Confucianism and the Philosophy of Well-Being

By R. Kim (2020)

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Reviewed by Ori Tavor

In early 2020, as reports of the spread of the Covid-19 virus began to circulate, our lives were thrown into chaos. In addition to the devastating effects of the disease itself, the preventative measures undertaken by governments around the world, such as lockdowns, quarantine measures, and social distancing, resulted in a growing sense of anxiety and distress. In order to combat the effects of social isolation, experts emphasized the role of emotional and mental wellbeing in ensuring the health of both individuals and societies, and promoted a variety of daily regimens such as exercise, meditation, as well as virtual gatherings, designed to enhance our coping mechanisms and allow us to survive this tumultuous period. While this discourse mostly focused on the health benefits of maintaining a state of mental and physical wellbeing, philosophical discussions of wellbeing, or the 'good life,' have been an issue of perpetual concern throughout human history and across multiple philosophical and religious traditions.

In *Confucianism and the Philosophy of Well-Being*, Richard Kim attempts to develop a Confucian account of wellbeing based on the writings of the three most influential thinkers of Classical Confucianism: Confucius (551–479 BCE) and his intellectual successors Mencius (fl. fourth century BCE) and Xunzi (fl. third century BCE). The current discourse on wellbeing, argues Kim, is predominantly rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, and has been criticized as being 'too abstract and theory driven' (p. 3). Some have responded by introducing a more empirically grounded approach, utilizing the latest innovations in the fields of psychology and

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cognitive science. Kim's work aims to take the readers on another route – utilizing the insights of classical Confucian thinkers to highlight areas of inquiry that are often neglected in the Western philosophical tradition, thereby complementing and enriching our understanding of wellbeing.

Kim is careful to acknowledge that there is no unifying theory of wellbeing in any of the classical texts he analyzes. The early Confucians, he claims, did not seek to build theories, but to improve the quality of life of the communities they inhabited by offering concrete ways of living well. Nonetheless, Kim identifies three main points that can offer a significant contribution to the current philosophical discourse on wellbeing. The first is holism; for the Confucians, wellbeing and morality are intrinsically linked and one cannot live a good life that is free of any ethical concerns. The second is relationality; whereas Western discussions of wellbeing are centered around the individual, the Confucians argued that this is not a goal that can be achieved in isolation as it is dependent on our relationships with others. The third and final component is the Confucian stress on contextualism; humans are not self-sustained isolated beings, they operate within an external environment and their wellbeing is determined by the physical, cultural, and social conditions that surround them. These three components, concludes Kim, can be woven together and used to construct a coherent Confucian model of the good life.

The book contains two relatively short chapters (Chapter 1, in which Kim sets out to compose a working definition of wellbeing, and Chapter 5, which examines the role of happiness and ethical equanimity in the lifelong pursuit of the good life) and three more substantial chapters that explore the aforementioned trio of themes. Chapter 2 sets the stage by establishing the relationship between Confucian theories of human nature and their relation to wellbeing. Kim introduces the work of two classical Confucian thinkers who are renowned for their opposite views of human nature: while Mencius claims that human nature is inherently good, Xunzi argues that humans are innately selfish. Despite these apparent differences, argues Kim, their conception of wellbeing is strikingly similar, as they both fundamentally agree that humans are equipped with the moral resources needed to develop virtue and live a good moral life. Another common feature is their claim that social harmony cannot be enforced by external means. Both thinkers argue that for society to flourish, it has to do so from within, through the moral transformation of individuals. The development of virtue thus has a transformative epistemological effect – it 'radically alters one's conception of well-being' (p. 52). Kim dedicates Chapters 3 and 4 to this assertion, highlighting the holistic, relational, and contextual features of Confucian wellbeing through an analysis of familial and social life.

In Chapter 3, Kim focuses on the important assertion that while the development of virtue in Confucianism is internal, it cannot be accomplished without the correct external environment. Humans begin their path of self-cultivation at a young age. This takes place in the context of the dynamic and complex social context of the family, where we learn certain 'social scripts,' practical forms of ritual behavior that enable social interaction. Ritual thus plays an important role in 'setting the proper social conditions for both the cultivation and maintenance of the virtues as well as assistance in good conduct in times of trouble' (p. 54). Confucian wellbeing, concludes Kim, is inherently social and relational. Rituals, in this sense, enable us to understand that the common good transcends our own individual self-interest. The sense of unity achieved through communal ritual interaction loosens the strict boundaries of the self and demonstrates the interconnectedness of people in society, thereby promoting wellbeing.

Chapter 4 continues Kim's examination of the communal nature of the Confucian pursuit of the good life. Most scholars, he claims, agree that Confucians consider the family as being the most important social institution. From the perspective of wellbeing, the family setting is the arena in which we acquire an 'indispensable psychological foundation for moral values and the cultivation of virtues' (p. 71). Learning, understanding, and mastering one's role within the family help us shape our identity and character. This means that the self in classical Confucianism is at least partially constituted by the different roles we play in the family and in society. Proper fulfillment of one's roles is directly related to their wellbeing, as our sense of self is intimately connected to our relationships. As opposed to the individualism of modern liberal societies, Confucianism is thus best described as endorsing contextualism, the claim that we fare much better in environments that 'nudge us toward certain goods and ways of living' (p. 86). For these reasons, Confucian views on wellbeing can expand our contemporary Western outlook, which is underpinned by the philosophy of individualism and thus tends to ignore the role of our social environment in ensuring wellbeing.

The book offers a clear, concise, and theoretically sophisticated introduction to the topic of wellbeing. While Kim's investigation is deeply rooted in the academic discipline of moral philosophy, he acknowledges that any treatment of wellbeing has to be interdisciplinary in nature, employing insights from religious studies, cognitive science, sociology, and anthropology to enrich the philosophical discussion. One of the book's main strengths is the author's ability to offer a fresh interpretation of well-studied Confucian concepts that reinforces their enduring value. A good example is Kim's nuanced treatment of filial piety, which is one of

the most influential, yet most misunderstood, moral virtues in East Asian cultures. For most modern readers, filial piety is associated with a strict sense of conservatism, adherence to social hierarchy, and a total deference to one's elders. Kim challenges this view by demonstrating that while as a virtue filial piety does not provide direct benefits for the individual, it is still personally advantageous as it helps to establish the sort of culture and community conducive to one's own wellbeing. It does so in three main ways: first, it motivates adult children to continue to care for their parents for their entire lifetime, which is beneficial for society; second, it fosters a greater sense of concern for members of society who are dependent and vulnerable, thus mitigating the anxieties of aging; and finally, it reinforces the realization that success is always dependent on others – it is never just the outcome of individual talent and effort (p. 62). These conclusions, as well as Kim's examination of the role of ritual in fostering a sense of personal autonomy, competence, and relatedness (pp. 65–7), are quite successful in dispelling some persistent misapprehensions regarding Confucianism's purported conservativeness, and they offer a substantial contribution to the current reappraisal of its value to contemporary life.

One criticism that might be directed at *Confucianism and the Philosophy of Well-Being* is the lack of any reference to the relationship between wellbeing and the body in classical Confucianism. Recent years have witnessed a growing number of studies demonstrating the impact of physical regimens such as meditation and yoga on one's corporal, emotional, and mental wellbeing. Interest in the complex interplay between mind and body, however, is not merely a modern phenomenon. In the writings of Xunzi, whose work is quoted extensively throughout the book, we can find multiple references to the physiological aspects of self-cultivation and ritual participation. While Xunzi was motivated by a desire to defend the Confucian doctrine against its philosophical rivals, he was also responding to the growing popularity of individual self-cultivation practices, such as meditation and calisthenics and dietary regimens, among the educated elites in his time. Aimed at extending one's lifespan and offering other physical and spiritual benefits, these practices threatened the Confucian project of moral and social harmony. As a result, Xunzi's writings often emphasize the physical boons of self-cultivation and ritual participation, claiming that these practices can provide the same advantages as the individual regimens but on a larger scale. While meditation, for example, only benefits the practitioner, participation in communal ritual results in both individual gains (a sense of effervescence and psychological comfort) and social harmony. Incorporating these elements into his overall discussion of Confucian wellbeing would have only served to bolster Kim's argument

and their omission is thus regrettable, especially for readers of this journal. This minor point aside, the book offers a substantial contribution to our understanding of wellbeing and is highly recommended for readers aiming to expand their knowledge of non-Western philosophies and religions.