a systematic version of Mead's process of self-cultivation and social integration.

All of this bears similarities to Confucius's view of healthy societies. Social harmony is of supreme importance to Confucius and like Mead he turns to social integration and relational interconnection to ensure it. However, when it comes to envisioning his ideal society one will find that it is quite incompatible with Mead's views. In line with the politics of his era, Confucius proposes an autocratic system whereby one virtuous ruler disseminates their harmony naturally among their subjects. In Confucius's view this is an efficient means of instilling good morals in a society since it allows a single person to have a large amount of positive influence on all of society. Citizens inspired by the ruler and supported by other *junzi*, then maximize their potential and find their natural place in the social order, resulting in a harmonious stratified society. Combined with the metaphysical benefits of cosmic alignment this system works well for Confucius, but for Mead, classism of any sort is doomed to create social conflict. Inevitably the attitudes of different classes will grow to the point where they are too disparate to be reconciled. Mead hails democracy as a process antithetical to classism, one which leverages functional differences between individuals to foster interdependence,

The development of the democratic community implies the removal of castes as essential to the personality of the individual; the individual is not to be what he is in his specific caste or group set over against other groups, but his distinctions are to be distinctions of functional difference which put him in relationship with others instead of separating him.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 318.

⁸⁸ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 318.

Mead sees the autocracy that Confucius proposes as a doomed system. Inevitably the ruling class would diverge too much from the lower classes and conflict between them would begin.

In Mead's ideal society all people must be equal partners. A democratic form of government allows for governance without classes and as such does not impede social integration and the ultimate homogenization of a society's attitudes—which creates lasting social harmony for Mead. Apart from this difference though, much of Mead's philosophy including his ideas on relational person-making, the benefits of social integration, and the importance of strengthening community and ensuring social harmony, all have parallels in Confucianism.

John Dewey

John Dewey (1859-1952) is one of the most notable and prolific pragmatists and is the last I will discuss. His work still influences modern thinking regarding the fields of education, political theory, sociology, and philosophy just to name a few. Much of Dewey's work was aimed at serving society practically. Like James, he felt philosophy had become too cerebral and isolated from the realities of experience to be useful, and like Mead he favored a reconstruction of the field to abate this issue. Due to their friendship, Mead and Dewey ended up sharing many ideals, resulting in an abundance of similarities between their philosophies. Both advocated for the epistemological importance of lived experience, saw minds as inherently relational entities, and recognized the importance of building strong communities within society. However unlike Mead, whose social psychology permeated every aspect of his philosophy, Dewey's naturalism pervaded his. As Chen, Y. states, "Dewey emphasizes life and practice very much, but he does so in a nonliving and nonpractical way. In the copious writings of thirty-seven volumes, Dewey explains

his ideas repeatedly and theoretically.”⁸⁹This results in a drier style of philosophy which is inherently more distanced from Confucianism. Regardless, this does not negate the multitude of similarities that there are, and overall, Dewey has been compared to Chinese philosophy far more than any other pragmatist.

This is potentially due to his visit to China, where from 1919-1921 Dewey traveled the country giving a series of lectures and experiencing the realities of Chinese life first-hand. Although I am hesitant to say Dewey directly adopted Confucian ideas there, as Wang argues, Chinese society proved to Dewey the extraordinary benefits of having a solid communal society independent of the state, “Dewey was fascinated by the contrast he saw between an organized, integrated public and an incompetent, untrustworthy state.”⁹⁰ “The fact that China could sustain itself in the long course of human history with the majority of its people being indifferent to political questions was an eye-opener to Dewey.”⁹¹ This ultimately caused Dewey to change his conception of democracy, his preferred system of governance, into a culture or a way of life that could be enacted by the public regardless of its government.

Regardless of the potential Chinese influence on Dewey’s political thinking, the metaphysical core of his philosophy remains in line with James and Mead and as such bears natural similarities to Confucianism. It differs in the technicalities however, as Dewey focuses primarily on defending the epistemological standing of science, but still, he and Confucius maintain similar underpinnings.

⁸⁹ Chen, Y., “The Core of Pragmatism and Its Echo in Chinese Philosophy,” 35.

⁹⁰ Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 98.

⁹¹ Wang, *John Dewey in China*, 98.

Although every pragmatist took a stance antithetical to the dualistic and absolutist tendencies that they felt had robbed philosophy of its usefulness, James and Dewey were the most outspoken about the metaphysical changes they felt had to be made in order to rectify the issue. Both disapproved of the Cartesian fixation on rational logic and deductive inference, and despised the subsequent devaluation of sensory experience and inductive inference that had followed it. Like James and his radical empiricism, Dewey bases his philosophy in lived experience and from this follows a relational concept of the self.

Dewey lays out the anti-dualistic groundwork for his philosophy by stating that nature and experience are not different things and that philosophy has fallen into a fallacious tendency of emphasizing one over the other. The Lockean empiricists reduce knowledge to sensory data alone. To them, objects in nature *are* the sensations we receive from them,

[objects are] replaced by certain qualities of sense attending the act of vision ... [a chair] will not be the chair of direct experience, of use and enjoyment, a thing with its own independent origin, history and career; it will be only a complex of directly “given” sense qualities as a core, plus a surrounding cluster of other qualities revived imaginatively as “ideas.”⁹²

Dewey rejects this, stating that even from this viewpoint there is still the acknowledgement of an external object. The chair which is being perceived still exists, so reducing the totality of its existence to sensory data alone is foolishly reductionistic. The subjectivists take the primacy of personal experience to the extreme, to the extent that any sense of objectivity is abandoned. For them, “mental attitudes, *ways* of experiencing were treated as self-sufficient and complete in

⁹² John Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” in *Experience and Nature*, unabridged and unaltered. republ. of the 2. ed (New York: Dover Publ, 1995), 17.

themselves, as that which is primarily *given*, the sole original and therefore indubitable data.”⁹³

Dewey also rejects this standpoint, preferring to reframe objectivity than do away with it.

On the other hand, the Cartesians lower the importance of experience, relegating it “to a secondary and almost accidental place.”⁹⁴ Dewey rejects this standpoint as well, stating that it is unnecessary and the product of a philosophy that is too removed from reality. He states that philosophy should strive to merge experience and nature rather than separate them, and that for his philosophy “empirical naturalism” this is no issue.

Dewey notes that the natural sciences are rife with empirical naturalism. Scientists use the rationalist tools of theory, reason, and logic freely but always ensure that their usage remains grounded in “directly experienced subject-matter.”⁹⁵ In other words, to a natural scientist, “experience, controlled in specifiable ways, is the avenue that leads to the facts and laws of nature.”⁹⁶ Dewey gives an example of the impressive inferential capabilities of this methodology stating that through this interlinked understanding of experience and nature, a geologist can infer with accuracy what the world was like millions of years ago without experiencing it first-hand.⁹⁷ Dewey states this proves, “that experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature—stones, plants, animals, disease, health, temperature, electricity and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are what is experienced.”⁹⁸ This

⁹³ Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method:,” 16.

⁹⁴ Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” 3.

⁹⁵ Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” 2a.

⁹⁶ Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” 2a.

⁹⁷ Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” 4a.

⁹⁸ Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” 4a.

merging of experience and nature is similar to the positions of other pragmatists like James and Mead, as well as that of Confucius. Naturally, this position is antithetical to Lockean empiricism, Cartesianism, and logical positivism, which Dewey claims have become overly intellectualistic, attempting to make knowledge clear-cut and distinct when it really isn't,

What is really "in" experience extends much further than that which at any time is *known*. From the standpoint of knowledge, objects must be distinct; their traits must be explicit; the vague and unrevealed is a limitation. Hence whenever the habit of identifying reality with the object of knowledge as such prevails, the obscure and vague are explained away ... But it is equally important to note that the dark and twilight abound. For in any object of primary experience there are always potentialities which are not explicit; any object that is overt is charged with possible consequences that are hidden; the most overt act has factors which are not explicit.⁹⁹

To Dewey it is a vice of philosophy to try in vain to live up to a perfect standard of knowledge, for there are always indefinite aspects to even the most definite facts, "the assumption that nature in itself is all of the same kind, all distinct, explicit and evident, having no hidden possibilities, no novelties or obscurities, is possible only on the basis of a philosophy which at some point draws an arbitrary line between nature and experience."¹⁰⁰ But for the empirical naturalist there is no line, and therefore no fear of murky facts. Dewey gives engineering and medicine as two more examples of empirical naturalism. They are tools that clarify, add meaning and value, and make for the "expansion of life" without getting bogged down in epistemic technicalities.¹⁰¹

This merging of nature and experience bears similarities to the worldview of Confucius who, as mentioned in my discussion of James, considers human experience as embedded in the

⁹⁹Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," 20-21.

¹⁰⁰ Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," 10-11.

¹⁰¹ Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," 10.

grandeur process of the universe. It also paves the way for Dewey's conception of self which is relational.

On the emergence of the self, Dewey states that "personality, selfhood, subjectivity are eventual functions that emerge with complexly organized interactions, organic and social."¹⁰² This is because, to Dewey, all of these functions are actually patterns of habitual thinking which are naturally imparted onto us through life in society. Proof of this is obvious: people act the way others in their social group act, they believe what they were brought up to believe, people are the products of their societies. Dewey outlines this while explaining his view of the mind,

the whole history of science, art and morals proves that the mind that appears *in* individuals is not as such individual mind. ... [the mind] is in itself a system of belief, recognitions, and ignorances, of acceptances and rejections, of expectancies and appraisals of meanings which have been instituted under the influence of custom and tradition.¹⁰³

These systems of belief, recognitions, and ignorances are patterns of thought that we can develop on our own, but more often than not adopt from our societies. As Kauppi notes, Dewey goes to great lengths to establish the inseparable nature of the self and society, "only in association with others does one become a conscious centre of experience ... The environment in which the individual experiences interaction with others thereby socially forming habits and adopting morals – is the source of the individual's formation"¹⁰⁴ Dewey notes that breaking away from

¹⁰² John Dewey, "Nature, Mind and the Subject," in *Experience and Nature*, unabridged and unaltered. republ. of the 2. ed (New York: Dover Publ, 1995), 209.

¹⁰³ Dewey, "Nature, Mind and the Subject," 209.

¹⁰⁴ Veli-Mikko Kauppi, Katariina Holma, and Tiina Kontinen, "John Dewey's Notion of Social Intelligence," in *Practices of Citizenship in East Africa* (Routledge, 2019), 46.

habitual patterns of thought is difficult, but empirical philosophy can help by rooting them out and examining them critically,

An empirical philosophy is in any case a kind of intellectual disrobing. We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intelligent furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us.”¹⁰⁵

This naturally challenges the feasibility of rationalism since purely rational introspection is impossible due to how ingrained our socially derived intellectual habits are. It also demonstrates the degree to which people are intertwined with their relationally derived intellectual habits.

Although Dewey finds it foolish to take anything as an isolated entity, as doing so would leave out the countless relations that impact its existence, he notes that it is possible for people to develop in a somewhat isolated sense. In some cases people do exist happily in their society resulting in a relational existence. This happens when an individual belongs to a, “continuous system of connected events which reinforce its activities and which form a world in which it is at home, consistently at one with its own preferences, satisfying its requirements.”¹⁰⁶ In this situation the individual is happy to exist as a part of a whole, adopting the habits of its society which provides for its needs. However, if the individual finds that its needs are not being satisfied by its surroundings then it has the choice of adopting a more isolated existence, “[The individual] is broken off, discrete, because it is at odds with its surroundings. It either surrenders, conforms, and for the sake of peace becomes a parasitical subordinate, indulges in egoistical

¹⁰⁵ Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” 37.

¹⁰⁶ Dewey, “Nature, Mind and the Subject,” 245.

solitude; or its activities set out to remake conditions in accord with desire.”¹⁰⁷ A person in this situation can either accept their unfortunate circumstance and exist unhappily, or reject the society that surrounds them to a degree, either isolating themselves or setting out to reshape it in their favor. Although Dewey doesn’t specify whether the satisfied relational life is better than this, he does state that the individual who exists happily in society has reached a “fulfilled” conclusion, “it is a natural end, not an abrupt and immediate termination but as a fulfillment.”¹⁰⁸ Dewey seeing healthy social integration as the natural end fits well with his philosophy—the more relational one is the more personal growth they will undergo and richer their life will be.

Dewey on Society

To Dewey, the particulars of governance come second to the well-being of the public, “there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public.”¹⁰⁹ From his standpoint on selfhood follows a sociopolitical philosophy that aims to leverage the relational qualities of individuals to create strong societies with the capacity for self-improvement. Core to this mission is education, a topic which makes up a rather large part of Dewey’s work. He notes that in a social situation, “a being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account.”¹¹⁰ Naturally we pick up on the actions of those around us, understanding our place in relation to them and determining our social role. Through

¹⁰⁷ Dewey, “Nature, Mind and the Subject,” 245.

¹⁰⁸ Dewey, “Nature, Mind and the Subject,” 245.

¹⁰⁹ John Dewey, “Search for the Great Community,” in *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Chicago Gateway Books, 1946), 68.

¹¹⁰ John Dewey, “Education as a Social Function,” in *Democracy and Education*, Penn State Electronic Classics Series (1916; repr., The Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 16.

this process we also begin to understand the ideas and emotions that underlie these activities and internalize them, ultimately adopting the attitudes of those around us, Dewey notes that,

the social medium neither implants certain desires and ideas directly, nor yet merely establishes certain purely muscular habits of action ... [it makes] the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step. As soon as he is possessed by the emotional attitude of the group, he will be alert to recognize the special ends at which it aims and the means employed to secure success.¹¹¹

This process is incredibly transformative: serving to integrate us into our communities and ultimately shape our minds. Remarking upon the psychological impact this process has, Dewey states, “the way our group or class does things tends to determine the proper objects of attention, and thus to prescribe the directions and limits of observation and memory.”¹¹² Moreover, for Dewey, this is a primary process of self-development, “the main texture of disposition is formed, independently of schooling, by such influences.”¹¹³ Ultimately, the key factor which stands to have the greatest formative impact on a person is their environment. As such, the school for Dewey should serve as an environment specially configured to naturally cultivate the ideas and emotions that one wants in its students. Additionally, Dewey states that “what conscious, deliberate teaching can do is ... free the capacities thus formed for fuller exercise, to purge them of some of their grossness, and to furnish objects which make their activity more productive of meaning.”¹¹⁴ Ultimately honing the habits naturally imparted upon students to be more fruitful. This is all very important to Dewey’s society as it is through education that societies self-renew.

¹¹¹ Dewey, “Education as a Social Function,” 18.

¹¹² Dewey, “Education as a Social Function,” 21.

¹¹³ Dewey, “Education as a Social Function,” 22.

¹¹⁴ Dewey, “Education as a Social Function,” 22.

It is how adults train “the immature” to replace them. A good school will omit what is considered undesirable for future generations to possess, eliminating “the unworthy features of the existing environment from influence upon mental habitudes,” bettering the society with each generation.¹¹⁵

This function of education as a method of societal revision bears similarities to the pre-Qin Confucian style of education which was divided into two parts: the education of music and the education of rites. Harmony was seen as inherent to music, and its practice was a means of instilling it within individuals so they could then spread it throughout society.¹¹⁶ Rites were the social rules and practices specific to one’s role in society. As Chen, J. notes, both of these aspects worked “to change the prevailing but problematic ways and customs on the one hand and to educate the people in their entirety on the other.”¹¹⁷ Both aims that Dewey also holds for education.

For both Confucius and Dewey, education serves as a revisionary process to better society generation by generation. But what would the culmination of this process look like? What is the ideal society for Dewey? Unlike James and Mead, Dewey wrote at length on politics and although his work bears some notable differences to Confucianism at its core the two are

¹¹⁵ Dewey, “Education as a Social Function,” 25.

¹¹⁶ Jia Chen, “Harmony in the Arts: The Sense of Communication in Confucian and Deweyan Aesthetics,” in *Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism: Resources for a New Geopolitics of Interdependence*, ed. Roger T. Ames, Chen Yajun, and Peter D. Hershock, Confucian Cultures (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2021), 51.

¹¹⁷ Chen, J., “Harmony in the Arts: The Sense of Communication in Confucian and Deweyan Aesthetics,” 58.

very similar. Indeed, both strive to create social cohesion and strong communities by leveraging the relational qualities of people.

To Dewey, society is a community and the healthier and more cohesive the community the better the society. The social order Dewey propounds is democracy, but he draws a distinction between “democracy as a social idea” and “political democracy as a system of government.”¹¹⁸ These two forms of democracy can exist separately of each other but are mutually beneficial when present in a society together. Democracy in the social sense bears similarities to Mead’s concept of social integration, in that it refers to a community composed of individuals that have adopted a shared set of values and work in harmony to achieve the group’s goals. In other words, “it is the idea of community life itself.”¹¹⁹ For Dewey, such a way of life is the only way to develop the self completely: “a society of free individuals in which all, in doing each his own work, contribute to the liberation and enrichment of the lives of others is the only environment for the normal growth to full stature.”¹²⁰

This societal ideal is similar to Confucius's, but distinct in a few areas. Both see the value of strong communities as places where relational individuals can fully develop their potential. In turn, developed people form better communities and so society naturally benefits. But Dewey differs from Confucius by placing emphasis on the free interaction between social groups as the main mechanism that both alleviates tensions between them and cultivates the self.

¹¹⁸ Dewey, “Search for the Great Community,” 143.

¹¹⁹ Dewey, “Search for the Great Community,” 146.

¹²⁰ John Dewey, “The Need for a Philosophy of Education,” *Schools* 7, no. 2 (1934): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1086/656072>.

Dewey states that when an individual in a democratic society belongs to multiple social groups that hold conflicting views, the discourse that results serves an indispensable purpose, “there is a free give-and-take: fullness of integrated personality is therefore possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups reinforce one another and their values accord.”¹²¹ Such conflicts not only serve to develop the individuals who are trapped in the middle, but the resulting exchange can serve to help the two differing groups come to terms, creating social harmony. Isolation of a social group impedes this discourse and is therefore detrimental for all parties involved, only through their free interaction can individuals develop and society become cohesive. Distinct social classes, like the kind that result from a Confucian social order reduce this discourse and would in Dewey’s eyes, impede social cohesion. As Dewey states, “a good citizen finds his conduct as a member of a political group enriching and enriched by his participation in family life, industry, scientific and artistic associations.”¹²² For Confucius, social stratification is the natural culmination of the Confucian meritocracy where everyone finds their proper place in society after achieving their potential. But Dewey doesn’t believe that development of the self is ever complete. The self is always open to further modification, even habits are flexible.¹²³ As such, one’s “proper” place in society will change as one grows and evolves. Therefore, social harmony being achieved through a final social order is unfeasible to Dewey as individuals will perpetually want to adjust their role in it. As previously

¹²¹ Dewey, “Search for the Great Community,” 148.

¹²² Dewey, “Search for the Great Community,” 148.

¹²³ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (Project Gutenberg), 71, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/41386/41386-h/41386-h.htm>.

mentioned, Confucianism's acceptance of a static social order is due in part to its prior acceptance of broader universal concepts like Tian (heaven). But like all the pragmatists, Dewey rejects such notions. For him, the cosmos as a vast web of individual yet interconnected things all interacting with no grand universal scheme or rhythm. As such, the best a society can do is to embrace its never-ending state of flux and work to better itself indefinitely.

As mentioned earlier, Dewey felt the status of the public was more important than the role of governance in society. It is important to note that Dewey did not view governments as irrelevant, but simply as less crucial parts of the state. Indeed, political democracy can serve to facilitate the kind of Deweyan society I have outlined. Dewey calls democratic governance the "political phase" of the democratic idea. It effectuates discourse between social groups with differing opinions, encourages citizens to take an active role in maintaining their society, and is naturally anti-classist, all of which are beneficial features for Deweyan public. Although ultimately Dewey's society is markedly different than a Confucian one, Dewey's ultimate goals of social harmony and maximizing self-development are shared with Confucius. Moreover, both build their social order around a sense of community and a conception of the relational self.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the differences between the ideal societies that Confucianism and pragmatism propound obscure the similarities between these two philosophies. For one, both view humans and consciousness as parts of the universe. Confucian philosophy sees humans as embedded within the grander scheme of the cosmic order while Pragmatists, who tend to reject universal notions, view the cosmos as an interconnected web of things all impacting each other through relations in an infinite state of flux. This focus on the interconnectedness of human experience

leads both to reject views of the mind as isolated, like Cartesian dualism, and opens the door for a relational understanding of the self.

When it comes to developing this self, Confucianism and pragmatism generally have similar ideas. Confucius lays out his process of personal betterment with concepts like *ren* and *li*, which if adopted lead one to become a *junzi*—a virtuous and highly relational person. Although James doesn't hold interactionist views to the degree that Confucius, Mead, and Dewey do, he does see the human as a relational creature open to development from its surroundings. Mead and Dewey both see self-development as contingent on social relations. For Mead this is especially pronounced given the importance he bestows on the process of social integration: where an individual accepts the roles and attitudes of their society and integrates with it harmoniously. This resonates strongly with Confucius, whose *junzis* undergo a similar process of development. Dewey doesn't take things quite as far, but he does hold that the mind grows through social interaction and that the most fulfilled individuals are social ones.

As a result of these relational and social views of the self, both Confucius and the pragmatists see societies as large communities with lots of internal interaction and relations. Good interaction generally strengthens societies, promoting harmony and social cohesion, but when it comes to how to facilitate this the philosophies diverge.

For Confucianism a good social order is created by first cultivating *junzis*, who act as catalysts of social harmony, bettering society from their station and assisting others in fulfilling their potential. Having a *junzi* as a ruler can significantly expedite this process, as their all-important position allows them to affect the entirety of their citizenry, instilling virtue in the masses with ease. A virtuous society culminates when its social order aligns with the universal

order. When people act with *ren* and *li*, and find their proper place within society, it will naturally inhabit its proper position in the cosmic order causing harmony and good fortune to befall it.

Pragmatists reject such universal concepts and tend to see class distinctions as damaging to relations. Instead, they prefer societies with as much internal interaction as possible, at the expense of ordered stratification.

James understands the importance of trust and cooperation in society but is the most individualist of the three. He dislikes authority and favors small, decentralized communities where one can experience the benefits of a relational existence while avoiding the tyrannical and collectivist dangers of large social structures.

In my opinion Mead resonates more with Confucius than any other pragmatist. When it comes to society both advocate for a mindset of humble collectivism. Mead sees strong individualism as a precursor to conceit which leads to social conflict, and Confucius propounds the importance of humbly placing the community's well-being above one's own. Furthermore despite their advocacy for homogenized semi-conformist societies, neither favor stripping people of their individuality entirely. As Chen, J. Notes, "Confucius argued, a harmonious society depended on the cooperation and coordination among different members: 'harmony, yet not sameness' was the ultimate ideal of educating for social cohesion and recognizing the differences."¹²⁴ Mead's social integration relies on people adopting the same "attitudes," i.e., motivations and perspectives, but this can only standardize them to a degree and individuals will always retain their unique personal viewpoints. Mead also notes that individuals ought to retain

¹²⁴ Chen, Y., "The Core of Pragmatism and Its Echo in Chinese Philosophy," 49.

functional differences which allow them serve different roles in society, fostering interdependence between citizens.

The main point of contention between Mead and Confucius is the matter of social classes. Like James, Mead would strongly dislike the classism that Confucius's virtuous autocracy promotes as he views any form of social stratification as keeping parts of society from integrating with each other. Mead regards internal conflict as an inevitability in such societies and prefers democratic governments which theoretically do away with classes.

Dewey is notably less conformist than Mead when it comes to the benefits of a homogenized society. He prefers when social groups have different opinions, as to him the discourse that erupts from their conflicting views develops the individuals caught in the middle. Still he dislikes classism, or any form of social order which separates social groups and impedes discourse. As such, he would likely not be in favor of the stratified Confucian society. Additionally, Dewey would regard a final, static, social order as untenable, as changes in ideas, people, and social groups would inevitably disrupt it. That being said, his view of education as a revisionary process to better society are remarkably similar to Confucius's.

Ultimately, pragmatists and Confucians both see humans as embedded in experience, selves as relational, and society as about communities which should leverage the relational qualities of people to be strong and harmonious. However, they differ on how this should be realized in practice, due in part to an underlying metaphysical distinction, that being Confucianism's acceptance of a universal metaphysical order and pragmatism's rejection of any such notion.

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