On the Modernization of the Confucian Ethics of Filial Piety: Rights, Duties and Virtues

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Since the beginning of ethics in Confucius, hsiao has been the focus and central principle of the ethical and moral life of a person. The cultivation of hsiao, in fact, has dominated Chinese family ethics, social ethics and national ethics for the last two thousand years. But because of the recent impact of Western learning and civilization, together with modernization and industrialization, hsiao ethics has begun to undergo a process of transformation. How far it will go and how far it should go will depend not only on our understanding of the nature of hsiao ethics, but also on our understanding of modernization and of our vision of humanity and values.

In this article I examine two models: the hsiao ethics from the context of the Analects, the Ta Hsieh, the Chung YIng, and the Mencius, and the hsiao ethics in the Hsiao Ching. It is pointed out that an important difference exists between the classical Confucian understanding of hsiao as a virtue which is a root of jen, on the one hand, and the Hsiao Ching's radicalization of hsiao as the motive and incentive for performing all other virtues, including jen.

To contrast the ethics of hsiao as an ethics of virtues and of self-realization, I introduce the ethics of rights and duties between parents and children as a model of ethics for modern Western, industrialized society. The ethics of rights and duties between parents and children recognizes the rights of children as the central consideration of parents' duties toward children. Children's rights are recognized as the basis for the children's duties to parents. In order to enable parents to provide
good protection of children's rights, the children therefore have their duties of obedience. The children may also have duties of gratitude to parents, and the duties of friendship to parents. The duties of gratitude derive from the benefits parents give to children in their child-rearing; the duties of friendship come from a *de facto* relationship of friendship between parents and children, if there is any.

The difference between the two systems of ethics governing the relationships between parents and children is great. *Hsiao* ethics is virtue-oriented and parent-oriented, whereas contemporary Western ethics apparently is rights-and/or duties-oriented, and is certainly more children-oriented than parents-oriented.

In face of the needs of modernization of society and the consequent adjustment of human relationships, we have to recognize the importance of distribution of duties and rights; but insofar as humanity is intrinsically important and intrinsically desireable, the virtue of *hsiao* cannot be totally abandoned. Hence, I suggest a new model of ethics of *hsiao* incorporating the concept of duties for both parents and children. In this model, parents have duties to children and children have duties to parents; both duties should be correlated with corresponding virtues, instead of rights, in order to give duty both an incentive and content.