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## Equality in Traditions

Throughout world history, people of different traditions have struggled and fought for equality. In the mid-twentieth century United States, African Americans fought for their rights as American citizens and equality known as the Civil Rights Movement. The purpose was to eliminate discrimination among ethnicities. Roughly the same duration, China was reestablished as the People's Republic of China on the foundation of communism. The purpose of doing so was to promise equality of wealth and property among the people. Also in that time frame, the United Nations established gender equality into the international human rights law leveling the status of women and men, yet in some nations gender equality is still not in sight to this day. I will discuss the concept of equality and its foundation in different traditions.

Christianity took root in western culture early on, and in the process of time and change, the religion branched off into Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Christianity. Although having their differences, the core of the branches is still consistent. It is a Christian belief that God created humans in his own reflection. In that sense, human beings should be equal by nature. In addition, the concept of holiness differentiates this religion from others. People share the characteristic of holiness; therefore, everyone could potentially be saved. Those who are saved all become the children of God, therefore all equally significant in the world. Church plays holds important significance in this religion because one it is the place where they practice

religion but also the place where morality is taught. The bible teaching in church serves the purpose of helping people live by the bible and at last be able to arrive in heaven after death.

However, it is believed that early Christians and Jesus himself lived in a male-dominated society. Therefore, although open to all ethnic groups, Christianity has its controversies regarding gender equality. Parallel to the belief that humans are all created in the reflection of God, they also adhere to the idea that women and men were made to be different by God to fulfill different roles. Some believers called for women to keep quiet and be submissive to men while others think that everyone should be treated equally because of the basis that God created humans all the same. On the other hand, majority catholic believers uphold the idea that husbands and wives are equal in value and should respect one another's share in marriage.

Equality in Chinese tradition has various interpretations with some overlap. Chinese civilization, being one of the four ancient civilizations, has roughly five thousand years of history. From the dynastic eras to modern day communism, Chinese ideology and belief system has undergone rounds and rounds of remodeling. The three major teachings that stand out in history are Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Confucius and Mencius teachings are built on society and politics. Along with Daoism, they are considered philosophies rather than religion because they lack the existence of one or more deities. However, Confucius teachings share many concepts with Christianity.

Confucius's original teaching explained that humans, by nature, are alike, and by practice they become different. In that sense, humans are born the same and grow to become different through outside factors. He never claimed that human nature not good nor bad. Mencius, student of Confucius, amplified Confucius' teachings and made his own input. Mencius believed in natural equality in continuing Confucius teaching. He believed that humans are born with the

four hearts/minds: heart of pity and compassion, heart of shame and aversion, heart of modesty and compliance, and heart that knows right and wrong. Hence, Mencius concept of human nature is human beings are born good and equal because everyone has the four hearts. The existence of evil people is due to the absence of a good environment. Confucius teaching came to a high peak following the establishment of the Han dynasty. Emperor Wu Di of the Chinese Han Dynasty established Confucianism as the official state ideology and lasted around four hundred years. Zhong Dongshu, a philosopher of that era followed Confucius teachings, but he had a different understanding. Unlike Mencius's belief that human nature is good, Zhong Dongshu believed human nature is neutral. This thought is similar to John Locke's idea of people are born with a blank slate.

By all means Confucius teachings is a great philosophy, but all the original literatures of this philosophy is in style of ancient literature. It resulted in the interpretation of the text open for debate. We can never be certain what Confucius himself wanted to express. For example, Confucius's view on gender and equality stays a controversy. Some critics believe that Confucius was sexist because he said in the Analects: "Women and servants are hard to deal with." In contrast, others believe that Confucius teaching did convey equality among gender in the sense that men and women take different roles in a household but are equally important. One of the four books in Confucius teaching, Book of Rites, records the way men and women should hold themselves in society and family. The strict demands that are placed on women is evidence of inequality. Like the early western world, Chinese society started as a male-superior society. In result, men used their interpretation of Confucius teaching to justify their treatment of women.

Besides being a patriarchal society, early Chinese civilization was built on feudalism, meaning people's statuses are mostly determined by the family they are born into. Back to

original Confucius teaching, he never mentioned much about equality just that humans start the same, then grow different. In his view, humans are the same does not mean that people all equal in social status, but rather we all have the potential to live our lives with virtue and fulfill our societal role. The question that follows that concept is who gets to say what one's role is. Confucius's answer is simply to follow the Way.

Confucius teaching declined with the fall of the Han dynasty. Years later, Confucianism was brought up again forming the Neo-Confucius era starting from the thirteenth century and ending in the nineteenth century. Neo-Confucian teaching had more influences of Mencius than before. Both Buddhism and Daoism and other philosophers influenced the reshaping of society and ethical thinkings in this period. Another prosperous dynasty that is great as the Han Dynasty, is the Tang Dynasty. This dynasty took place when the three teachings were all present. The combination of different parts of different ideologies, lead to prosperity in the dynasty. The dynasty also marks a significant marking for gender equality because in that dynasty women has more freedom.

Zhu Xi was one of many philosophies during this era. His central idea is built upon yin-yang and qian-kun. Qi is the element of all things in the world. Qi could be yin or yang; these two qi create the five basic phases: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Furthermore, the concept of yin-yang represents a complementary relation which emphasizes the balance of nature. His idea of human equality is that all humans are made of the five basic phases. For instance, a person with a short temper would have a higher fire element than others; a person that is forgiving and caring would have higher water element. Hence, although all made of the same elements, people are unique with their own ratios of the five phases. The use of this concept to explain equality was highly influenced by Daoism.

The birthplace of Buddhism is India, but the religion made its way beyond that civilization and spread into Chinese civilization. Buddhism influenced Chinese philosophy, and native Chinese philosophies assimilated Indian Buddhism into Chinese Buddhism. Being a great religion, buddha, unlike Jesus, is not a god. Buddha does not love humans as children. He acts more as a model that believers follow to escape the cycle of life and death. Despite this difference, like Christianity's concept of holiness, Buddhism a similar concept; Buddhist doctrines claims that all life has buddha nature. Buddha nature is the idea that all lives can be saved which includes small critters and large beasts. This leads to the concept that all lives are equal. Therefore, no one should have the power to take the life of another or hurt one in anyway.

On the other hand, Buddhism breaks beings into ten sentient beings. Alongside with one's karma, one would take form of life as hell dweller, hungry ghost, animal, human being, asuras, or heavenly being. Because life is a suffering and to live to must die, the ultimate goal in Buddhism was to escape this cycle and go to Nirvana, paradise and become sravakas, pratyak-buddha, bodhisattvas, or Buddha (De Bary et al. 445) Equality is present in this religion, because the concept of karma. If one does too much harm to others in one life, in his/her next life he/she will be paid back with that pain. If one does good things and brings joy to others, his/her next life would be fortunate. Of course, there is no way to actually to prove this right, in other words promise a bad person would suffer in his/her next life, this concept still has effect of one's actions.

Another key concept of Buddhism is the overall idea of existence and unattachment. The two-fold truth of this religion tells us that nothing in the world is permanent (De Bary et al. 440) Structures that has stood for a long time was once not there and later can be destructed. Mountains and river shift in time, and people come and go and are born and then die. Therefore,

one should not be attached to anything or anyone because at the end, they would separate. With that said, unattachment is also equal among all lives. Every life is independent. No one's life is attached to another life. In result, the only one that can master one's life is him/herself.

One distinction that differentiates Buddhism from the previously mentioned teachings is the absence of gender equality. In the eyes of Buddhism, gender simply does not matter. What matters is the actions one takes and the effort one puts into religious practice. From another viewpoint, being male or female is insignificant since there are ten different realms one's soul could end up in. This concept contributes to the gender equality of the world today. Ironically, modern day India is still underdeveloped in gender equality. Women still fall victims to their husbands in marriage. Polygamy is still legal in the nation yet only persevered for Muslims. What that said, Buddhism could be said to be quite successful in somewhat influencing Indian traditions.

Like Buddhism, Daoism also takes a spontaneous form of teaching. The basis of Daoism is nature and balance. Zhuangzi is one of the great philosophers that contributed to this philosophy. Zhuang Zi says humans are all equal because nature made us equal. His perspective not only put humans at the same level but also all the thing nature made (De Bary et al. 99.) His argument was if nature put in the effort to make all the things in the world, they all must have their purpose and use in the world. This is like the concept that every life has buddha nature, but it stressed more about nature. In society, Zhuangzi believed that nature has reserved everyone a role to play; this is his understanding of virtue.

Lieh Tzu followed Zhuangzi's ideology and brought up the question: "Are there things large and small, long and short, noble and base, similar and different?" (Liezi 100.) The purpose of this question was to get people to realized that people are not superior among everything. It

wanted people to think about what makes them think they are higher in status to judge. Leih Tzu's view was that human beings along with everything else, dead or alive, are all created by nature. Therefore, they are all at the same level. Humans are not qualified to judge or manipulate the work of nature because nature is the mother of all things.

This idea of natural equality is significant in Chinese society. The biggest outcome from this idea is the upbringing of respect to self, others, and nature. The stressing that everyone is made perfect and for a reason makes people cherish their life. Along with the Buddhist concept of self and the Confucius teachings of equality, the respect to self-factors into the end of a feudalistic society.

Confucius teaching is strictly down to earth. His teachings are societal based and how everyone should contribute in created a peace and prosperous world. In contrast, Zhuang Zi's Daoism is rather abstracted and focuses more on how one should just go with flow of nature because nature has its course. It's a little like Mencius's believe in heaven. There is an old Chinese phrase, a proverb, that says “命里有时终须有，命里无时莫强求 (75 Chinese Proverbs)” It means if it is yours, it will be yours, and if it does not belong to you, do not obsess because it does not belong to you. This idea aligns with Zhuangzi's ideology. Nature had made everyone unique, therefore no one should be jealous of another because everyone has his/her unique fate and destiny.

With that said, another augment arises such as: how is it fair some to live longer lives while other dies young? How is it that some are born into wealth and some into poverty? How is it fair that some people never get sick while some are so sick, they cannot take care of themselves? Zhuang Zi's chapter one of *Free and Easy Wandering* provides a fitting answer in the form of an analogy. Kun is a big fish of the northern darkness; when time comes, he turns

into a bird name Peng and makes a journey south to the Lake of Heaven. The journey is dangerous, but he must go. Meanwhile, the little dove and cicada saw this and laughed and joked about Peng's journey. Then, the same happens again. Kun is a big fish of the Lake of Heaven, and there is also a bird name Peng. When time comes, Peng flies from Lake of Heaven to the southern darkness. This time he was spotted by a little quail. The quail, like the little dove and the cicada did not understand why Peng has to fly so far (De Bary et al. 96.) This analogy conveys that some concepts are too large for humans to understand. Fate and destiny are beyond our intelligence. The little dove and quail do not get to know why Peng must fly from one place to another. All they can do is to live their lives in the little area that belongs to them because they cannot affect the journey of Peng even if they wanted to. In the analogy, humans are the little creatures. Like how all the creatures question Peng's actions and get no answers, humans question their fate, but no one has answers. In this sense, humans are equal.

It's ironic to think about equality in society because early civilization all starts as male-superior society. This is because biologically men and women are different. By nature, men mainly play the role of protector, and women are caretakers. Because men physically stronger than women, they have dominance. From early western civilization to ancient Chinese and Indian civilizations, women had started with little to no rights. Ironically, from early on, the formation and spread of religions and philosophies that called for human equality did not give humans equality at the time. Particularly, it is hard to understand how, in the thousands of years, Chinese society did not reach human equality despite the three great teachings all preach natural equality. It wasn't until the twentieth century when nations started to pass laws to enforce equality among people in society.



During my childhood, I had understood from the conversations among my parents and relatives that my grandparents, my father's parents, wanted at least one grandson. Unfortunately, my parents did not give birth to a boy until the fourth child. As we grew up, I realized that my parents favored my brother more although I could not tell if it was because he is the youngest or simply because he is their son. Now, after studies, it's easier to understand. In Chinese tradition, the importance of family and fidelity is driven into the foundation. Son being the one that can pass down the family name and take care of old parents. Therefore, people believed that they must have a son to reserve themselves a good life when they become old. This results in parents to be more obsessive and loving to son than daughters. Due to the overpopulation in China, the government had put a limit on how many children each family can give birth too. This resulted in the ratio of men and women to become out of balance.

People discriminate because of the feeling of superiority. The more one amplifies differences among a group, the more that group is divided. That's the reason great religions and philosophies preach equality. They want human beings to be more united and not more divided. The twentieth century marks the start time of globalization. As more cultures started to exchange and blend, the gaps between humans of different race and gender becomes smaller. As division decreases, human equality increases in the world.

Personally, I agree with some parts of the discussed views of equality and disagree with others. At the center of my thinking is that race and social status does not matter too much. Like Zhuangzi's idea, no one's life is purposeless. Everyone was put into the world for their reason and not one can take one another's place. Therefore everyone, by nature, is the same, but by fate and destiny they are all different.

Looking only at gender equality, most parts of the world is in a good place. Thinking scientifically, I would say that men and women cannot reach equality because we have different genetics and anatomy. For example, women are more bothered by high-pitched noises because biologically women are more prone to crying babies. In addition, societal norms hold men and women to different standards. It's okay for women to be weak and cry over life, but men must work hard to be able to protect and provide for family. As more and more women step out of homes and pursue their career, the more and more leveled the status of genders become. Although absolute equality among all the human beings is impossible, the world today is close enough excluding underdeveloped nations.

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