

Perceptions and Appreciation of *Free Will* in Confucius:

An Examination with Western Terminology

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Abstract

Reflecting upon the concept of ‘free will’ and its significance and impact in ancient Western intellectual and religious traditions, as represented by Aristotle and St. Augustine, this paper explores the potentiality of *free will* in Confucius’ (孔子) thinking through a comparative analysis of the attributes present in both Eastern and Western traditions. This paper delves exclusively into reflection of Confucius’ political thoughts and a few of dialogues between Confucius and his students on self-cultivation in the *Analects*, aiming to illuminate the manifestation and embodiment of *free will*, in order to introduce the intricacies of ancient Confucian ethical cosmology. Although the topic of *free will* seems to be as inconspicuously addressed in traditional Confucianism as it is in the West, the concept, when viewed through the lens of Western hermeneutics, is implicitly embedded in early Confucian thoughts. It serves as an intrinsic characteristic and capacity of humans, allowing individuals to cultivate a humanistic vision aligned with Confucian values. The implications of *free will*, understood as the capacity to choose one’s path, differ from the Western understanding due to the limitations set by the

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designated social roles within Confucian society. However, Confucius' dialogues with his students shed light on how one could interpret the meaning of *free* will in the contemporary world.

Approach of Study and Audience

This study begins by providing a succinct overview of Chinese history, Confucius' Confucianism, and the concept of *free* will as part of the literature review. Subsequently, "The Analects (Lun Yu)" by the early Scottish sinologist James Legge and "The Analects of Confucius" by Professor Song De Li are cited and analyzed in this study; the aim is to reinterpret them through the lens of the hermeneutics of faith, focusing on Confucius's underlying assumptions about human possession of *free* will, which would enrich the current understanding of Confucian ethics. This paper serves as a philosophical resource to increase Chinese cultural awareness for amateurs and Chinese scholars with an interest in Confucian ethics and influences in modernity, contributing to the Western readings of Confucius' ethical motives.

Brief History of China and Continuation of Early Confucianism

With written records spanning three thousand years of history, China is among the world's oldest civilizations. This rich and complex traditions captivate modern sinologists and intellectuals, both Chinese and foreign. According to a Chinese cultural researcher, Fercility Jiang, sinologists have classified the early history of China into distinct periods; these begin with Shang Dynasty (c.1600–1046 BCE), Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE), Spring and Autumn Period (c. 770–475 BCE), Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), and various more dynasties until the Hsinhai Revolution that ended China's last imperial dynasty

in 1911.¹ For this research, the Spring and Autumn Period (c. 770–475 BCE) is exceptionally crucial as one of the most influential thinker in the East Asian intellectual history, Confucius (551–479 BCE), was born, and his teachings and philosophies were developed in response to the socio-political upheavals during a tumultuous period when states frequently warred against each other.² It is noteworthy that Chinese people’s ethical perceptions and worldview continued to evolve even after the death of Confucius; Confucius’ students and later intellectuals contributed significantly to the elaboration and extension of his philosophy. Professor Shi of Tunghai University mentions that various interpretive frameworks have been incorporated in Confucius’ thinking, including Mencius’ concept of the four sprouts (four fundamental human virtues), Buddhist metaphysical views and values, and Western scientific discoveries.³ These intellectual thoughts spanned two thousand years of human history and challenged traditional Confucian scholars to build upon Confucius’ teachings; thus, it can be argued that contemporary understanding of Confucianism embodies a continuing, transformative millennium of philosophical thought, influenced by numerous predecessors who have made significant contributions to the development of the Confucian tradition. This phenomenon is even more evident in the New Confucianism movement of the early 20th century, which arose in response to the challenges posed by Western philosophy and science; however, this research will not delve

¹ Fercility Jiang, “Timeline of Chinese History and Dynasties,” *China Highlights*, November 5, 2021.

² The reference to the eighteen major dynasties between the Qin Dynasty and the People’s Republic of China has been omitted, as the research topic concentrates on the implications of Confucius’ thinking, which predates the Qin Dynasty. It is worth noting that Confucius’ name is transliterated from the romanization of his Chinese name, Kong Fuzi, which some scholars refer to as Master Kong.

³ Weimin Shi, “A Curious Case of Cultural Encounter: The Appropriation of Kant’s Philosophy through Contemporary Neo-Confucianism,” *Culture and Dialogue* 10, 2 (2022): 130.

cultural and intellectual crisis of Chinese civilization at that time, as its primary focus is on Confucius' *Analects*.

Introduction to Western Conception of Free Will

The Western notion of free will is a philosophical and theological concept suggesting that individuals have the capacity to make choices not predetermined by external factors or antecedent causes. This perspective holds that people have the ability to freely exercise their will and make decisions independently, without being subjected to the influence of fate, determinism, or divine intervention.⁴ According to Professor Li of Nanyang Technological University, various ancient Greek philosophers, including Aristotle, did not consider human agency to require proof of the existence of free will.⁵ It is plausible to infer from Aristotle's works that Aristotle believed that human beings have the ability to reason and make choices based on their own desires and intentions. This is referred to by Professor Li as "voluntary or involuntary actions and choice."⁶ Furthermore, Professor Li states that the concept of free will has a unique "cultural origin" that dates back to St. Augustine, who is credited with inventing the notion.⁷ St. Augustine drew on the Christian doctrine of original sin, which taught that human beings are inherently sinful and in need of divine grace to achieve salvation. In order to attain salvation, St. Augustine believed that

⁴ This research does not delve deeply into the debate on free will and determinism. However, it is noteworthy that two primary philosophical views exist in this area. Compatibilists maintain that free will and determinism are compatible, while incompatibilists assert that they are not. Incompatibilists argue that causal determination of our actions precludes free will.

⁵ Chenyang Li, "The Confucian Conception of Freedom," *Philosophy East and West* 64, no. 4 (October 2014): 903.

⁶ Li, "Confucian Freedom," 903.

⁷ Li, "Confucian Freedom," 903.

free will was a necessary component of moral responsibility and the ability to choose between good and evil, in other words, choosing between God and Satan. On that note, a significant premise of St. Augustine's argument was that free will was a gift from God, and that it was necessary for human beings to use their free will to choose the path of righteousness and salvation. Dr. Luke Teeninga, a scholar specializing in the philosophy of religion at Tyndale University, contends, God bestows free will upon humans because "Free will is worth its cost as the good it brings about."⁸ To conclude, free will is considered a fundamental aspect of human nature in Western theological traditions; nonetheless, its significance does not parallel that in Confucian traditions.

Confucius' Influence on the Exercise of *Free Will* in Chinese Society

For over two millennia, the practice of Confucianism has been a fundamental cultural and humanistic pursuit in Chinese society, with an impact so profound and extensive that nearly every Chinese considers Confucius a quintessential teacher who guides individuals toward a fulfilling and transformative life by actively cultivating their virtues, for instance, learning to be a junzi. Although Confucius pertains a position of a prominent role model in the Eastern world like Jesus as the Messiah in the Western world, particularly in the Christian tradition, Confucius never carries the mission to rescue God's children from original sin and restore them to a right relationship with God.⁹ Contrary to Western perceptions of Jesus, Confucius is not considered a

⁸ Luke Teeninga, "God and the Value of Free Will," *Sophia*, volume 61, no. 3 (2022): 646.

⁹ Even if Confucius had coined the term "God," he would likely have done so in the same way Maimonides did, as "G-d," without making positive affirmations about what God is.

religious figure in the East, though some early sinologists erroneously assumed so.¹⁰ In the Confucian tradition, Confucius is not seen as divine; instead, he is revered as a teacher and philosopher emphasizing self-cultivation, family values, and social harmony, rather than personal salvation or divine intervention. It is reasonable to assume that, influenced by their own cultural and religious biases, Western scholars used inductive reasoning when initially approaching non-Western cultures. That said, it is evident that St. Augustine's concept of free will is foreign to Confucian civilization, as it is tightly linked to the Christian religion. Professor Li also argues that Confucianism does not need to explicitly prove the existence of free will because Chinese intellectuals did not recognize an omnipotent and omniscient God like in the West.¹¹ This research takes a further step and argues that although the concept of free will is not commonly explored or discussed in the East with the same cultural connotation as in the West, it cannot be entirely disregarded in a dispensable sense.

Before exploring the concept of *free* will in Confucius' thought, it is essential to consider the social constraints in terms of social roles that exist for individuals in China when exercising their will.¹² To illustrate, according to Professor Csikszentmihalyi at UC Berkeley, the Confucian tradition, as expounded in the encyclopedia of philosophy, espoused a set of social guidelines that dictated the normative comportment of individuals, and defined their respective duties and

¹⁰ Many scholars in the modern times debate over whether Confucianism is or is not a religion.

¹¹ Li, "The Confucian Conception of Freedom," 905.

¹² I italicized the word "free" in the phrase "free will" to draw a distinction between the Christian narrative and connotation of the term and Confucius' vision of human will in terms of actualization of being *free*.

responsibilities in relation to others within the society.¹³ This included the social roles such as “ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, siblings, and friends,” all of which were prescribed with a view to promoting appropriate conduct among the populace.¹⁴ In short, Confucius’ advocacy of social hierarchy has been a pervasive influence on Chinese culture and continues to shape the behavior and expectations of individuals and communities in modern-day China.¹⁵ On this note, Confucius believes that individuals possess personal duties and obligations within the societal framework, asserting that the exercise of one’s will ought to be steered by these responsibilities. As Confucius suggested that interpersonal relationships in terms of social roles are an intrinsic component of society, he presumes that one cannot truly experience a sense of freedom in an individual level or exercise *free* will without fulfilling their respective duties and obligations. Hence, it becomes evident that Confucius sets a non-Western definition for how individuals should exercise their *free* will to fulfill their social responsibilities.

In terms of self-cultivation, Confucius teaches people to achieve personal growth and ethical maturity by harmonizing one’s life with the principles of ren (仁), righteousness (義), and propriety (禮). According to Professor Xie of Shandong University, Confucius introduced the concept of “Zhongyong” (中庸), advocating that individuals should engage in ‘proper action’ with the objective of becoming a “junzi” (君子), who serves as an exemplary model for others to

¹³ Mark Csikszentmihalyi, “Confucius,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, March 31, 2020, sect. 5, par. 5.

¹⁴ Csikszentmihalyi, “Confucius,” sect. 5, par. 5.

¹⁵ One notable distinction to make is in the definition of “I” (self) (我) in the Confucian tradition is not in the same sense in terms of autonomy, personal identity, and the inherent value of the individual. Like mentioned, the Confucian self is understood in terms of its relationships with others and its role within the social hierarchy.

emulate.¹⁶ To be specific, a junzi strives for moral self-cultivation and personal growth through continuous learning and reflection. According to Tu Weiming, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University, it is essential to underscore that individuals engaging in the practice of Confucianism and aspiring to become a junzi generally do not self-identify with the label “Confucian,” nor do they refer to themselves as “junzi.”¹⁷ This note highlights a key difference between the Confucian and Christian traditions: adherents of the former do not self-identify with a specific appellation, whereas those who follow Jesus commonly refer to themselves as Christians. Pertaining to *free* will, Confucius believes that humans possess the potential to evolve and transform themselves through self-cultivation, ultimately attaining a state of moral excellence exemplified by the junzi. The primary distinction of the term “free will” from the Christian tradition lies in the fact that Confucius neither explicitly discusses nor views it necessary to emphasize human autonomy in making appropriate decisions regarding moral practices. This paper contends that Confucius perceives no rationale for individuals not to aspire towards becoming a Junzi; for, each person, regardless of their social status or background, can engage in self-cultivation and moral refinement based on Confucius’ account of the characteristics of junzi. Referring back to the concepts of social roles, Confucius reasonably believed that every junzi should aspire to contribute positively to their family, community, and the state; this would foster a society where every individual actualizes their *free* will for the benefit of others, ensuring harmony when everyone achieves such high moral status. Thus, within Confucius’ vision of a harmonious society, *free* will is inherently oriented towards the pursuit of becoming a junzi in an individual level, and also as a fundamental concept.

¹⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, “Confucius,” sect. 5, par. 5.

¹⁷ Tu Weiming. Interview by Bill Moyers. “Tu Wei-ming: A Confucian Life in America, with Bill Moyers,” *A World of Ideas with Bill Moyers*, 1988.

Exploring the Implications of *Free Will* in the *Analects*

In this section, a few translations of the *Analects* by Professor Song and Professor Legge will be examined and analyzed to investigate the presuppositions of free will in Confucius' thought. The specific translation for each of Confucius' dialogues with his disciples is carefully chosen based on the relevance to the discussion of *free will*.

In the first book (1-1) of the *Analects*, Professor Song translates, "Confucius says: Learn something and then review and practice it frequently. Isn't it a pleasure?" ("子曰：'學而時習之，不亦說乎?'").¹⁸ In this line of dialogue, Confucius acknowledges that individuals possess the personal choice to acquire knowledge and enjoy the gratification of learning. This suggests that individuals have the autonomy to determine what they wish to learn and the extent of their dedication in reviewing and practicing the knowledge gained. Most importantly, Confucius perceives pleasure as a form of intrinsic satisfaction and joy, stemming from the exercise of one's *free will* in the pursuit of learning and self-improvement.

In another dialogue of the first book (1-16), Professor Legge translates, "The Master said, 'I will not be afflicted at men's not knowing me; I will be afflicted that I do not know men'" ("子曰：'不患人之不己知，患不知人也'").¹⁹ Confucius presumes that individuals possess a personal responsibility for understanding others, advising that one should not fear being misunderstood by others, but rather should fear not understanding them. This implies that individuals bear the responsibility to actively seek comprehension of others, which is a conscious choice they can make. This line of Confucius also reflects his thinking regarding self-cultivation; Confucius

¹⁸ Song Deli, "The Analects of Confucius," *University of International Business and Economics Publishing House*, October 1, 2010, 1.

¹⁹ James Legge, "The Analects (Lun Yu)," *Cambridge Chinese Classics*, 1893, 3.

advocates for personal growth by emphasizing the importance of sincerely listening to others, which implicitly underscores the role of one's will in fostering such development.

In the second book (2-4) of the *Analects*, Professor Legge translates,

“The Master said, ‘At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right’” (“子曰：‘吾十有五而志于學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩’”).²⁰

In this line of the dialogue Confucius recounts his personal life journey, delineating various stages of growth and understanding. By sharing his experiences, Confucius suggests that individuals possess the volition to choose their path of learning and self-improvement, much like he did. It is important to note that when Confucius mentions his fifty, he regarded “天” (commonly translated as Heaven) as the origin of moral values and the supreme authority for human conduct. Novices frequently equate “天” with the notion of “heaven” in the Christian religious context; however, there are crucial differences between the two. In actuality, the concept of “天” encompasses the endorsement of natural order and moral principles, which hold significant weight in Confucian moral ethics. As a result, one's moral duty involves cultivating virtues and adhering to values that align with the will of “天.” It is also essential to highlight that “天” does not embody an omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent deity.

Regarding the capacity of one's will in 2-4, Confucius suggests that, upon reaching the age of fifty and having accumulated sufficient life experience, individuals have acquired wisdom and discernment concerning the boundaries of their control over specific facets of life. Confucius acknowledges that one becomes aware of the inevitability of certain events and circumstances humans anticipate, though the exercise of their will to uphold the natural order and moral

²⁰ Legge, “The Analects,” 3.

principles of “天.” This assertion could potentially serve as a counterargument to the presence of *free* will in Confucius’ thoughts as its manifestation has now become dependent on external mean; the contention that not every occurrence in life can be influenced or modified through human effort may imply that embracing *free* will is rendered futile, given the existence of predetermined or uncontrollable events. Nevertheless, Confucius encourages individuals to persist in concentrating on aspects within their control and accept those that are beyond their influence. Consequently, the existence of predetermined or uncontrollable events does not preclude individuals from exercising their will in the pursuit of self-cultivation, as the essence of self-cultivation is derived from one’s active engagement in the process of self-transformation and improvement.

Modern Significance of Confucius’ Teaching

In the contemporary world, particularly in the United States where various traditions intertwine, and many scholars and students come here to research and study, the concept of *free* will and Confucius’ vision of a junzi can offer guidance. In *Analects* 15.18, Confucius elaborated on the meaning of a junzi as one who “‘Uphold justice, observe discipline and abide by the law, speak modestly, be trustworthy in word and resolute in deed.’”²¹ According to Confucius, a junzi always strives to discern right from wrong, understands what actions are righteous, and acts according to this understanding. Through this unity of discernment and action, one exhibits ren, and others come to recognize that individual’s ren. This teaching encourages modern people to

²¹ Song, “The Analects,” 286.

approach human interactions with an open heart and a genuine desire to understand, fostering a world where mutual respect and empathy thrive.²²

Conclusion

A notable trend discerned in the research is the implicit integration of the notion of *free* will within Confucian intellectual traditions, dating back to Confucius himself. While the concept of *free* will may seem comparatively less prominent in traditional Confucianism relative to its standing in Western thought, it is implicitly embedded as an indissoluble presupposition and assumption. The implications of exercising such agency in Confucian society are distinct due to the prescribed social roles and expectations. In the Confucian context, the exercise of *free* will is framed within the boundaries of these designated social roles, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling one's responsibilities and maintaining social harmony. This idea of *free* will serves as an innate and persuasive aspect of human nature, facilitating the cultivation of a humanistic comprehension of Confucian values. Therefore, readers are encouraged to approach the paper with an open mind to understand Confucius's perspective on *free* will, a topic that remains a subject of scholarly debate.

Extension

This research commences with the contention that *free* will exists within Confucian thought and seeks to substantiate and investigate this assertion. The study may further engage in a meticulous analysis of the *Analects* in reading the original classical Chinese version and

²² It is noteworthy that many religious scholars identify themselves as Confucian Christians or Confucian Muslims after recognizing and acknowledging the universal values of Confucius, as demonstrated in the idea of becoming a junzi. For example, Dr. Robert Cummings Neville, the former Dean of the Boston University School of Theology, wrote a book titled *Boston Confucianism* (2000) to integrate Confucian ideas into modern Western philosophical and theological discourses.

conduct a comprehensive analysis of every book within the classic. Moreover, it is worth considering the specific contributions made by Confucius' students to the *Analects*, as each student may have interpreted his teachings differently, thus offering a richer understanding of the reconstruction efforts of Confucius' thoughts within Confucianism.

For comparative purposes, one can introduce and analyze the theories of self in Neo-Confucianism, particularly those concentrating on the mind or heart, as proposed by Neo-Confucian philosophers such as Wang Yang Ming. According to Professor Sun, the essence of Wang's philosophy lies in the concept of the unity of knowledge and action (知行合一), which argues that an individual's moral knowledge and moral action are inextricably intertwined.²³ In Wang Yangming's theory, an individual's will is manifest to the extent that they have the choice to cultivate their innate moral knowledge and act upon it. Wang's argument for the unity of moral knowledge and moral action necessitates the presence of individual will, making it reasonable to assume that he regards moral responsibility as a significant aspect of one's agency. Conversely, if *free* will is absent, attributing moral responsibility becomes problematic for individuals. Thus, exploring Wang's line of inquiry and his interpretations of Confucian thought could offer a deeper understanding of the interrelationship between *free* will and Confucian ethics.

²³ Kwong-loi Shun, "Wang Yang-ming on Self-Cultivation," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, December, 2011, 1.

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