

Resolving Confucian Parent-Child Relationship Issues Through Aristotle's Concept of Friendship

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Abstract: *The traditional Confucian concept of parent-child relationships, while emphasizing kinship, focuses more on "filial piety" and less on "benevolence," treating the father as the primary subject in addressing parent-child issues. Aristotle interprets familial love as a form of friendship, providing us with an opportunity for equality between father and son. In modern society, family relationships are no longer characterized by an undifferentiated public-private sphere, nor by distinctions of honor and disgrace. This demands that the Confucian concept of parent-child relationships regard children as equal individuals in the context of modernization, and separately narrate the responsibilities and obligations of fathers and sons.*

Keywords: Parent-child concept, Friendship, Kin Concealment.

Introduction

The concept of family in contemporary China largely continues the traditional Confucian style, primarily characterized by the father's authority and dominance, and the child's need for filial piety and obedience. In family relationships, parent-child relationships are often tense and fraught with contradictions. The reasons are twofold: on the one hand, the individual freedom brought about by socio-political and economic changes, and on the other hand, the conservatism of cultural traditions and misinterpretations of Confucianism. When Aristotle discusses the friendship within the family, he also touches upon the political system of the city-state's citizens, but this is radically different from the Confucian approach of integrating home and state, where Aristotle places greater emphasis on the value of the individual. The identity difficulties in the Confucian view of parent-child relationships can seek new ways of resolution from Aristotle's concept of friendship within the home and city.

1. First

The traditional Confucian concepts of family and politics are closely intertwined. Since the formation of the state system, the idea of "all under heaven as one family" has always been the main political and ethical consciousness of the feudal society. The family, as the basic unit of social structure, essentially mirrors the structure of the state. The concept of kinship within the family, mainly referring to blood-related parent-child relationships, includes the Five Relationships mentioned by Mencius: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, brothers, and friends, among which the relationships between father and son, husband and wife, and brothers are all internal family ethical relationships. The most important of these is the relationship between father and son. In traditional Chinese Confucian thought, while the way of husband and wife is certainly important, in the ethical composition, the role of women is not on an equal footing with men. Men usually dominate the relationship, while the role of women is to obey and assist. Even if they become governors of family, they are still attached to the background of family authority and have no power or dignity of their own. For example, in the "Family" hexagram of the I Ching, the yin

(female) line is the main element, managing the household affairs, which is also due to the needs of the family. Men manage the household with rationality, while women often govern the home with emotion, focusing on internal matters such as food and other domestic affairs. They are not granted the Li, only suitable for handling household chores. Furthermore, in Confucianism, the relationship between brothers advocates that the elder brother be friendly and the younger brother be respectful. The "friendliness" of the elder brother here does not entirely refer to fraternal love but is, in fact, a lenient and loving attitude towards the younger brother under the requirements of "propriety," which still reflects a relationship of superiority and inferiority. Moreover, within large families, after brothers establish their own households, this order of seniority becomes the main principle of the brotherly relationship. Both ethical relationships are actually about the distinction of superior and inferior, similar to the father-son relationship, and can be collectively summarized as the relationship between the superior and the subordinate. Aristotle's concept of friendship offers us a perspective to re-examine the Confucian parent-child relationship.

Aristotle discusses the issue of friendship throughout Books VIII and IX of the Nicomachean Ethics, with special mention of familial friendship. This includes the friendship between parents and children, between children and parents, among siblings, other relatives, and between husband and wife. Let's focus on his discussion of the love between parents and children. In the context of city-state politics, the family does not constitute the cornerstone of politics. Although the family is a community of shared life, the weight of individual choice as the subject has not been completely overlooked. This provides room for interpreting family relationships. First, Aristotle believes that the love of a father for his son is not the same as the son's love for his father. However, as long as "but whenever children accord to their parents what they must accord to those who gave them birth, and parents accord what they must do to their children, their friendship is enduring and decent." (1158b22—24) This is an inherent inequality. To compensate for this inequality, Aristotle suggests that love can be matched by the superior party in proportion to their status, making it equal. Yet the natural act of parents nurturing their children encompasses both the instinctual behavior of the vast majority of living beings and a uniquely human emotion, making it difficult to discern how to allocate the

quantitative relationship. However, from another perspective, friendship has the potential to regulate the equality of parent-child relationships.

Secondly, in the context of familial friendship, Aristotle mentions the friendship between parents and children, acknowledging that it involves pleasure and utility. From ancient times to the modern era, from the important concept of the relationship between heaven, and humanity to the actual provision of labor force, children have always been of paramount importance to the family. It is only in modern society that many of the values previously provided only by children can be replaced by society, making children seem less uniquely important. In fact, familial friendship implicitly contains the nature of being pleasant and useful. Within the family community, these two aspects may be primary because there are no preconditions for mutual choice. For children, it takes a long time to perceive and understand the love of their parents, which initially is seen as a natural necessity of upbringing, and at this stage, being loved does not involve an equal relationship. The love needed by parents also varies between their youth and old age. The care for their children's growth when young and the dependence on their children in old age seem to correspond to the two qualities of being pleasant and useful. These two qualities are attached to natural affection. From the parents' perspective, the most ideal form of friendship is one that is heartfelt and without expectation of return, yet ideally and practically reciprocates the parents' love. Aristotle says that there is an inherent inequality in the quantity of love between father and son because no matter what the son does, he can never fully repay the father's kindness. Confucianism also seems to emphasize the inequality between father and son, focusing more on "filial piety" rather than "benevolence," but the difference lies in whether the child is given due status and respect.

In the family community, both ancient Greek and traditional Confucian families have a common foundation in natural philosophy. Firstly, there is a consensus between the two regarding the relationship between parents and children. In his theory of friendship, Aristotle likens children to the products of a craftsman, with parents providing all the love, and over time, children come to understand and reciprocate their parents' love. However, parents do not seek reciprocation as their primary goal; this love is natural. Aristotle believes that the difference between loving and being loved is that most people prefer to be loved, while parents are more inclined to take the initiative to love. In this factual inequality of love and being loved, parents occupy an advantageous position in terms of kinship and are correspondingly willing to give more. People generally prefer to be loved rather than to love, with being loved seemingly being an honor, but in parents, it is more often an unconditional love. Aristotle concludes from natural facts: "Friendship is more about giving love." Although there may be cognitive gaps due to age differences between middle-aged people and young children, or the elderly and the young, the parent-child relationship is also a dynamic process. Middle-aged parents raising children or middle-aged people caring for the elderly can give proportional love based on their own advantages, and those being cared for can rightfully enjoy being loved. Secondly, this relationship of mutual friendship must exist within the family community. Just as citizens are to the city-state, family

relationships become the pillars of the family community, which also provides a natural basis for life within the family community. Especially the parent-child relationship, which is different from other communities, as children are born to their parents and then give rise to familial friendship. It is only after this that the family constitutes the city-state, so Aristotle says, "to the extent that the household is prior to the city, and more necessary." (1162a17). Of course, this is the family in the natural sense that comes first. Within this community, father and son share feelings and mutual understanding, choosing to live together for the overall benefit of life. Aristotle divides the constitution into three forms: monarchy, aristocracy, and republic. The father-son relationship is like a monarchy, where the father is a monarch with virtue and wisdom, and the son is like a citizen. A monarch with complete virtue naturally also includes friendship. Liao Shenbai believes that "the nature of friendship is realized in activity rather than just existing as potential." Therefore, within the family community, parents mainly give love rather than receive it, and this love is expressed through activity, realizing the friendship of the family. Thirdly, the activity of friendship requires practical wisdom. Aristotle believes that the family needs the father to provide excellent moral education, "For just as in a city the provisions of law and the types of character found in that city have influence, similarly a father's words and habits have influence, and all the more because of kinship and because of the benefits he does; for his children are already fond of him and naturally ready to obey." (1180b3-5) A person with practical wisdom should have a full understanding of the family's friendship, knowing how to handle unequal friendships and make trade-offs between justice and friendship. More importantly, they should be able to recognize themselves through friendship within family relationships and achieve their own virtue.

2. Second

From these points, we can summarize that when Aristotle discusses familial friendship, he emphasizes the role, status, and behavior of the father within the context of political life. In contrast, Confucianism, in its view of parent-child relationships, often talks about filial piety but seldom about benevolence. Zengxi once fainted from being beaten by his father for mistakenly cutting a gourd vine, and Confucius criticized the reason as it would subject the father's morality to criticism. Zhang Xianglong further explained: "But why would Confucius blame him? Because Zengxi's concern for his father did not reach the deepest level, did not reach the father's loving heart for his son, and the mutual communication with the father, so it is still a linear way of thinking, similar to the linearized schools like Mohism that came later. This is not acceptable in Confucianism; how can our Confucian doctrine of filial piety be passed on then? ... Almost Zengxi 'plunged his father into injustice,' destroying Confucius' two beloved disciples, and the doctrine of filial piety in Confucianism would become a joke, 'whose unfilial act is greater than this!' How much more contrary to the teacher's teachings can one be! No wonder Confucius is 'angry.'" This explanation may not be entirely convincing. How can Zeng Xi's furious beating of his son be seen as the heart of a loving father? Moreover, Zhang Xianglong believes that it's not just about a gourd vine or a mistake, but Zeng Xi's actions, although seemingly in a bad mood, are actually out of

concern, which are all excusing Zeng Xi's behavior and do not directly explain Zeng Xi's mistake, but rather indicate that there is a big problem with his actions.

When Confucianism discusses the relationship between father and son, the focus is generally on how the son should act, rather than the actions of the father. Generally speaking, the father has a favor or grace towards the son, which is the primary connection in the father-son relationship. For the child, the grace of the parents should be more accurately described as a debt of gratitude. Aristotle, when addressing the conflict of responsibilities in the repayment of friendship, distinguishes between different levels of importance: economic debts, the favors of friends, and the debts of family. His criteria for distinction are "nobility and urgency," so after being rescued from kidnapping, one should first save their father rather than repay the debts of a creditor. Regarding parents, Aristotle believes that "It seems that we must supply means of support to parents more than anyone. For we suppose that we owe them this, and that it is finer to supply those who are the causes of our being than to supply ourselves in this way." (1165a24-27). Therefore, there is a commonality between the two, both acknowledging the debt the father has to the child, but the difference is that Aristotle does not point out what to do if the father is irresponsible. When discussing the cessation of friendship, he believes that when a friend loses the quality of friendship, the relationship of friendship naturally ends. However, he does not discuss the father-son relationship, and kinship certainly does not cease due to some external conditions. But in kinship relationships, the roles of both parties should be bound together with responsibilities.

Confucius said: "A ruler should act like a ruler, a subject like a subject, a father like a father, and a son like a son." However, Confucianism often overlooks the part about "a father being a father," only emphasizing "a son being a son." Filial piety has become the main theme of Confucian views on parent-child relationships, while discussions about "benevolence" from the father are rarely seen. Indeed, similar to Aristotle, Confucianism also places great importance on the concept of debts of gratitude, especially evident in the attitudes towards funeral rites, reflecting the gratitude and reciprocation in Confucian parent-child relationships.

Zai Wo believed that the three-year mourning period for one's father was too long. From a modern perspective, Zai Wo held a pragmatic view to question Confucius's doctrine of the three-year mourning period, and his reasons were quite compelling. The three-year mourning rites could likely lead to the collapse of spiritual culture, which is an outcome that Confucius would absolutely not want to see. However, the problem with Zai Wo's viewpoint is that he only saw the inconveniences from the surface level, but within the spiritual construction inherent in Confucian culture, the three-year mourning is absolutely indispensable. From an individual emotional standpoint, it takes an infant three years to be nurtured out of the parents' arms, and the emotional reciprocation of the three-year mourning is also natural. Moreover, the most severe criticism of Zai Wo was "lack of benevolence"; a benevolent person loves others, and thus it can be seen that Confucius believed Zai Wo must have no love in his heart for his parents if he could be at ease, not even as much as the "universal love" criticized by Mencius towards

the Mohists. Zai Wo's fundamental issue was that he neglected the spiritual context inherent in Confucianism: benevolent is loving family. Denying the basic values negates the rites, and subsequently further negates benevolence, so Confucius still wanted to uphold the concentrated expression of benevolence under the rites, which should be understood here as the love for one's kin. This is also a manifestation of a child's love for their father.

Additionally, Confucianism actually embodies the concept of equality in the reciprocity of grace and responsibility. Mencius said to King Xuan of Qi, "If the ruler regards his ministers as his hands and feet, then the ministers will regard their ruler as their heart and lungs; if the ruler regards his ministers as dogs and horses, then the ministers will regard their ruler as ordinary people; if the ruler regards his ministers as dirt and dust, then the ministers will regard their ruler as enemies." (Mencius) The relationship between ruler and minister, also one of the Five Relationships, can be regulated and admonished by the concept of equality, but such a description is not seen in the parent-child relationship. This can give us some inspiration: as a minister, one should be loyal to the ruler, and as a son, one should be filial to the father. Conversely, if the ruler treats the ministers as tools, the ministers can also treat the ruler equally. However, the parent-child relationship lacks equality, especially the father's equality towards the son. In the political composition of Confucianism, the family and the state are one, and the Great Learning advocates the gradual governance from the individual, family, state, to the world, which can be said that the family is the initial template for governing the country. This coincides with Aristotle's community of friendship, where all family communities are parts of the city-state, gathered together to seek common interests. Moreover, the Confucian concept of family even transcends the limits of the dynasty. From history, we can see that the power of local families has a long-standing origin. The stability of the family community far exceeds that of ordinary governments, so the governance of the family community is the starting point of Confucian political logic. It can also be inferred that the most important thing is the parent-child relationship. The second is the foundation of natural philosophy. Confucianism's philosophy of life describes the virtue of heaven and earth, the proliferation of all things, and the union of yin and yang is the origin of natural philosophy. Heaven gives birth to all things in silence, and people inherit the mandate of heaven and naturally have their own virtue. First, people should become themselves, complete the construction of the human order based on their own subjectivity, and then become a person, transcend the subject, and reach the state of benevolence, loving others, and promoting oneself and others, achieving the state of being a sage inside and a king outside. This requires in the parent-child relationship that the father becomes a father and the son becomes a son, and they should care for each other, comply with the heavenly way, and the father and son are close. Moreover, Confucianism emphasizes natural emotions. Mencius speaks of the Four Beginnings, which is to express natural emotions outwardly. Finally, Confucian scholars have elaborated on filial piety, including "respect," "non-disobedience," etc. all of which strive to practice communication on the basis of taking into account both rites and kinship. However, there is a more serious problem that has not been resolved, that is, the challenge of kin

concealment.

3. Third

Although the family is a preliminary political community where managing the household equates to governing the state, with a unified hierarchy, it can also suffer from the problem of indistinguishability between family and state affairs. Thus, in such a structure where family and state are intertwined, when faced with conflicts, it becomes difficult to make choices that balance public and private interests. Typically, these moral dilemmas arise in situations where the father has committed a wrongdoing, and the child is faced with a difficult decision. As recorded in the Records of the Grand Historian, Shi She released his father and, in the predicament of choosing between loyalty and filial piety, he had no alternative but to take his own life to repay the kindness of his ruler and father, which is actually the worst choice in a dilemma. When Aristotle discusses friendship, he actually touches upon the redirection towards one's own happiness, the pursuit of something better by a self-sufficient person. If one encounters such difficulties in practice, it is inevitable that one cannot achieve personal happiness, and the parent-child relationship is not based merely on utility and pleasure. Therefore, a wise person should not bring their own problems into the parent-child relationship.

Aristotle's virtue ethics and Confucianism seemingly do not offer direct solutions to moral dilemmas, but both provide ample discussion on self-cultivation. Although the Confucian ideal of fraternal friendship does not include the parent-child relationship, it is one of the Five Relationships. Thus, the primary issue in Confucian parent-child relationships is to cultivate oneself, followed by the love for others, with the love between parents and children being especially significant. In traditional Confucian thought, the public is also the private; there is no absolute conflict in the predicament of concealment among kin. The Confucian ideal is that sages always act flawlessly, with upright hearts and sincere intentions, in harmony with the natural order of heaven. However, in modern society, family relationships do not always align with social order, necessitating the resolution of contradictions between public and private interests, as well as emotions and rationality. For fathers, they should rationally address their own difficulties, while children should only act on their private concerns without violating the social contract, which is the residual of moral virtue. Zhu Xi said that children should gently admonish their fathers' faults, which is a representative example of practical wisdom in dealing with fathers' issues with understanding. On the issue of concealment among kin, recognizing the conflict between individual and societal consensus, one does not necessarily have to bind oneself to the parent-child relationship to resolve the issue, as doing so would be unhelpful in reality.

It can be said that the most significant characteristic of modern society is the recognition of individual value and personal rationality. Parent-child relationships should adapt to the demands of modern society on the basis of respecting individual personality. Aristotle's concept of friendship provides a template for modern family society, seeking an equal relationship between both parties under natural emotions, and taking personal virtue and happiness as the

ultimate goal. This involves extracting individuals from family values to achieve consistency between individual and social values.

"For each has a proper virtue, and this will be a source of enjoyment for them. Children seem to be another bond, and that is why childless unions are more quickly dissolved; for children are a common good for both, and what is common holds them together." (1162a26-30) The individual virtues of men and women are first and foremost personal goods. At the beginning of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle narrates the importance of "virtue," as the excellence of the soul, and human virtue is manifested in the practice of good. Here, it can be seen that men and women are united not only by natural inclination but also by their respective good virtues. Children are the product of goodness, which is why Aristotle also demands that children should honor their parents as citizens honor the gods. The ambiguity in Aristotle's discussion of domestic friendship lies in his simultaneous consideration of the individual, the family, and the community. However, at the family level, since friendship exists, there is no need to discuss justice further, as justice is embedded within the community. Two levels of expression, the perfection of individual virtue, and the cornerstone of family harmony and the construction of the community are inseparable, each level pursuing the greatest good. Moral attributes vary in different eras and cultural contexts. The Confucian issue of concealment among kin is actually a conflict between personal virtue and political virtue faced by the scholar-officials, a vagueness of identity, and the focus of the debate on the distinction between public and private also changes in different contexts. In the Politics, Aristotle's discussion focuses more on the political relationships of family members and their civic identity. Sun Chunchen believes that Aristotle's discussion of the family is insufficient, and modern discussions on the "family" further deconstruct it within Aristotle's framework of understanding, thereby making the individual the foundation of political philosophy. This view is very pertinent. Confucian views on parent-child relationships must keep pace with the times, re-enriching individual moral values within ethical relationships.

In modern society, values are diverse and everyone is equal. The worth of an individual is no longer assessed within a fixed discourse, and the parent-child relationship inevitably changes with the evolution of the era. The Confucian virtues of benevolence and righteousness can be reinterpreted anew; for instance, by explaining Confucian parent-child concepts through emotionalism, one can capture the emotional resonance within the family. Fathers, too, have experienced childhood, and children will one day grow to be parents themselves. Through the passage of time and the transmission across generations, memories, experiences, and interactions will become means to understand family relationships. The closeness between parents and children can be more natural and unforced, infusing the interactions with friendship and affection.

4. Conclusion

"A ruler should act like a ruler, a subject like a subject, a father like a father, and a son like a son." (The Analects) The relationship of ruler and subject no longer exists in the modern

context, so the relationship between father and son can be given a new interpretation. Fathers should fulfill their responsibilities, and children should fulfill their duties; There's no need to put the other person in a difficult position. In insurmountable dilemmas, there are naturally other institutional norms to constrain and manage. As long as they do not harm each other and do not act recklessly, the natural order and human ethics will find their way.

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