The Superiority of Daoism Over Confucianism

By Shahzaib Jaffer

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Harvard University

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Confucianism and Daoism are two ancient Chinese schools of thought. Confucianism is a way of life propagated by Chinese philosopher Confucius in the sixth to fifth century B.C.E, his teachings were followed for more than two millennia. At its core Confucian views advocate for the intersubjectivity of man, in that; man is a social being whose primary concerns ought to be those concerning his interactions with other members of society (Britannica). Daoism, on the other hand, although not an absolute contrasting school of thought to Confucianism, offers an alternative view to Confucianism. It emerged in ancient China around the same time as Confucianism with one of its primary teachers being Laozi who wrote one of its canons; the Daodejing. Daoism can be characterized as the ritual worship of the Dao or “the Way”. This refers to the natural way of being which pervades everything in heaven and earth (Puchner 1344), and the metaphysical (Britannica).

This paper argues for the superiority of Daoism over Confucianism because of the more fulfilling path it offers for the human soul and because of the dangers presented to society of conducting oneself in accordance with Confucian teachings as opposed to Daoist teachings. This will be argued using two main ideas. The first is an argument for the superiority of the Daoist interpretation of humanity over the Confucian interpretation and each’s service to the Chinese conception of the soul. The second is an argument that Confucian societal values which call for immediate action pose certain dangers to society where as, in contrast, Daoism offers the individual a solution through the introspection of the self and non action; where one can develop themselves into a superior societal being. Both ideas argue ultimately that the cultivation of the superior self is not attainable solely through societal interaction.

Chapter 2: On Jen and the Soul

The term Jen, meaning “humanity”, is a central idea used in both Confucian and Daoist philosophy. Furthermore the physical Chinese conception of the soul consists of two elements: Hun and Po. Hun; the active “yang” aspect represents spirituality. P’o; the passive “yin” aspect meaning
“seamen”, representing matter and earth. Both schools of thought offer their own interpretation of Jen.

In this paragraph and for the sake of this essay I will be using this definition of the soul in order to evaluate the Confucian and Doaist interpretations of Jen, particularly focusing on each’s interpretations service to the soul. In that I argue for the superiority of the Daoist interpretation of jen and contrast it with the Confucian interpretation of Jen. The ultimate reason for this being that the Daoist interpretation brings the individual closer to harmony with their soul.

Jen, meaning “humanity”, is a central theme in Confucian philosophy. The Confucian interpretation of Jen expresses that the defining human quality of man is his ability to have an in-depth intersubjectivity. In that man is most human because of societal interactions and his societal existence thus concluding that man exists in the world in relation to others (Jung 186). This is because in Confucian philosophy Jen is the encompassing of all moral elements existent during interactions with others, which will be spoken of later. It is often translated as “universal virtue”, “love”, “benevolence” and “compassion”. Confucianism also uses the theme of Jen in order to bring unity to all his principal values in his teachings of social conduct. He insists that what one must hope to achieve in his lifetime is to practice Jen - the distinguishing characteristic of man which makes him human - indirectly this means to practice social interaction. This is evident where he writes: Jen is “a rule of practice for all one's life…the ultimate concern” (Analects 15.23) for every man. Furthermore this interpretation of Jen can be explained as being derived by Confucius due to the word’s literary composition. Jen is composed of two ideograms; “man” and “two” (Jung 194). These ideograms in Confucius’ eyes suggests sociality through “man” and reciprocity in the everyday actions of man with society through “two”. This interpretation further supports the Confucius view of Jen and its position being solely of social interactions. It suggests that man, ontologically, lives his life for, and in, the web of society. Thus man in isolation is not only in conflict to this interpretation of humanity (Jen) but also is an infraction of being human thus concluding that only through sociality and intersubjectivity is man able to be human. This is of clear benefit to society as the individual’s goal is to now become an efficient and harmonious member of society. However in the perspective of the soul, this goal of the
individual is flawed as it leads one to be out of tune with the two aspects of the soul, as will be
discussed in the next paragraph.

Earlier I stated that the Chinese conception of the soul consists of two elements; matter and
spirit. In addition this dualistic nature of the soul implies an interdependence between matter and
spirit (Morris 108). We have also established that *jen*, representing “humanity”, is the defining quality
of man which makes him human. However if we are to adopt the position that the soul is the ultimate
defining quality of man and his humanism; and if we are to use the Chinese conception of the soul as
an arbitrary definition; for the sake of this paper, then we can recognize the Confucius interpretation
of *jen* as one which ignores this interdependence of the soul between matter and spirituality. As one
which leans heavily towards the *P’o*, matter, aspect of the soul. This is evident in the *Analects* where
Confucius when asked about the spirits of the dead by one of his students answers: “While you are not
able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?” (Analects 11.11). Or when asked about death and
responded: “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?” (Analects 11) . This
evident negligence of the *Hun*, spirit, aspect of the soul ultimately results in the negligence of a
fundamental part of humanity. It is here where Daoist teachings can be recognized as being superior to
Confucian teachings.

It can be argued that the Daoist interpretation of *jen* is that the ideograms represent two
aspects of mans metaphysical existence as opposed to only his societal existence where; “man”
represents matter and “two” alludes to the dualism of man; this dualism being his body and soul.

The *Daodejing*, the main canonical texts of Daoism, preaches that the attainment of inner
peace occurs when the individual embodies *jen*. This comes as a result of the accumulation of *de*,
meaning “virtue” (Morris 111). Although the translation of *de* into English is “virtue”, it is not only a
human trait or quality but also an etymologic metaphor alluding to *Tao*. The term is etymologically
linked to the verb “*de*” meaning: “to get,” “to grab” or “to take hold of” (Britannica). In this context
what is being “held” is the *Tao* or the “natural Way”. The *Tao* is extrinsically linked to the interplay
between *yin* and *yang* where; each flow into each other; can only exist with the opposite other and
also produce each other. This is evident in the Daodejing where Laozi writes “Thus Something and Nothing produce each other; The difficult and the easy complement each other…” (Daodejing 2). And where he writes “The Way never acts yet nothing is left undone” (Daodejing 37). Both of these excerpts can be seen as symbolically representing the opposing elements of the soul; matter and spirit. Where matter, symbolized by the human body, flows into spirituality once the human body dies and where matter, the human body, can only exist with its opposite spirit, the human soul. This supports the claim that the Daoist interpretation of jen is a form of the Chinese conception of the soul, where Daoist followers are forced to consider both the Hun and the P’o aspect of their soul due to the awareness they have that they will be forced to confront both elements as one flows into the other. Thus using this idea of interplay between opposites in Daoism, we can say that society eventually leads into isolation and isolation into society. Here the superiority of Daoism over Confucianism in social interactions is discernible since its inevitability of flows into opposite leads one into society, thus adhering to the P’o aspect of the soul. Hence man can never escape not being a social being. Furthermore Daoism also eventually leads one away from society and into isolation thus one similarly conforms with their Hun element of their soul. The ultimate result being an individual who is in harmony with the two defining elements of their soul and who is thus closer to humanity. The benefit of this being that there now exists an individual who is not absolutely versed in societal conduct but is also not ignorant of it, an individual who is versed in both; society and the development of the self. It is only in this position that the individual can hope to shape himself, and through that he may shape humanity (Sartre). This is the next argument I pose in this paper.

Chapter 3: An Existential View

Confucian ideals stress order and harmony in the universe through the consistent practice of everyday actions or, as Confucius describes it, rituals in society. The individual must be efficient in his ritualistic actions in order to embrace the Confucian interpretation of jen. Yet this is antithetical to the dominant theme of existentialism: alienation in the search of individual identity. In a sense
existentialism is the revolt against the masses and society (Jung 190). This section of the paper provides an explanation for the limitations and dangers posed by anti-existential and excessively pro-societal views as present in Confucian philosophy. Following this I argue for the superiority of Daoist teachings in guiding the individual on the existential journey of self discovery where the individual is able to shape himself and how this makes one into a superior contributing member of society.

For Confucius there is no going beyond the actions which embody man’s intersubjectivity with society, man's actions must be societal in order for him to embrace the Confucian interpretation of jen as jen is the primary pillar of human conduct in Confucianism. He constantly informs the reader of this in the Analects where he writes “The jen man first considers the difficulty of his task, and afterwards thinks of acquisition” (Analects 6.20); jen “is to love all men” (Analects 12.22) and “Jen is to be slow and cautious in speech” (Analects 12.13). Furthermore all the virtues in Confucian teaching - ritual propriety, righteousness, loyalty, humaneness, filial piety, consideration of others (Morris 115) - all encompass the societal man which is jen in a broader sense. In addition these are fundamentally and purely societal virtues. Thus we can conclude that the Confucian conception of the individual is essentially based on human interaction and transaction. This claim can be proved through the metaphor of speaking through Confucius’ line on speech and his concern with its performatory value. In the Analects he writes “‘If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done remains undone; if this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion. Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything” (Analects 13.3). The following passage brings us to the position that Confucian philosophy is more concerned with the actions of the individual as opposed to the thoughts of the individual since it is actions that are required for societal interactions. As a result we can also conclude that the primary concern of Confucianism is action and if we adopt the position that speech is also metaphorically symbolic of thoughts, as thoughts are a prelude to speech and are a constant action, immediate action. This is the individual’s main concern in the mundane world in Confucianism. Hence so far in this paper we can recognize that Confucianism overshadows the question of heaven, the transcendent and the spiritual.
As a result of this excessive individual concern with action in society, the individual can be seen as living in a world of approval and disapproval as other members of society are witness to their actions. This gives rise to the potential of the individual straying from the virtues of *jen* with the intent of seeking approval in an existence with a non-virtuous society. He, the individual, is thus willingly and inevitably succumbed into the negative mindsets and actions of said non-virtuous society. Thus the individual may become a slave to said society’s vices. One may contest this view with the position that Confucian teachings permit for the individual to refute society if their teachings are not in accordance with *jen*, however it can be understood that such an action requires the retreat of man from society in order to escape the negative mindsets of said man’s society. If Confucius says man must be constantly encompassed in his intersubjectivity with society, how can he hope find recluse from society. To understand why such a retreat is needed to refute society, consider the following excerpt from French writer Michel De Montaigne in his essay *On Solitude*:

> “You are to do like the beasts of chase, who efface the track at the entrance into their den. You are no more to concern yourself how the world talks of you, but how you are to talk to yourself. Retire yourself into yourself, but first prepare yourself there to receive yourself: it were a folly to trust yourself in your own hands, if you cannot govern yourself (Montaigne 2).”

This is retreat into solace is not possible in the Confucian way of thought as it involves the rejection of the Confucian interpretation of humanity (*jen*) which requires social intersubjectivity of man. To do so would be an infraction on his Confucian existence. As evident in the above excerpt where Montaigne warns that in order to reject the negative conduct of society one must escape society and seek isolation or they risk falling in mindlessly with the crowd. This is particularly evident in history where the masses often finds themselves committing crimes against humanity, such as the Rwandan Genocide and French Revolution, following the actions of the few. Hence in Confucianism it is difficult to deviate from such societal dangers due to the constant societal interactions it requires of man. What we are left with now is the very real danger for the reduction of the single individual into one of the masses, one who follows mindlessly with the actions of the herd in fear of disapproval as a
result of the practice of Confucian teachings. It is clear that the individual risks losing their individuality, a clear conflict with the existentialist’s goal of self discovery and the development of the self. It is here where Daoism claims superiority over the teachings of Confucius since it allows for one to escape from the societal constraints of non-virtuous societies.

For the sake of this paper I will be using the existentialist perspectives posed by Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is an advocate for the view that the interest in inward subjectivity, as opposed to Confucius’ standing that is is outward intersubjectivity, is what constitutes human existence (Jung 196). For Kierkegaard the unforgivable crime against humanity is the reduction of a particular existing individual to one of the crowd and masses (Jung 196). This is a very real and potential danger present in the followings of Confucius thought, as explained in the earlier paragraph. I advocate that the Daoist approach to life reduces and minimizes this danger. To understand why I adopt this position we will build upon the Confucian view of speech introduced in the earlier section of this paper. I wrote of how Confucius’ concerns with the use of language is primarily for how it is used as a prelude to one's intended actions. Effective speech is needed to effectively carry out societal interaction, thus if one is unable to have effective speech then they are farther away from embodying the Confucian principals of *jen* which demands societal interaction. In the Daoist approach an individual who seeks but is unable to have their speech be an effective representative of their actions would allow themselves to fall into the recluse of silence. This would follow the Law of Reversal recognized in the philosophy of *yin* and *yang* where the highest form of a single action is found in its opposite (IEP). Now the individual who is in silence develops his thoughts and mindfulness towards his words and, once he speaks again, speaks effectively. This action of essentially adopting non-action would not be a possible route to adopt in Confucian philosophy in the context of escaping the actions of a non-virtuous society. It would cut off the individual from said society and thus from adhering to any of the Confucian social virtues. This is because communication is the main mode by which one interacts with society. It would be in direct conflict with the Confucian pillar of humanity where individual existence is only constituted by virtue of the individuals’ societal interaction with others. Ultimately resulting in a trap for the Confucian follower. However the Daoist who finds himself in a
similar position is one who understand that he must recluse from society. Only then does he achieve the avoidance of his and the undeveloped crowd’s superficial talkativeness, of the crowd’s negative actions and virtues. He finds value in silence as it allows him to observe and ponder on how to develop himself past this, to become superior but more importantly how to change it. Inevitably his prolonged recluse into silence and isolation, by the Law of Reversal, brings him back into communication with society. Now, where formerly he was one who follows the crowd, he returns with effective solutions to lead and change the crowd towards the principles of jen thus becoming an efficient member of society. In conclusion individual has shaped himself into the superior societal being by internal subjectivity and as a result has improved society through external intersubjectivity.

**Chapter 4: Conclusion**

In following Confucianism one faces a myriad of dangers of losing themselves and not being in tune with their humanity, as stated in the first and second section of this paper. More importantly the individual lacks self development. Furthermore in Confucianism one is also unable to find solutions to said dangers due to their confines of society. Daoism, providing an alternative path to Confucianism, through the Law of Reversal brings the individual back to society as a result of their isolation where they were able to escape non-virtuous societies.

The fact of human existence is that the individual cannot be a prisoner of society. Nor can he neither be enclosed in his own society. Without his interaction with the *P’o*, matter, element of his soul he loses a piece of his humanity and hence jen. Similarly if he is disconnected from the spiritual *Hun* he also loses a piece of his humanity. Daoism allows for the individual to have connectivity with both of these aspects of the soul and thus also both aspects of human existence, society and the spiritual self. This leads to the cultivation and development of a superior individual. To conclude this is ultimately where Daoism is superior to Confucianism for the potential benefits it brings to humanity and the self. Through introspection as a result of reclusion the individual is able to observe and
understand the fundamental problems of “the crowd” and return with solutions to advance society, as opposed to falling mindlessly with the crowd and stagnating development.
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