Confucian Ethics and Impartiality: On the Confucian View about Brotherhood

Abstract This essay reviews Confucian ethics with regard to impartiality and Confucian notion of brotherhood. It focuses on the comments by Song Neo-Confucians, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, about a famous case involving brotherhood. In this case Diwu Lun of the Han dynasty treated his diseased son and his diseased nephew in different ways. The author argues that Confucianism, starting from a naturalist standpoint, affirms the partiality in the relations between brothers, and judges deliberate impartiality negatively. On this point, one cannot simply view Confucianism as analogous to the Kantian ethics which promises impartiality or the virtue ethics which opposes impartiality.

Keywords Confucian ethics, Neo-Confucian, impartiality, virtue ethics, Kantian ethics, brotherhood

1 Introduction

As one of the “wu lun” 五伦 (five kinds of relations)¹, the relations between brothers constituted a necessary topic in Confucian family ethics. Compared with the concept of filial piety which was used to handle the relations between parents and children, the concept ti dao 恭道² is seldom discussed among modern scholars. The reason may be that the foundation for brotherhood actually does not exist anymore as traditional big families have gradually shrunk in modern China. In my opinion, the discussion of brotherhood in Confucian ethics has often shown the unique Confucian understanding of the principle of impartiality. In the discussions of brotherhood, the issue of impartiality arose with reference to gong 公 (unselfishness, impartiality or public interest) and si 私 (selfishness,

¹ The five kinds of relations include: that between the ruler and the ruled; that between parents and children; that between siblings; that between husband and wife; and that between friends.
² Ti, the love and respect for an elder brother, here I use it to suggest brotherhood in general.
partiality, self-interest or personal interest). I will unfold his view through his analysis of the comments that Cheng Yi 程颐 and Zhu Xi 朱熹, Neo-Confucians of the Song dynasties, and their views about a famous case related to brotherhood—Diwu Lun 第五伦 of the Han dynasty who “discriminated” between his diseased son and his diseased nephew.

Diwu Lun was a native of Xi’an in the time of the Eastern Han dynasty. With Diwu as his family name, he was also known by the alias Boyu 伯鱼. He had carved out his official career as high as Sikong 司空 (the highest official in charge of the construction of infrastructure), with the dates of his birth and death unknown. The prime of his career is dated at approximately 76 AD to 88 AD. Diwu Lun was known in his day for his unselfishness. According to historical records, “Diwu Lun was committed to public interest and was always ready to sacrifice his life for preserving morality; when he talked about political affairs, he had no misgivings, nor did he flatter anybody. His sons tried from time to time to dissuade him out of such style, but he always scolded and sent them away. Whenever his subordinate officials had any advice beneficial to the country in their reports, he also added the original reports as appendices and submitted them together with his own. So unselfish he was” (Fan 2005, Vol. 41, p. 1401). However, when he was asked whether he had any selfish mind or not, he unexpectedly answered that he did have a selfish mind.

Somebody asked Diwu Lun, “Does your excellency have any selfish mind?” Diwu Lun replied, “Somebody once presented me a swift horse. I refused his offer, but every time when the three dukes gathered to recommend and select candidates for vacant posts, I always think of him, although I have never recommended or appointed him. For one more thing, my elder brother’s son was often ill, I went to see how he was ten times one night, but I could fall sound asleep when I returned; in comparison, when my own son was sick, I was not able to fall asleep all night long although I did not go to see how he was. Now, can I call myself a man without any selfish mind?” (Ibid., p. 1402)

Before he answered the question, Diwu Lun gave two examples. The first was about someone who offered him a gift. Diwu Lun did not accept the present, but he always kept this matter in his mind every time when he appointed talented people, although gift-giver was still never appointed. The second example was about his diseased nephew and his diseased son. When his nephew was sick, he was able to fall asleep easily, although he did go to see the patient ten times in one night. When his son was sick, however, he suffered from insomnia all night but still he did not go to see him. In reference to these examples, Diwu Lun concluded that he could hardly say that he was unselfish.

Diwu Lun’s story presents a view which defines “selfishness” psychologically rather than behaviorally. Particularly, the second example involves the issue of
brotherhood, and it attracted the attention of Neo-Confucians of the Song dynasties. For example, Cheng Yi (1033–1107) once discussed this case in depth with one of his disciples.

The dialog between Cheng Yi and his disciple is composed of four sets of questions and replies, which leads from the individual case of Diwu Lun to a more general discussion about the Confucian issue of brotherhood. Now, we will analyze the dialog step by step, and make overall comments on it.

2 The First Set of Questions and Replies: The Discussion about Whether Diwu Lun Had a Selfish Mind

Question: Diwu Lun had different attitudes towards his son’s sickness and his nephew’s, and he called himself selfish. What do you think of it?
Reply: The mere fact of not getting up and getting up ten times just shows unselfishness, therefore it does not matter anymore whether he slept peacefully or not. The love between father and son is unselfish; once it involves any deliberateness, it would be selfish. (Cheng and Cheng 2004, p. 234)

Apparently, the topic of this part of the dialog is the discrimination of unselfishness (impartiality) and selfishness in the particular case of Diwu Lun. Its theoretical thrust is an issue of the definition of partiality and impartiality. Actually, Chen Rongjie 陈荣捷 translated this passage as follows:

QUESTION: Ti-Wu Lun had a different attitude toward his son’s sickness from that toward his nephew’s sickness, and he confessed that it was selfishness. Why?
ANSWER: It does not matter whether he slept peacefully or not. The fact that he did not get up in one case but got up ten times in the other shows selfishness. Love between father and son is essentially a matter of impartiality. To attach any personal idea to it is selfish. (Chen 1967, p.175)

As mentioned before, Diwu Lun’s confession of his selfish mind was mainly grounded in his psychological activities rather than external behaviors. The partiality in psychological activities, i.e., a selfish mind in usual terms, can be viewed as “selfishness” in a broad sense. At this point, Diwu Lun had his reasons to think that he himself had a selfish mind. Usually, however, when they remark whether a man is selfish or unselfish, people mainly judge in reference to his behaviors rather than in reference with his psychological activities (which is obviously more difficult for an outside observer). Judging from behavior, in the two examples that Diwu Lun gave, the unselfishness in his morality is beyond
question: As for the giver who offered him a present, he eventually did not show his partiality through practical activities although he had kept the person in his mind; as for his sick nephew and son, he did not treat the latter better than he treated the former although he internally loved his son much more than he loved his nephew, rather he did the other way around. Therefore, we have a reason to believe that people’s impression of Diwu Lun’s unselfishness would not change just because he himself held such an opinion.

The judgment from the point of behaviors instead of psychological activities results in people thinking a person unselfish even if they admit that psychological partiality is also a kind of selfishness. In other words, based on such understanding, the following proposition does not appear absurd: an unselfish man also has a selfish mind. This proposition can also be used in the case of Diwu Lun. It can be easily imagined that people who hold that Diwu Lun was unselfish would give the following refutation against Diwu Lun’s opinion that he himself had a selfish mind: The two cases you illustrated merely indicate that you have your own partiality. Even if we admit that such partiality is related to selfishness, such selfishness is not a criterion with which we judge whether a person has a selfish or unselfish mind. Rather, our criterion is whether you embodied such a selfish mind in your behaviors. In fact, your nobility rests just in the fact that you did not put such internal partiality into external behaviors, therefore we think that you still deserve fame as an unselfish person.4

4 As for whether Diwu Lun had a selfish mind or not, Ji Kang 嵇康 (224–263) once aired an unusual opinion. Ji argued that Diwu Lun’s honest confession of his selfish mind was just where his unselfish rested, and that he was wrong in the event when he went against his own intention to see his nephew instead of his son: “Now Diwu Lun honestly expressed his feelings, it suggested his unselfishness; but he was wrong when he held himself back from going to see his son but failed to fall asleep.” “Now Diwu Lun made a mistake but was able to confess his wrong, we cannot view him as not unselfish; the right and wrong he confessed cannot be called a real wrong; and now he honestly admitted his wrong and called it selfishness, we cannot say that he was not confused about the principle of unselfishness and selfishness” (Yin and Guo 1986, Vol. 6, “A Theory on Selfishness,” p. 235). It can be seen that Ji Kang had employed the categories of “right and wrong” to explain where ordinary people discussed unselfishness and selfishness, and that his differentiation between unselfishness and selfishness from the point of “confession” and “concealment” was obviously a result of his philosophical trend that valued naturalism. What deserves our attention is that Ji had discriminated two estimate objects: Object 1: The behavior that Diwu Lun straightly confessed his internal preference to the person who made the question to him; Object 2: The behaviors in which Diwu Lun respectively treated his nephew and his son. In the dialog between Diwu Lun and the asker, what served as the object of estimate was merely Object 2. Most discussers have done so: They are estimating whether the Diwu Lun in “getting up ten times” and “not getting up even once” had a self mind, not estimating whether the Diwu Lun in honestly confessing his own selfishness had involved selfishness. Even Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, who will be discussed below, had also largely the same focus. See details below. As for the topic of this essay, however, the discussion will be focused on whether Diwu Lun’s behaviors in the event conform to the criteria of unselfishness.
If we call the view that judges whether a person is unselfish or not in reference to what he has done (i.e., behaviors) a kind of externalism, then the view that judges whether a person is unselfish or not in reference to what he has thought (i.e., psychological activities) would be a kind of internalism. The questioner in the biography of Diwu Lun and most lay people hold externalism, but Diwu Lun himself held the view of internalism.

According to externalism, what requires earnest examination is the selfishness that is put into practice or embodied through behaviors, rather than the selfishness that stays at a psychological or conscious level. As for the latter kind of selfishness, there are two possible reasons that make people relatively tolerant: First, such selfishness exists in almost everyone, and seems to be inborn and beyond one’s control, therefore one cannot be required to be responsible for it; second, and more importantly, such selfishness has not turned into action, therefore it is not necessary to assign blame.

From the point of view of internalism, however, it does not matter whether the selfish action is performed or not—it would be selfish once it is thought of. This is a very strict criterion of unselfishness, and greatly expands the sphere of selfishness. In reference to this criterion, it would be out of the question to find a man deserving the fame of unselfishness. Because there is no border between “having thought of but not having done it” and “having thought of and having done it,” this more strict criterion for unselfishness may possibly lead to an opposite result, that is, it may possibly foster a kind of moral abandonment along the following lines: Now both “having thought of but having done it” and “having thought of and having done it” are viewed as selfish, then what sense does it make to subdue one’s own selfish mind and not to put it into practice? Therefore, for the sake of the moral philosophy of Confucianism, this internalism is not an ideal choice.

Judging from his comments on Diwu Lun’s story, Cheng Yi’s standpoint was actually a kind of internalism, but an internalism that was disguised as externalism. On the surface, Cheng did not comment on the psychological point of “falling asleep peacefully” or “not falling asleep peacefully.” Rather, he started from the external behaviors of “not getting up” and “getting up ten times.” It appears that his train of thought belonged to externalism which judged in reference to behaviors. But a further analysis indicates that Cheng Yi discussed this case in reference to the psychological conditions beyond such behaviors as “not getting up” and “getting up ten times,” for the very ground on which Cheng asserted that Diwu Lun had “a selfish mind” was that his behaviors involved deliberateness. This is what he meant by commenting that “The love between father and son is unselfish; once it involves any deliberateness, it would be selfish.” The word “deliberateness” here literally means to consciously do
something. Then, what had Diwu Lun consciously done? Cheng did not point it out explicitly, but Ye Cai 叶采 (though the dates of his birth and death are unknown, the prime of his life was around the year 1248) made such an explanation when he interpreted this passage:

People know that (Diwu Lun) was able to fall asleep peacefully and stayed awake because of his partial love for his son, but they do not know that his getting up ten times and his not getting up also suggest selfishness. Actually, everything has its principle of course, and allows no deliberate arrangement. The love between father and son is a thing by nature. Now he did not see his son when the latter was sick but got up ten times for the sake of his brother’s son. Was it natural for a human being? Any deliberate arrangement is immediately of selfishness. (Ye Cai, 6:4a)

Judging from the sentence that “Everything has its principle of course and allows no deliberate arrangement,” the word “arrangement” here means the breach of naturalness. As for the case of Diwu Lun, the “arrangement” is just the breach of naturalness in human feelings (the love between father and son). Hence, it can be known that Ye Cai had understood the word “deliberateness” by Cheng Yi as the internal breach of original nature. In other words, the involvement of “deliberateness” just means to “intentionally do (things opposite to nature).”

Why did Diwu Lun deliberately do things opposite to nature? A reasonable presumption is that some other purposes had overwhelmed the requirements of his nature. Some commentators hold that Diwu Lun did so for the purpose of setting up an image of unselfishness for himself.

How could he not get up now that he was concerned with his son’s sickness? He did not get up because he feared people would criticize his selfishness. He was similarly worried when his brother’s son was sick, but what was the need to get up ten times? He expected people to see his impartiality. (Zhang 1937, Vol. 6, p. 192)

According to this opinion, Diwu Lun’s “not getting up” was because of his fear of people’s criticizing his partiality, and his “getting up ten times” was due to his expectation of people’s seeing his impartiality. Here, the “fear” and “expectation,” one of which was negative and the other was positive, are both related to the pursuit of “unselfishness.”

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5 This opinion of Zhang had also been adopted by Chen Rongjie in his English translation of Jinsilu 近思录 (Reflections on Things of Hand). See Chen 1967, p. 175.
“Unselfishness” was a kind of positive value that Neo-Confucianism affirmed, but Neo-Confucianism opposed the “unselfishness for the sake of unselfishness itself.” The “unselfishness for the sake of unselfishness itself” is no more than a sort of “selfishness.”

Some people suspect that the selfishness that Diwu called himself was not necessarily selfishness. Cheng Yi gave a well-grounded answer, which was that the difference between unselfishness and selfishness is fairly subtle. Only being completely in accord with Heavenly principles without a vestige of a selfish mind can be called unselfishness. As for what Diwu Lun had said, it was selfishness already before it came to the matter whether he was able to fall asleep peacefully or not. The mere intent to not get up or to get up ten times is enough already to be called selfishness. (Ibid.)

In Cheng’s opinion, behaviors could be called “unselfish” (impartiality) only when a subject completely started with Heavenly principles without any mixture of consideration of self-interest, that is, only when moral behaviors were performed with “unconsciousness.” The other way round, no moral behaviors “with (external) purposes” can be called “impartiality” or “unselfishness.” In reference to this standard, both Diwu Lun’s “not getting up” and his “getting up ten times” belong to “deliberate” behaviors, therefore we cannot say that he met the standard of “impartiality” (unselfishness).

What must be pointed out is that Cheng’s opinion that Diwu Lun’s “not getting up” and “getting up ten times” were the result of his subjective choices (deliberate behaviors) is actually not well factually grounded. Theoretically, Diwu Lun’s “not getting up” and “getting up ten times” might be possibly a result of some objective conditions. For example, a Japanese annotator Sato Issai (1772–1859) once pointed out that the availability of nursing should be taken into account.

We have no clear idea about how the episode with Diwu Lun actually went. As for his brother’s son’s sickness, it would show partiality even if no nurses had been available; as for his own son’s sickness, it would show impartiality for his son even if his son had been well nursed. It is a pity that we have no way to know exactly how it happened. (Lanwaishu 栏外书, Vol. 6, “Wen Di Tiao,” quoted from Chen 2007, p. 197)

Once the factor of nursing is introduced, Diwu Lun’s “not getting up” and “getting up ten times” would require re-consideration. In the case of his brother’s son, it does not indicate that Diwu Lun was not partial for his son deep in his
heart if there was no nursing for the sick. In the case of his own son, “not getting up” would be because there was no need objectively to get up instead of consciously preventing oneself from getting up if there was nursing available. In this case, there would be no reason to criticize Diwu Lun as having a selfish mind because he made his decisions deliberately.

However, just as Sato Issai wrote, we have no way to know how the exact situation, therefore we cannot assert that Cheng’s analysis is certainly unreasonable.

As for Cheng’s comment about whether Diwu Lun had a selfish mind, Cheng merely remarked that Diwu Lun was selfish in acting that way, but he did not say how to act in a way that could be viewed as “unselfish.” In addition, his emphasis on the idea that “The love between father and son is unselfish” has impressed people as meaning: Compared with an uncle’s love for a nephew, the love between father and son is stronger.

Now if obedience to naturalness is just “unselfishness,” there would be nothing to blame even though a father’s love for a son is stronger than an uncle’s love for his nephew. In the case of Diwu Lun, perhaps he should have seen his sick son more times than he did his sick nephew, which is exactly opposite to what he had actually done.

If Diwu Lun had done what he had wished deep in his heart, for example, to see his son more times and his brother’s less, then would Cheng express his endorsement? I do not think so. The very reason is that “unselfishness” in Cheng’s view requires that one treat one’s own son and one’s nephew impartially or equally. What was discussed in the second set of questions and replies was just whether one’s own son and one’s brother’s son should be treated equally.

3 The Second Set of Questions and Replies: A Discussion about Whether One Should Discriminately Treat One’s Own Son and a Brother’s Son

Question again: There should be any difference between treating a brother’s son and one’s own?

Reply: The saints established a rule which says “a brother’s son is like one’s own.” That means that the saints expected people to view a brother’s son as their own. (Cheng and Cheng 2004, p. 234)

The asker wanted to know whether there was any “principle of difference” in treating one’s own son and a brother’s son. Cheng Yi gave a negative answer by quoting a sentence from a classical Confucian book. The sentence that “a brother’s son is like one’s own” comes from “Tangong Shang” in Liji 礼记 (The
Records of Rites): “As for funeral costumes, a brother’s son is like one’s own, which is for strengthening their relations, but a sister-in-law and a brother-in-law do not wear funeral costumes for each other, which is for keeping them at arm’s length. Such strengthening or weakening of relations is for emphasizing close relations and discrimination” (Zheng and Kong 1999). Here the expression “to view a brother’s son as one’s own” just means to treat a brother’s son as his own, which suggests “impartiality.” However, Cheng’s denial of the principle of difference did not seem to have convinced the asker, and the latter still insisted on his opinion on the principle of difference. Subsequently, therefore, the third set of questions and replies continued to discuss the question of “difference.”

4 The Third Set of Questions and Replies: The Further Discussion about Whether One’s Own Son and a Brother’s Should Be Discriminatively Treated

Question again: By nature the love between people varies in degree, so I suspect that there seems to be some difference.

Reply: That is because today’s people view it with their selfish minds. Confucius once remarked, “The relations between father and son are by nature.” He said so because he alluded to filial piety only, but are the relations between monarch and subjects, between elder and younger brothers, and between host and guests not by nature just because they were not mentioned? It is merely because today’s people misunderstand it by belittling it with their selfish minds and thus do not think about why Confucius remarked so. How different is a brother’s son from one’s own? Both are from the same grandfather. Only that the brothers have different physical forms, so brothers are compared to limbs. People tend to care more for one’s own sons than for brothers’ mostly because of such difference of forms, and they are completely wrong in doing so. (Cheng and Cheng 2004, p. 234)

The asker turned to the concept of “naturalness” to respond to Cheng’s opinion: by nature a man loves his own child more than his brother’s, how could he manage to view a brother’s son as his own as Cheng had said?

As Cheng admitted in his reply, the theory of “naturalness” came from Confucius: “(Confucius said,) the relations between father and son are of naturalness, and also contain the righteousness between monarch and subjects. As parents give birth to children, they are the most thankworthy by continuing the family lineage, and as they bring up the children, they are the most significant obligors. Therefore, it is called the breach of morality to love others instead of
one’s parents, and it is called the breach of rites to respect others instead of one’s parents” (“Shengzhizhang Dijiu” in *Xiaojing* 孝经 [The Confucian Classic of Filial Piety]). Invoking Confucius’ theory of “naturalness,” the asker attempted to challenge the theory that “a brother’s son is just like one’s own,” which was the theoretical foundation of Confucian “brotherhood.”

In answering the asker’s question, Cheng Yi resourcefully pointed out that the sentence that “the relations between father and son are of naturalness” had been specially mentioned in reference to the issue of filial piety, but that it could also be applied to the issue of brotherhood. The assertion that the love between father and son was by nature did not mean that the love between brothers was not natural. In Cheng’s opinion, brothers came from the same source—a single father—the main difference was that they had different physical bodies, which is why people usually treated their brothers as their limbs. Therefore, one could not say that the love between brothers did not spring from nature. Subsequently, Cheng analyzed why people had more love for their own children than for their brothers’ children. According to Cheng, that was mainly because people were deceived by the different physical forms of bodies, and thus neglected the important fact that all brothers came from the same source.

Cheng seemed to think that so long as one’s motivation came from a natural basis, the impetus would be the same. He did not think of the comparison of the impetus from different parts of nature. Therefore, the asker could still insist on his proposition that, “By nature the love between people varies in degree.” Even if we admit that the love between brothers is a part of nature, compared with the love between father and son by nature, why could not its impetus be much less? Perhaps due to personal persuasion, Cheng was reluctant to admit such an experiential fact that the love between father and son weighed more than the love between brothers. Instead, he insisted that it was due to one’s selfish mind that one discriminated the love between father and son and the love between brothers. As he remarked, “That is because today’s people view it with their selfish minds.”

Theoretically, the proposition that the love between brothers is natural merely found a biological basis for the Confucian argument about brotherhood. But this basis is not enough to prove that such nature as the love between brothers had the same impetus as the love between father and son did. Cheng did not seem to have realized that the core of brotherhood—to view a brother’s son as one’s own—was merely a regulative proposition rather than a factual description. Just as one cannot deduce “ought-to-be” from “existence,” Cheng also faced a great difficulty when he attempted to get the kernel principle of brotherhood from a biological foundation (nature).
Cheng’s discussion was focused on the discrimination between unselfishness and selfishness rather than the topic of nature. As mentioned before, the notion he used to address the discrimination between unselfishness and selfishness was deliberateness. According to Cheng, any involvement of deliberateness belonged to “selfishness,” even for an otherwise morally correct action. Here, the key point was not whether the action taken was correct or not, but whether it was approached in a correct manner. We can take brotherhood as an example. To “view a brother’s son as one’s own” is an obligation, but if someone deliberately views “a brother’s son as his own,” then is he selfish or not? This is an interesting question, which Cheng himself neglected, but which was discussed by Zhu Xi and his disciples. Zhu invoked Cheng’s view about Diwu Lun’s “getting up ten times” in his discussion, therefore we might as well think that Zhu’s dialog with his disciples was an answer to Cheng’s view about unselfishness and selfishness.

Songjie once attempted to cultivate myself in reference to the point of “loving and being biased.” For example, I often wanted to love my brother’s son as my own. I always took Diwu Lun as a mirror, but my love for my own son remained stronger than that for my brother’s anyhow. Zhu replied] The expression “often wanted” just means the same mentality of getting up ten times. One must see the naturalness of the embodiment of Heavenly Principles, and then he would be able not to break the principles although he deals with things discriminatively. (“Da Li Jingzi Yu Guoxiu,” Zhu 2002, Book 23, pp. 3028–3029)

The expression “loving and being biased” comes from the Daxue 大学 (The Great Learning), which says, “The sentence that ‘The regulation of the family lies in the cultivation of the person’ means this: ‘When there is someone you love, you are biased. When there is something you hate, you are biased. When there is something you are in awe of, you are biased. When there is someone you pity, you are biased. When you are lazy, you are biased’” (Chapter 8). According to Zhu, the word “biased” means something similar to “partial” (Zhu 1983, Daxue Zhangju 大学章句 [Chapters and Sentences of The Great Learning], p. 8). At this point, “biased” is exactly the opposite of “impartial,” which is equivalent to “partial.” Therefore, “loving and being biased” suggests that a man is always partial those he loves. The so-called personal cultivation just means to eliminate such partiality. However, it is not easy for man to eliminate such partiality, and

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6 In fact, James Legge did translate “keep away” with the word “partial”: “Men are partial where they feel affection and love; partial where they feel sorrow and compassion; partial where they arrogant and rude” (Legge 1996, p. 11).
the author of *The Great Learning* admitted this in writing, “Those who love someone and yet know their bad points, or who hate someone and yet know their good points, are few and far between. Hence there is the proverb: ‘The man does not know of his own son’s evil, or the richness of his own corn’” (Ibid.). The person who put the question to Zhu had encountered the same problem, and he found that he could hardly meet the requirement of brotherhood: to “love his brother’s son as his own.” Instead, he continued as before to have more love for his own son than for his brother’s.

Judging from the expression, “always took Diwu Lun as a mirror,” the author was obviously familiar with the story of Diwu Lun and wished to avoid such partiality as Diwu Lun had for his son. To a certain extent, we can say that the asker had self-consciously disciplined himself with the Confucian theory about brotherhood, for he said, “For example, I often wanted to love my brother’s son as my own.” Zhu pointed out that such self-consciousness runs exactly counter to the principle of naturalness required by true unselfishness, for the expression “always wanted” represents a deliberate mentality which was no different from Diwu Lun’s mentality when he feared his love for his brother’s son was less than that for his own and thus got up ten times one night.

Obviously, Zhu’s analysis of the two words “always wanted” had inherited Cheng’s view that “once it involves any deliberateness, it would be selfish.” Different from Cheng, however, Zhu had anticipated that a subject would have different degrees of natural affection when faced with different relations. For Zhu, one did not need to worry about his love varying in degree, so long as one started naturally in the Heavenly Principles. And the “naturalness in the representation of Heavenly Principles” was actually the natural trend of human nature.7

According to Zhu, if one acts in accord with true feelings from the bottom of one’s heart, there would be no question of selfishness even if Diwu Lun got up ten times to see his brother’s son. Diwu Lun’s problem rested in the inconsistency between his heart and his behavior: He cared more for his own son, but he paid more visits to his brother’s. In a certain sense, Diwu Lun was making a sort of self-sacrifice when he frequently saw his brother’s son instead of his own. Such self-sacrifice, however, was not appreciated by Neo-Confucianism. On the contrary, it was viewed as selfish because its purpose was still to strengthen his self (the reputation of unselfishness). In the eyes of ordinary people, it was to avoid arousing suspicion that Diwu Lun acted like this, but in

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7 By the way, as for the proposition that “nature is just principle” put forwards by the School of Principles, some debaters argue that it was to regulate human nature with morality; actually, it can be understood the other way round, that is, this proposition had legitimized the natural aspect of man. So, the complete understanding should include both aspects.
the vocabulary of Neo-Confucianism, to “avoid arousing suspicion” was not a good term. The fourth set of questions and replies clearly discloses this point to us.

5  The Fourth Set of Questions and Replies: The Discussion about Whether Confucius Had Attempted to Avoid Arousing Suspicion

Question again: Confucius thought more highly of Nan Rong 南容 than Gongye Chang 公冶长, so he married his elder brother’s daughter to Nan Rong, and gave his own daughter to Gongye Chang. Why?

Reply: This is also to view a saint with one’s own selfish mind. People try to avoid arousing suspicion always because of their insufficient internality. A saint is unselfish and impartial by nature, how need he avoid arousing suspicion? As for the marriage of daughters, parents match them in reference to their talents respectively. The case may be that the daughter of one’s elder brother was not so pretty, so he must choose someone who fit to her to match her. Likewise, the case may be that one’s own daughter was a beauty, so he must choose a talented handsome man to match her. Why need he avoid arousing suspicion? As for the case of Confucius, it might be that their ages were different, or that their times were in sequence, we can have no idea about it no matter either case it might be, but it is certainly wrong to assume that Confucius deliberately did so to avoid arousing suspicion. As for the avoiding of suspicion, even an ordinary virtuous man would not do, let alone a saint.

(Cheng and Cheng 2004, p. 234)

This discussion between Cheng and his disciple has also been included in the Lunyu Jizhu 论语集注 (Collected Annotations of The Analects) by Zhu Xi, with slight variations in the words.

Somebody asked, “Gongye Chang was not so virtuous as Nan Rong, so the Saint gave his own daughter to Gongye, and his brother’s daughter to Nan Rong, that was probably because he favored his brother more than himself.” Master Cheng Yi answered, “This is to pry into the Saint with one’s own selfish mind. People try to avoid arousing suspicion always because of their insufficient internality. The Saint was unselfish and impartial by nature, how need he avoid arousing suspicion? Moreover, when marrying daughters, parents match them in reference to their talents respectively, and especially should not attempt to avoid any suspicion. As for the case of Confucius, we have no idea about the two young ladies’ ages and sequence, but we do know
that we cannot assume that Confucius deliberately did so to avoid arousing suspicion. As for the avoiding of suspicion, even an ordinary virtuous man would not do, let alone a saint.” (Zhu 1983, Vol. 3, p. 75)

The story about the marriages of Confucius’ daughter and niece that the asker mentioned comes from The Analects:

Confucius evaluated Gongye Chang as “can be wived. Although he was put in bonds, it was not his own faults,” then he married his own daughter to the latter. Similarly, Confucius rated Nan Rong as “if the country were well governed, he would not be out of office, and if it were ill governed, he would escape punishment and disgrace.” Hence he married his niece to Nan Rong. (“Gongye Chang”)

Both Gongye Chang and Nan Rong were Confucius’ students, and Confucius respectively married his own daughter and his brother’s daughter to them. Some annotators assumed that Confucius did so with reference to the virtues of those two, that is, Nan Rong was more virtuous than Gongye, therefore Confucius married his own daughter to Gongye and his brother’s daughter to Nan Rong. 8 In other words, Confucius favored his brother more than himself. People generally favor themselves more than others by nature, but Confucius did the opposite which unavoidably makes people suspect that he did so to avoid arousing suspicion.

The asker mentioned the story of Confucius possibly because it had some similarity with the case of Diwu Lun: Both favored their brothers more than themselves.

Logically, the assertion that Confucius favored his brother more than himself must be based on two prerequisites: (1) Confucius thought that Gongye Chang was not as virtuous as Nan Rong; and (2) Confucius gave consideration only to virtue when making marriage matches for his daughter and niece, neglecting whether the man and woman fit each other in terms of talent, appearance and so on. Compared with the first point, the second is especially important.

Cheng disagreed with the idea that Confucius deliberately favored his brother’s daughter to avoid arousing suspicion. His reasons were as follows: (1)

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8 Such idea seemed to be popular before the Tang dynasty. According to Huang Kan 皇侃 in his Lunyu Shu 论语疏 (Commentaries to The Analects), “In previous discussion, people tended to remark that Gongye Chang and Nan Rong were different in virtue and that there was hence the difference of matches of Confucius’ daughter and niece” (quoted from Cheng 1990, p. 289).
Usually, Confucius would not do anything for the purpose of avoiding suspicion, because the primary reason why a person wants to avoid arousing suspicion is because he had a guilty conscience or was in the wrong, but Confucius was a saint who was most fair in dealing with affairs, and there was no such case where Confucius was guilty or in the wrong, so he had no need to avoid arousing suspicion; and (2) as for the marriages of his daughter and niece in particular, there was even less possibility for Confucius to act to avoiding suspicion, for the basic principle of marrying a daughter was matching her in accordance to her talent and virtue. If his brother’s daughter was not good enough in talent or virtue, then it would be necessary to find a man of proportionate talent and virtue to match her, not necessarily a man of absolute talent and virtue. If his own daughter was satisfactory in talent and virtue, then he would choose a man of proportionate talent and virtue to match her, and it would be improper to find a man of disproportionate talent and virtue as her match. Therefore, it was unimportant whether Nan Rong or Gongye Chang had more talent and virtue. What was important was whether the talent and virtue of his daughter and his brother’s daughter could match up with them.

The reason why the commentators suspected Confucius was unfair in marrying his daughter and niece was possibly that the way in which *The Analects* described the whole event had suggested unequal treatment. To eliminate such an impression, Cheng Yi explained that it was not discriminative treatment; rather it was based on the sequence originated from the girls’ different ages.

According to Cheng Yi, Confucius did not “favor his brother more than himself” in the matter of his daughter’s marriage. Instead, he made no exception in adopting the principle of “arranging matches in accordance to talent and virtue.” The presumption about avoiding suspicion was because the commentators pried into the saint’s motivation with their own selfish minds.

Above, we have analyzed step by step a set of dialogues between Cheng Yi and one of his disciples around the particular case of Diwu Lun. Overall, the Confucian idea of brotherhood can be represented “view a brother’s child as one’s own.” The key word in this sentence is “view.” Viewed physically, a brother’s child is of course a different person from one’s own child, and that is an ontological fact. Even the Neo-Confucians admitted that a brother’s child and one’s own child have “different bodies.” Confucian brotherhood faced the tension between naturalness and ought-to-be from the very beginning since it required a person to treat a brother’s child the same as one’s own. By nature, the love for a brother’s child is always less than for one’s own. Confucian brotherhood required equal love for a brother’s son and one’s own, and was a transformation of “nature,” hence it had to rely on the subjective endeavor of a
subject. However, Neo-Confucians held that brotherhood had its foundation in human nature just as the relations between father and son did, therefore they opposed the requirement to realize such brotherhood through a subjective endeavor. Instead, they emphasized a kind of naturalism. On the basis of this preference for naturalism, Neo-Confucianism criticized the behavior of favoring “a brother rather than oneself,” viewing it as a kind of pretense due to a selfish mind. More than that, any self-conscious decision to “love a brother’s child as one’s own” would be criticized by Neo-Confucians as artificiality that deviated from the spirit of naturalism. In essence, to “love a brother’s child as one’s own” is a kind of moral mandate which belongs to regulative ethics, but Neo-Confucianism demanded that people internalize this as a moral feeling within a person, which indicated an ethical pattern that turned what ought-to-be into what exists. To a certain extent, such an ethical pattern had confused ought-to-be and existence. On the other hand, this emphasis on naturalism made it plausible to admit the natural vent of human nature as legitimate. In this way, the Neo-Confucian understanding of brotherhood was partiality based on naturalism.

Compared with ethics in the West, this train of thought in Confucianism is peculiar and deserves our attention. As is well known, one result of the enlightenment ideas about equality between individuals is that modern moral philosophy (utilitarianism and Kantian ethics are its major representatives) offered a strong endorsement of impartiality (Williams 1981). Virtue ethics objected to this, however (Xu 2007, pp. 155–279). On the other hand, a familiar criticism against virtue ethics was about its indifference to impartiality, its self-centeredness, and so forth. Confucian ethics has been thought to have many similarities with virtue ethics.9 According to our research above, however, Confucianism was not indifferent to impartiality. In other words, Confucian ethics was not similar to virtue ethics in this aspect, and the criticism against the latter’s indifference to impartiality does not apply to the former. On the other hand, some commentators tend to view Confucian ethics as a counterpart of Kantian ethics. But in reference to the above research, the naturalist pattern of Confucian ethics was quite different from Kantian ethics especially on the point

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9 Among the representative scholars who hold that there are many similarities between virtue ethics and Confucianism, one is Yu Jiyuan 余纪元, see Yu 1998; Yu 2002, and Yu 2007. Among the representative scholars who point out that Confucian ethics has similarities with the ethics of care, one is Li Chenyang 李晨阳, who has two pertinent treaties, see Li 1994, and Li 2002. Huang Yong 黄勇 pointed out that Confucian ethics was superior to virtue ethics while it was similar to the latter. See details in Huang 2010. In addition, P. J. Ivanhoe and Zhuang Jinzhang 庄锦章 and some others have done concrete research.
of impartiality. If the impartiality sought in modern western moral philosophy is the so-called personal-neutral impartiality, the impartiality in Confucianism is instead a result in the efforts to achieve virtue within oneself (for the sake of oneself)\textsuperscript{10}, and such impartiality is a kind of naturalist impartiality (that is, viewing the natural vent of human nature as legitimate).

For Confucianism itself, such a naturalist style also brought about an advantage in the sense of theory about practices. As mentioned above, there was certain tension between the principle of justice required by brotherhood and natural human feelings. Confucians might be stuck on the horns of this dilemma in their practice of brotherhood as evidenced by the dialogs with Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. Resorting to the naturalist understanding of brotherhood, however, one could do whatever he wanted to, and had no need to worry about whether the result would lead to partiality. Hence he was able to disburden himself from the ethics of his social or family role. Judging from the source of this theory, such a natural method as that advocated by Neo-Confucianism was to a certain extent the absorption of Buddhist wisdom about nothingness.\textsuperscript{11}

The complicated debate about Confucian brotherhood triggered by the particular case of Diwu Lun has displayed to us the special view of Confucian ethics on impartiality, giving us a sensible understanding of the naturalist pattern of Confucian ethics. Since the Qing dynasty, Neo-Confucian moral philosophy has often been criticized as hypocritical and unkind, and even as “killing people

\textsuperscript{10} The opposite to “for the sake of self” is “for the sake of others,” while “for the sake of others” was purposeful in the eyes of Confucianism, and its motives were thus impure; whereas those “for the sake of self,” in the word of Zhang Shi 張栻 (1133–1180), a Neo-Confucian of the Song Dynasty, “are what they are without deliberate endeavors” (Quoted from Zhu 2002, Book 6, p. 514, “Daxue Huowen”).

\textsuperscript{11} As for the Confucian criticism about Buddhism, one important point was that Buddhism did not perform ethical duties, while Buddhism, however, commented from the point of view of non-attachment that the adherence to the relations between monarch and subjects, father and son and husband and wife in Confucianism was attachment. For a long time Confucianism was unable to effectively retort this criticism by Buddhism until Wang Yangming 王陽明 absorbed this Buddhist wisdom to deal a counterblow to Buddhism: “Buddhism purports not to confine itself to certain particularity, but it has actually been fettered by particularity. We Confucians admit particularity, but we are not fettered by it... (Buddhism) has gone all out to evade the relations between monarch and subjects, father and son and husband and wife only because such relations are of particularity. We Confucians, however, give benevolence back in the face of the relation between father and son, give righteousness back in the face of the relation between monarch and subjects, and give distinction back in the face of the relations between husband and wife. When did we ever attach to the particularity of relations between father and son, monarch and subjects or husband and wife?” (Wang 1992, p. 99) As for the absorption of the Buddhist wisdom of non-being by the Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming dynasties, see details in Chen 1992.
with principles.”12 The disclosure of the naturalist qualities of Confucian ethics in this essay may be helpful for rectifying such specious bias.

References


12 At the early 20th century, the radical anti-traditionalists in China often criticized the Confucian brotherhood’s hypocrisy and its disagreement with the naturalness of human nature. In the journal Mangyuan 莽原 published on February 10, 1926 was released Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 short story “Brothers,” which was included into one of his collections Panghuan 彷徨 (Oscillation). In this short story, Lu Xun, who had just gone through quarrels with one of his younger brother, ruthlessly anatomized with his special sensibility the “brotherhood” that had been delightfully talked about in the traditional Chinese society. Zhang Peijun 张沛君, a major character in the fiction, was an exemplary elder brother in the eyes of people, and Zhang himself was also proud of it. But, his younger brother was struck by an acute disease, and was misdiagnosed as having a lethal one. This misdiagnosed disease subsequently led to a total panic (afterwards it was proven to have been a false alarm). With a passage of excellent description of mentality and another passage of wonderful description about a dream, Lu Xun vividly revealed to readers how Zhang Peijun’s daily brotherhood was fragile and false, and how the selfishness and obduracy at the bottom of man’s heart was true and dreadful.
Confucian Ethics and Impartiality: On the Confucian View about Brotherhood


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