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**“Never Disobey”:**

**How Confucian Filial Piety is Counterproductive to Its Goals for Society**

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A common question mankind has struggled with is how it can foster order and maintain harmony in society. Many thinkers throughout human history have sought to answer that question, among them being the philosopher Confucius. His philosophy has had such a large impact that it remains a major influence in China today and for adherents throughout the world. In the written wisdom of Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, the philosopher’s students recorded his sayings which postulated a comprehensive guide to improving oneself and creating harmony. However, within his philosophy remains a contradiction, which if taken to its logical conclusion has the potential to foster discord within the society that practices its teachings, specifically in the realm of government, the familial, and the social realms.

The contradiction in question comes from the eighteenth saying of book XIII whereupon a man known as the Lord of She tells Confucius that in his lands, a man stole a cow and his son testified against him, with the lord calling the son righteous. Confucius then remarks that “The upright men in my district are different. Fathers cover up for their sons and sons cover up for their fathers” (70). When readers are confronted with this piece of wisdom, there is a dilemma; it raises the question of whether one can or should ever speak ill of family, even if for the sake of truth. This comes in contrast to his piece of wisdom later when he says regarding the relationship

between a lesser official and a ruler, “Do not deceive him, but be willing to offend him” (77). How can one not deceive a higher authority by lying to cover up their misdeeds? From the story of the Lord of She, Confucian philosophy claims that the son was right as he did not deceive his ruler, but he was also wrong since he acted against his father. Thus, the Confucian perspectives of filial piety and truth are in opposition to each other, so a choice has to be made between the two. If truth is to be expected at the highest level of society, why is it rejected at the foundation? If anything, allowing truth to be discarded in favor of protecting one’s family and its reputation will not resolve any conflict and will only create new ones. Not only that, but if the degree of filial piety is applied by officials within the government, conflict will arise there too. The adherence to filial piety will give bureaucrats and other state officials the ability and the obligation to take greater interest in the reputation of their families rather than upholding the integrity and peace of the country. This level of corruption within the state will not leave a country in peace, but will only pit the sections of government against each other.

Although filial piety can be carried to an extreme, Confucius is correct in that it needs to be a tenet of every good society. For example, in the familial realm a good reason why parents need to be obeyed is so their children learn to recognize danger. Without that, they will not know how to act, which may lead them to do reckless things out of ignorance, like going to gather water from a place which is known for containing crocodiles. For all its beauty, the world is filled with dangerous animals and cunning people; elders and parents pass this knowledge onto their children so that they can recognize danger. Or at least, that is what responsible parents would do. Irresponsible parents would not teach their children how to protect themselves or live good lives; instead, whether intentionally or not, they teach the opposite. But according to Confucius’s logic, these parents would have to be obeyed because the family unit is the

foundation of society, for when he was questioned about filial piety, he replied, “Never disobey”, and to “serve them according to *li*”, which means with the greatest respect (5). So great is reverence for one’s parents that Confucius even prescribed a certain amount of time one should mourn for his parents after their deaths, that being three years (16). The problem with this level of filial piety is that there is little accountability for bad parents, and Confucius’s logic presupposes that parents in general can do no wrong. The family unit is a unit with many parts, and it is incumbent on children to listen to their parents for guidance, but if they are not taught how to properly conduct themselves for their benefit or that of others, they will not be successful or accepted in society. If the family unit which adheres to such filial piety is to be the foundation of the best society, the probability that that society will be as harmonious as Confucius desires is minimal.

Considering the structure of Chinese society in his time, such an extreme stance by Confucius may have been seen as necessary; furthermore, such extreme filial piety could have been necessary in times of war. For example, when the country is in upheaval, a disobedient son or an indignant child may be a liability, and family cohesion as tightly knit as Confucius proposes might be what is needed to survive. Everyone must contribute to the welfare of the family, which means that if one has to undertake terrible actions like theft or worse to survive, and the only thing preventing the family from enduring shame and poverty was to lie to cover up the crime, it might be seen as justified. By lying to save one family member, particularly if they are productive and vital for their collective survival, such an act will prevent the worst for them, and at best the one whom they have committed the crime against was not affected too much by their actions. This logic appears sound, but in times of war the populace and the state need honest and reliable people to help the country function. If someone cannot trust their neighbor

because he is known for stealing another man's crops, and he in turn cannot trust another because someone stole some of his cattle, they will be hesitant in aiding each other. Because of that, they will be more concerned with looking over their shoulders and taking care of themselves instead of helping each other, for as Confucius said, "A person without trustworthiness, who knows what he may do" (8). Thus, society will suffer from paranoia regarding their persons and property, and mutual distrust of one another will eventually lead to conflict, undermining the intended purpose Confucius had for filial piety and its social benefits.

The logical extreme with which Confucius believes filial piety is to be carried out has the potential to create an environment where dishonesty can become not only a rampant problem within society, but also a pillar of society itself. Such a state of affairs, if not rectified, will have disastrous consequences in the future. Confucius did not desire any such thing to come to pass, as it would eventually create the society he did not want to see. But what could he have done to correct this inconsistency? Perhaps he could have re-examined his position and proposed that filial piety is still imperative for the kind of society he wants, while also stressing the need for truth and honesty in the family unit with equal necessity for governance, as well as emphasizing good parenting. Loyalty is important to any relationship, but loyalty without honesty is shallow and will not last. It could also be that Confucius never said what he said in book XIII, since he never wrote down his teachings and what remains was later recorded by his students and was influenced by their opinions. Either way, adherents of Confucianism, when faced with the moral dilemma of the eighteenth saying in book XIII, must find a way to reconcile such a contradiction and meditate on what is the right way, or the true Dao for each situation.

### About the author

Bruce Crosby is a history major at Georgia Southern University. He comes from Saint Mary's, Georgia and has been at the Armstrong campus since the fall semester of 2016. He has gone on to make Dean's list four times, and is currently a member of Phi Alpha Theta and Phi Eta Sigma. His goal is to learn more about foreign cultures and eventually work for the state department to improve international relations.

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