Family as Topic, Model, and Root in the West
An Ephemeral Resource for Comparative Philosophy

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Preface

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Western Blind Spots

A prime area of interest for scholars in China/West comparative philosophy has been the family: its importance, its norms, its value as a model, and its role as a root of character. The main general vision of the Western tradition on family that has been presented in that context in recent years may perhaps be encapsulated in three reports:

- Western ethical thinking, philosophy and theology have been inattentive to the family and its relational norms.[1]

[1] "Family is not an important consideration in the evolution of Western ethical thinking" (Ames 2011, p. 255 n. 152). "Family matters have long been considered to be private matters, whereas morality is concerned with one's public persona" (Rosemont 2015, p. 119). "Confucians must take full cognizance of, analyze, and evaluate the specific relations that obtain among members of a family in a way that is difficult for followers of Kant, Bentham, or Mill. For these latter philosophers, taking the special bonds that hold between parents and children (and other special relations) into account philosophically becomes impossible. … A role ethics grounded in familial relations has attracted relatively little attention in the Western philosophical narrative since medieval times" (Ames & Rosemont 2011, p. 29). For Utilitarianism and Kantianism, "*no* moral questions concerning the family can even be framed for examination … all moral questions pertaining to family matters have been swept under the conceptual rug of a 'private' realm … wherein moral and political philosophy do not enter" (Rosemont & Ames 2008, p. 14). "The institution of family has had little relevance in the Western philosophical narrative" (Ames 2024a, p. 16). "Family is a seldom referenced institution in the Western philosophical narrative" (Ames 2012, p. 652). "Ever since the time of Hegel – and usually before then as well – the family has not been much of a concern for philosophers, especially moral philosophers" (Rosemont 2014, p. 171). "The role ethics

- On the whole, Western culture and Western philosophy have not taken the family as a model for other things, nor seen it as a main moral root.[2]
- Western philosophy and Christian thought have in general tended not to see the family as beneficial.[3]

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of familial relations has attracted relatively little attention in the Western philosophical narrative from earliest times, and certainly over the past two centuries" (Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 39). "With a few oblique exceptions (such as Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel), the family, and the relations among and between family members have not received much attention from Western philosophers and theologians" (Ames & Rosemont 2014, p. 17; and similarly at Rosemont 2015, p. 118). The Western tradition is characterized by a "sustained lack of interest in the always partial relations that emerge from family feeling" (Ames 2020, p. 355).

[2] "Explaining society in terms of the family is not unknown in the West, though the image is less pervasive. Aristotle was perhaps its most famous classical proponent, and he made only sparing use of it. It is significant that one must root around among far lesser figures to find modern advocates, such as Locke's target, Sir Robert Filmer (d. 1653)" (Munro 1988, p. 46). "Family as an institution has not been a significant inspiration for order within the broad sweep of the evolution of Western philosophy and culture" (Ames 2010a, p. 155; Ames 2011, p. 103; Ames 2014a, p. 34; and Ames 2021b, p. 147; similarly at Ames 2020, p. 353). The Western tradition is characterized by "reticence to see family as a model [or] measure … for social and political order among our best thinkers" (Ames 2020, p. 355). "Appeal to the institution of family as a source and model of moral order has been markedly absent from the Western philosophical tradition" (Rosemont & Ames 2008, p. 12). "The radical disjunction between familial and political life in classical Greek thinking largely disqualifies "family" as an appropriate metaphor for order in the evolution of Western social and political philosophy. This deprecation of family life contrasts starkly with classical China in which family (*jia* 家) is established as the pervasive metaphor for all social, political, and even religious relations" (Ames 2002, p. 148f.). "If we rehearse the important contributions of what are acknowledged to be the most prominent Western philosophers across the centuries, with few exceptions we are hard-pressed to find any significant thinker who invokes family as a productive model for organizing and optimizing the human experience." (Ames 2011, p. 153; and similarly in Ames 2008a, p. 196; Ames 2008b, p. 46; Ames 2020, p. 353; Ames 2021b, p. 147; Ames 2023a, p. 362; cf. Rosemont 2015, p. 118).

[3] "If we rehearse the important contributions of what are acknowledged to be the most prominent Western philosophers across the centuries, … Plato's rejection of the family in the *Republic* and Aristotle's denigration of the "household" *(oikis)* as a source of privation [i.e. as a depriver] are fairly representative" (Ames 2011, p. 153; and similarly at Ames 2008a, p. 196; Ames 2008b, p. 46; Ames 2020, p. 353; Ames 2021b, p. 147; Ames 2023a, p. 362). The Western tradition is characterized by "reticence to see family

In short, Western thought has largely been blind to the plain warm heart of the human condition. If these reports are accepted by the reader, they make for a persuasive argument in favor of greater attention by the Western academy and public to traditions that do emphasize the family, and a more directly persuasive argument against anyone's attention to Western moral, social and political thought (unless in opposition). The lesson is hard to miss.

The three claims may thus be worth evaluating. But they have not to my knowledge been evaluated in the literature of China/West comparative philosophy. To my knowledge they have not been seriously challenged in that literature,[4] and almost no evidence has been offered in their favor. Granted, it is hard to offer positive evidence for a negative. To confirm the reports, one might reasonably cite the absence of professional challenge to them.

From one point of view, readers might be expected to think no evidence or argument for the three reports is needed. The reports are presented as fact; they are theses about the broad strokes of something that has been studied long and deeply (the Western tradition); the claims are conceptually simple and easily researched; and they are repeatedly asserted in refereed publications by leading scholars in a field that claims to take the professional study of that very tradition

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as a … precondition for social and political order among our best thinkers" (Ames 2020, p. 355). "Dewey … is true to the mainstream of his own tradition when it comes to the institution of family, ignoring it as a model of organization and questioning its value" (Ames 2020, p. 354). "From Western philosophers and theologians … much of what notice family has received has been in a more negative than positive light with respect to the capacities of this social institution to enable full human development. … A few Christian savants have made tolerable remarks about the institution of marriage and the family, but to most of them married life, being profane, is decidedly inferior to the loftier existence of the monk or nun" (Ames & Rosemont 2014, p. 17; Rosemont 2015, p. 118).

[4] For example, though the reports figure importantly in the work of Roget T. Ames, no hesitation about any of the reports is intimated anywhere in the two anthologies of essays discussing his work (Behuniak 2018, Sullivan & Mason 2021). Ivanhoe 2013 denies at least the first report, but offers no evidence (pp. xxiii, 59). A. T. Nuyen's review of Ames 2011 mentions a number of recent Western philosophers who assert and discuss the importance of the family (Nuyen 2012, pp. 146-148); though it does not challenge the reports regarding the Western tradition in general.

as a core project. In general one must assume that claims that meet those descriptions can be trusted.

But the content of the three reports must give the generally educated Western reader pause, even before we investigate. Regarding the **second** report, on family as model and root in Western culture and philosophy, such a reader is familiar with many long-established Western family-relation metaphors for revered or transcendent authority, equality, and community. Western gods come in families. And the formative power of family relations, and in particular people's tendency to see other relationships on the model of their main family relationships, is a familiar idea in Western psychology, literature and television.

The **first and third** reports, that family has been ignored and deprecated, may be surprising because in the West or at least in the United states one's ears have long rung with talk of "family values," and because one may think that it is *obvious* that the family is a prime lever of life and nourisher and shaper of souls.

Though the Western tradition has great shortcomings, it is a long, wide, diverse and porous tradition that has devoted a great deal of individual effort and thoughtful design of institutions and principles to the collaborative search for understanding and to mutual correction in matters of fact, theory, and individual and collective practice. Can the West really have been blind for millennia to what you and I see as the plain warm heart of the human condition? And can it really be true that Western thought has for ages seen something big as a problematic influence but seldom thought about how it might be tweaked?

On the other hand one must admit that astonishing failures of intellect and wisdom by a whole tradition, at least for long periods, are not unfamiliar phenomena. It is easy to list Western examples. So if we have any good reason to think the three reports might be true (or believed by influential people), then the question whether they are true bears looking into. And if it bears looking into,

it bears looking into with care, not just because the reports have big implications but also because in looking into it we are forced to rely on Western record-keeping and West-vetted experts on the West, members of a tradition whose grasp even of very obvious matters in this area is at issue.

I have rooted around in the Western tradition to try to see how far the three reports are true, with a special emphasis on the report about family as model and root. My reconnaissance report takes the form of a series of sketches of how some bits and pieces of the Western tradition have been at least partial exceptions to one or more of the three reports.

On the whole my research has been superficial, so I must offer the reader details rather than broad conclusions. But I have come away from my rooting expedition with the sense that **(a)** family has been a major topic of socially influential Western thought for the past five centuries and often before, not least among utilitarians; **(b)** family norms have historically been the West's most prominent and pervasive inspirations for political, cosmic and religious order, familiar especially as models for transcendent authority, ecclesiastical authority, monarchy, community, and egalitarian universalism; **(c)** in most ages most Western political philosophers have held that the state arose as a natural radial extension of the family; and **(d)** family virtues have often been held up as roots of wider virtues, from ancient times to the present.[5] But one finds what one is rooting for.

Most of the sketches I shall offer are brief to the point of skimpiness. They dissent from some minority interpretations but do not challenge mainstream scholarly views (so far as I know). The project is shallow also in the sense that its research on particular points often simply cites or quotes one primary text or

[5] It may be interesting to note that in *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argues that Americans' post-1965 decline in civic engagement is not attributable to our decline in family participation (Putnam 2000, pp. 277ff.).

recognized authority. The aim is only to offer a tentative (first?[6]) general survey of Western interest in family over the millennia, focusing especially on taking family as root or model. The survey is addressed primarily to comparers of the West with Chinese Confucianism.

Potential Value

There is reason to hope that such an effort will be of service to the projects of China/West comparative philosophers.

For, first, those philosophers are professional scholars of the Western tradition.

Second, the Western materials may suggest new questions about Chinese thought, if one tries to compare the materials from the two traditions.

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[6] A few years into Anglophone professional philosophy's current renaissance of interest in the family, Jeffrey Blustein, primarily a philosopher of memory and clinical bioethics, published a long chapter on how Western philosophers have *derived* various conceptions of the rights and duties between parents and their minor children from more general philosophical visions of morality, from Plato into the Industrial Revolution (Blustein 1982, pp. 19-98). The chapter is offered as background for Blustein's own derivations later in the book.

To explain why his survey largely ends at 1830, Blustein says that Western philosophers from 1830 "no longer attempted to systematically apply their most dearly held moral and social values to the study of parenthood." The China/West comparativist literature on the West on family relies mainly or entirely on that remark when it cites scholarship to show that "the role ethics of familial relations has attracted relatively little attention in the Western philosophical narrative from earliest times, and certainly over the past two centuries," telling readers in this context that Blustein is "a major historian of familial moral thinking" (Rosemont and Ames 2009, p. 39; Ames and Rosemont 2011, p. 29; cf. Rosenlee 2016).

The chapter in question, Blustein's one foray into a historical topic about family, has a very narrow scope. Topics outside Blustein's focus are (a) family norms not taken as derivative; (b) family relations as inspirations for other order; (d) non-philosophical discourse; (e) sibling relations, adults' filial relations, spousal relations, more distant family relations, gender roles; (f) kinship groups larger than the nuclear family. No female thinker is mentioned, not even Wollstonecraft. And almost no attention is given to any thinker after 1830 except Henry Sidgwick and Bertrand Russell, though Mill and Rawls get significant attention elsewhere in the book.

Third, comparative philosophers are not just scholars of two traditions, they are philosophers. The three reports about the West's shortcomings have been offered to help commend to philosophers the study of Confucian philosophy, presumably as a source of ideas to aid in one's pursuit of such philosophical projects as (a) trying to articulate and evaluate norms for family relating, so as to improve the family if possible or defend the status quo if not, (b) evaluating the idea that the family is the root of virtue, and (c) trying to understand or design other things on the model of the family, to decide how far it makes sense for a culture do so. A comparative philosopher focusing on the family will want to know where to find potential colleagues in history, east or west.

Fourth, the survey project might be seen as an effort to redress a scholarly asymmetry aptly remarked especially by Kwong-loi Shun and Roger T. Ames. Shun has commented:

> There is a trend in comparative studies to approach Chinese thought from a Western philosophical perspective, by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Western philosophical discussions. This trend is seen not only in works published in the English language, but also in those published in Chinese. Conversely, in the contemporary literature, we rarely find attempts to approach Western philosophical thought by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Chinese philosophical discussions.[7]

As Ames rightly points out, "it would not occur to us to ask if the ethical insights of Aristotle and Hume are, in substance, an ancient and an early modern kind of European Confucianism, respectively."

It cannot easily occur to someone to ask that question if they do not have a definite opinion about what fairly simple philosophical position or method defines Confucianism. A potential obstacle to discussing the question is that we may not agree on such a conception of Confucianism; or if we do, we may not

[7] Shun 2009, p. 470; quoted and elaborated in Ames 2021a, p. xxvii.

find the position or method compelling enough to support interest in the scholarly work.

It has been proposed that Confucianism amounts to seeing either family feeling or reverence for prior generations in one's family as the governing moral imperative and seeing all non-family matters on the model of the family and its norms.[8] Chinese culture in general has been characterized in a similar way.[9] If that characterization is more or less right, then the three reports and my investigation are each trying to address the question how Confucian the West has been. That is just the kind of investigation whose absence Shun and Ames lament.

Fundamental

But we might hesitate over the idea that Confucianism means taking family as fundamental.

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[8] "Family reverence" is the "governing moral imperative" for Confucianism (Ames 2021a, pp. 62, 412; Ames 2020, pp. 356, 406), "the prime moral imperative" (Ames 2021a, pp. 217, 349, 361), the "highest moral imperative" (2021a, pp. 3, 356), and "the ground of the Confucian vision of the moral life" (Rosemont & Ames 2008, p. 9). "Confucian normativity is defined in terms of living one's family roles to maximum effect" (Ames & Rosemont 2011, p. 19). Confucianism is the worldview in which "family is *the* governing metaphor, and in which in fact *all* relationships are familial. The signature of Confucianism is that human morality is an expression of immediate family feeling" (Ames 2010b, p.78; Ames 2008b, p. 64f; and similarly at Ames 2023a, p. 362; Ames 2020, pp. 131, 355; Ames 2021b, p. 148). "We might say that Confucianism is nothing more than a sustained attempt to "family" the lived human experience" (Ames 2021a, p. 115; Ames 2014a, p. 33; Ames 2011, p. 98). The Confucian worldview promotes "family as the pervasive model of order" (Ames 2021a, p. 352; Ames & Rosemont 1998, p. 58).

[9] "It is [the] persistent family-based sociopolitical organization of Chinese society that has … elevated the specific family values and obligations circumscribed by the term *xiao* to serve as its governing moral imperative" (Ames 2024b, p. 66; Ames 2023b, p. 266; Ames 2021a, p. 451; Ames 2019, p. 568; Ames 2014b, p. 22; Ames & Rosemont 2013, p. 124; Ames 2012, p. 653). Family is "the most foundational of all metaphors in Chinese thought" (Ames 2014a, p. 43 n. 34), "the grounding Chinese metaphor" (Hall & Ames 1995, p. 326), and "the governing metaphor in Chinese culture" (Rosemont & Ames 2016, p.8; cf. Ames 2021a, p. 208).

For one thing, there would seem to be a difference and even a conflict between taking a family norm such as filial piety as the governing imperative and taking it as the model for decision-making in, say, politics or religion or morality generally. If filial piety is my governing imperative, then in all areas of life I am trying to do whatever would best serve and honor my parents. But if filial piety is my *model* for politics, religion, and general morality, then in those areas my principle is *analogous* to filial piety. Perhaps I am devoted to the political or religious or moral authorities as though they were my parents. These two approaches to life will disagree if the current political or religious or moral authorities happen to disagree with my parents or threaten their interests. As we shall see, the Western tradition offers many examples of conflict between the claims of family and the claims of institutions and authorities modeled on the family, including conflict arising directly from the very fact of that modeling. The more I see something other than my parents as my parents, the less I see my parents as my parents.

I do not know what Confucianism in general might regard as fundamental in justification.[10] But the Confucian tradition does offer some arguments in

[10] Suppose we think of justification only as a kind of thinking by an *individual*. We might then suppose that since (a) the course of any individual's actual thinking toward conclusions about what is right or good is *necessarily* the same as the course of their actual life, we should conclude that (b) ideally, comprehensive justification is comprehensive development, so (c) the two orders should have the same best path from the same best starting point. A defender of that individualistic view might hasten to point out, correctly, that we commonly feel our reasons long before we are able to articulate them. On the other hand, we are inevitably often wrong, so we may try to make new starts on deliberation (so far as that can make sense for beings who often feel reasons before articulating them). Anyway deliberation and justification are commonly not individual enterprises. We collaboratively construct deliberations and justifications for individual or collective action through public discussion, tradition, the academy, the state, the growth of law, and conversations with friends and family. Many heads are better than one.

In science, we develop general principles based on observations and a strong preference for elegance (trying to see the world as ruly, so that we can see to some distance at all). But in a sense it is the generalities that are the starting-points in justification, since almost every event they apply to, past or future, is one we have not

justification of family virtues on other grounds. The best known are the idea that filial piety is required by gratitude or fair exchange, and the argument attributed to Youzi at *Analects* 1.2. As usually understood,[11] that passage argues from (a) the tacit premise that public order or a broad kind of public vocation is a great good and (b) rough statistics suggesting that two family virtues are key causal supports for this good, to build a case that (c) men should be scrupulously devoted to their parents and respectful of their older brothers. In his 1861 work *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill argues at length in an analogous way that spouses should relate to each other as equals, and that the law should not undermine this practice. In brief:

> If the family in its best forms is, as it is often said to be, a school of sympathy, tenderness, and loving forgetfulness of self, it is still oftener, as respects its chief, a school of willfulness, overbearingness, [etc.]. … The family … will always be a school of obedience for the children, of command for the parents. What is needed is, that it should be a school of sympathy in equality, of living together in love, without power on one side or obedience on the other. This it ought to be between the parents. It would then be an exercise of those virtues which each requires to fit them for all other association, and a model to the children of the feelings and conduct which their temporary training by means of obedience is designed to render habitual, and therefore natural, to them.[12]

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yet observed. Similarly, most Western professional moral philosophers conceive of their project as working up general principles to interpret and extend our most confident moral "perceptions" and plausible generalizations such as that respect for others is essential to reason (thinking well) and that empathy is an important kind of knowledge bound up with motivation.

[11] I argue that the usual reading is mistaken, in Haines 2026, "Impartiality in the Ancient Root," *passim*. Neither the Youzi nor the Confucius of the *Analects* sees the root of the Way as internal to the family or to dyadic relationships.

[12] Mill 2002, p. 169

Classical Confucianism offers a number of maps of cultivation by stages, in which the first stage may be said to be fundamental at least in being necessary to the succeeding stages.[13] But in many or most prominent places where classical Confucianism lays out such a program, only one stage pertains to some part or aspect of kin relations, and that stage is not the first or final stage. *Jiā* 家 is the second of four items at *Mencius* 4A5, pleasing one's parents is the third of six at *Mencius* 4A12, serving one's parents is the third of five at *Zhongyong* 20, obeying one's parents is the third of six at *Zhongyong* 22, and regulating one's *jiā* is the fifth of seven at *Daxue* 2. In each chain, prior to the stage we might associate with family comes the focus on oneself or on reality or goodness.[14]

If we say simply that China and Confucianism see family as fundamental while Western philosophy and culture do not, we are alleging a difference between the traditions only if we are talking about proposed justificatory fundamentals on both sides, or if we are talking about proposed fundamentals in development or cultivation on both sides.

Family

The other ground for hesitation over the idea that Confucianism means taking family as fundamental pertains to "family." We might be wary of identifying Confucianism, or one of its core values, mainly by way of an English

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[13] For Confucianism, "a personal commitment to achieving relational virtuosity within one's own family relationships is both the starting point and the ultimate source of personal, social, and indeed, cosmic meaning" (Ames 2023b, p. xii; Ames 2021a, p. 6; Ames 2011, p. 91). "The family is the ultimate source and the indispensable ground of an achieved propriety (*li* 禮) in all of our roles and relations." Ames 2020, p. 107; and similarly at Ames 2021a, pp. 43, 159; Ames 2021b, p. 148.

[14] It has been said that "in China, family values were … discernible as fundamental, throughout the culture. Physical evidence of ancestral sacrifices has been found in archaeological remains from as early as the fifth millennium BCE" (Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. xii). An ancestor is fundamental *to* a lineage or clan; but sacrifice to ancestors does not suggest regarding family as fundamental. It suggests regarding descent groups as important.

word, indeed a longstanding keyword and prime Western ideological battlefield especially since 1516. We might worry that such an identification could amount to a projection of a Western popular vision onto another tradition. We might hesitate about such an identification even if it may attract positive Western interest in Confucianism.

On the other hand, my sense is that the three negative reports about the West on family, and the associated contrast with China and Confucianism, do not mean to use the word "family" in any very precise or narrow sense. The comparativists' thesis is not that the hole in Western culture and philosophy is a little hole associated with a very specific modern Western concept, nor that the long Confucian tradition has been focused on or attentive to the specific idea that is evoked by the English word in its current normal or default sense, even if scholars sometimes leave that word to speak for itself in the context of the thesis. Accordingly, my survey of Western interest in family is not finicky about what counts as an interest in *family*.

Still, since the English word that defines the survey is flexible, and since it could be compared with a variety of rather different Chinese terms, on principle we should canvass at the outset some of the differences in what one might mean by the English word "family" and by comparable Chinese words in discussing the West or China.

When a couple has their first child, they are said to "start a family." The term "family-friendly" means suitable for children. The core image evoked today by the countable noun "family," what we expect our readers to understand by this term in default of special signals such as the modifier "extended," is a married couple and their minor children, especially as constituting an entire household (and secondarily such a household family plus a penumbra consisting mainly of the couple's parents and those grandparents' other offspring and *their*

spouses and children).[15] It is "family" in this default sense that is emphasized in recent Anglophone popular culture, religion and policy debate. One's household family, whether or not it fits the nuclear image, can have an identity as a community, as a family. We can *count* the household families in society and regard them as divisions of society, albeit not exhausting it.

The most focal archetype is the household consisting of two parents and their minor children. Within this archetype *all* the adult-to-adult relating is in the spousal relation, though the spouses are likely to negotiate their family life in consultation with friends in similar positions and with their own other kin; and children come to approximate adults before they move out.

The concept "nuclear family" is a little different. Usually a person is a member of two nuclear families at once. When a person thinks of their "family," they may be thinking mainly of either of these or both, without regard to residence. Either may have a sense of itself as a group. But because nuclear families overlap, society does not divide into nuclear families.

Sometimes we use "family" as an uncountable noun, to refer not to a kind of community but to a kind of connection. We say that someone is "family" to someone. The people who are literally family to me include my spouse, offspring, parents and siblings, and other people related by short concatenations of such relations, never mind residence. The uncountable noun is often used metaphorically, to express depth and permanence of bonds. An interesting difference between the countable and uncountable nouns is that while I am a

[15] Blustein reports, "The modern, child-centered conception of the family, as Philippe Ariès tells us in *Centuries of Childhood*, is of comparatively recent origin, dating back only to the sixteenth century" (Blustein 1982, p. 21).

member of my (countable) family on a par with other members, it would be odd and arguably incorrect to say that I am "family" to myself in the uncountable sense—that I am one of my close relatives. Conversely, every person is the center of the array of those who are "family" to them in the uncountable sense, but not every person is the central or focal member of their "family" in the countable sense, and I suppose most of my readers think normally nobody should be.

The Latin word *familia* and sometimes the Greek words *oikos* and *oikia* referred to the whole *household*, small or large, usually including its non-kin residents and not including one's family members living in other households. The English word "family" too could be used in that sense in ages when it was very common for a household centering on a kinship group to have non-kin members.

In discussions of cultural arrangements very different from those of most current English-speakers, "family" can be used to encompass any well-entrenched way of binding people into households or similar small groups seen as natural and defined mainly by some combination of relationships of close consanguinity and/or spousal pairing. But when we are attending to a culture whose arrangements are very different from our own, we are less prone to use the word "family" insofar as we aim to be alive to those differences. And in philosophical contexts where we discuss a philosopher on "family" without drawing the reader's attention to the fact that what the philosopher had in mind was likely very different from the core associations of that word today, we should expect our readers to take the word as meant to evoke something like the usual image.

Whether a philosophical interest in the family implies an interest in the *familia* or in other cultural arrangements unlike the current image of "family" depends perhaps on why and how the family is taken to be philosophically important.

I am not familiar with the subtleties of Chinese kinship language or practices at different periods, but I shall try to sketch a few main conceptual points as I understand (or misunderstand) them.

In connection with China we might associate the English word "family" with the term *jiā* 家. I gather that today the term *jiā* is close in meaning to the current English term; but I do not know how early that happened relative to the shaping of the Confucian tradition.[16]

Analects 12.20 speaks of being famous in one's *jiā*. Li Zehou has written,

> What was referred to as '*jia*' (家)—often translated as family—during the Warring States and by the Confucians of the time was not the individual household or extended family of later periods but the clans and tribes that were similar to the idea of a nation (*guo*).[17]

Co-membership in such a *jiā* would not be an intimate bond. The West too has had kinship groups comparable to nations, such as Israel and its tribes, and the cities of the Greeks. Being kinship groups of a certain scope, these could not be augmented by conquest or mass immigration.

The anthropologist Fei Xiaotong wrote in the 1940s that the term *jiā* differs crucially from the English "family" in that *jiā* does not refer by default to the household nuclear family.[18] On his account of the term, anyone's *jiā* is a circle of their kin—a wide or narrow circle, depending on the conversational context. One might compare the English word "relatives." In this picture *jiā* does not name a kind of group with its own integrity or shared identity (such as the "clans and tribes" of ancient times); and the picture may not settle whether a person is seen as a part of their own *jiā* (one of their own relatives or kin, part of their own kinship retinue or matrix). In Fei's (translated) words:

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[16] There is no entry for the term in *A Conceptual Lexicon of Classical Confucian Philosophy* (Ames 2021a).

[17] Z. Li 2020, p. 8f.

[18] Fei 1992, p. 62.

> No two people in the world can have entirely the same set of relatives. Two brothers certainly would have the same parents, but each brother would have his own wife and children. Therefore, the web of social relationships linked with kinship is specific to each person. Each web has a self as its center, and every web has a different center.[19]

Would two siblings who never marry have the same *jiā*? Or would only Jack's include Jill?

Fei contrasts this idea of an indefinite web, or countless intersecting sets of concentric circles, with the Western idea of "family" as a sharply bounded "organization" or group in which everyone who meets certain qualifications is a member on equal footing, bound by respect for the rights of each member *qua* member.[20] (It is as though Fei has in mind a Western conception of political community instead.) In fact the English countable noun is somewhat flexible as to the scope of the group, so that it is not quite "sharply bounded." Still, a household family or a nuclear family is like a political community in that it is a kind of group with its own identity, a group the members have in common, so that I am a *member* of my family just as the other members are. (My household and nuclear families are not retinues or matrices arranged around me as the defining focus.) But an emphasis on rights or equal rights is not prominent in the idea of a "family" or of relations among "family." Or at least, we do not much use the language of rights in that connection, nor the language of equality except as between spouses and sometimes between siblings. The usual assumption is perhaps the Aristotelian one that justice applies in the family but rarely need be consulted in practice, as love usually keeps things fair without reference to justice. And perhaps a more apt term than *organization* would be *community*. Typically an "organization" is constituted mainly by its *rules* of action and governance (though it can change these), and an articulated purpose. Typically

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19 Fei 1992, p. 63.

20 Fei 1992, pp. 63-65.

an organization is seen as something people participate in rather than part of who they are, and typically an organization's members or participants are each easily replaceable at least in concept. In contrast, a "community" need not have governance or definite rules, and it must be slow to change its members.

In the Chinese language we find terms for an institution somewhat similar to the family: the exogamous patrilineage. Where lineages are recognized or important, we might want to call them "families" in an extended sense of the word, or "extended families."

Without appeal to any empirical details of actual practice or attitudes in either tradition, it may be worthwhile to note certain formal features inherent in the idea of an exogamous lineage as a division of society that can have a sense of itself, and some prima facie implications of these features for the relation between lineages and what today's readers understand by "family."

A lineage is larger than a family, but we might want to say that the two institutions are the same in kind, differing only in that a lineage also encompasses more distant bonds than we find in the core image of family, and that a lineage have a sense of itself as enduring over a much longer period of time than a family. Hence if we hear that our neighbor society takes the *lineage* more seriously than we do, we might infer that they also take the *family* more seriously than we do.

On the other hand, not so fast. For, first, lineage and family may be quite dissimilar concepts. The focal image of *family* is home life centering on a married couple and their minor children. But one's main image of a *patrilineage* might be of a network of men bound by blood, spanning multiple households and generations; or a man might think of an ancestor or chain of his progenitors, one per generation. These images do not prominently feature home life, nor the spousal relation, nor both genders, nor children (minors). An interest in the one complex does not directly evidence an interest in the other.[21] I gather that the

[21] Speaking only of the West, one scholar writes,

traditional Chinese lineage was a very different institution from what we call "family," and that it had the power to enforce greater and more enduring burdens on its members as a matter of course.

Second, the lineage does not encompass the family. In societies with defined patrilineages, at any given time *most* adults have nuclear family members outside their lineage. Where wives join their husbands' patrilineages, as in China, a married woman's lineage excludes her parents and siblings and any married daughters she may have, while a man's lineage excludes his married sisters and daughters. Where wives keep their fathers' patrilineages, a married woman's lineage excludes her mother, husband, and children, while a man's lineage excludes his mother and his wife.

Granted, it is also true that the adults in any modern Western household nuclear family also have nuclear family members outside that household family: their parents and siblings. But the concept "family" is flexible enough to say that those outside members are still close family members. Valuing the "family" does not leave those members out. I do not know that an analogous claim can be made for the patrilineage. I do not know that it could have been said that a man's married sister or maternal grandfather or daughter's son was in his "lineage" in some other sense, or in another of his lineages. (In the heyday of the patrilineage, could someone outside one's patrilineage be in one's closest "*jiā*" circle on grounds of their being one's father or brother or daughter?)

> Today we conceive of the family as made up of the individuals of the father-mother-children triad, and we rarely talk of the welfare of the family apart from the welfare of each of its members. In earlier times, however, the family in the sense of "house" or "lineage" was thought of in some places as an entity of great importance apart from the members. With such a conception, as Bourdieu has stressed, it made good sense to develop marriage and inheritance strategies that sacrificed the welfare of most of the children in order to preserve the "house" with its patrimony at full strength. (Saller 1984, p. 336)

But I gather that Chinese inheritance practices regarding significant patrimonies were relatively egalitarian among brothers from the early Han forward, with the aim of weakening kinship groups (Wakefield 1998, pp. 10-12).

The lineage and today's family are defined by different *kinds* of bond. The basic links that define the family connection by their concatenation are links of blood or marriage indifferently. For the patrilineage, however, the spousal relation is a hydrogen bond to a carbon chain. One can think that the basic bond that defines the patrilineage is *consanguinity* only if one forgets about women. Nor does one man's descent from another put them in the same lineage. Rather, the basic bond that defines a lineage is *immediate* descent between members of the primary gender, descent not through any other gender. Relevant descent is from one person, not two; hence there can be focal ancestors and society can *divide* into descent groups. A patrilineage can have a sense of itself only because three quarters of a man's great-grandfathers and great-grandsons are outside his patrilineage.

In a system where marriage transfers a girl to her husband's lineage, normally any kinship piety a married woman has toward parents or siblings is directed outside her lineage. Her sharing a lineage with any other person at all was ephemeral in her formative years, and in her adulthood may be seen as a matter of convention or fiction or capture or gift (revocable or not), or not much considered. Hence we must say *either* that lineage membership is not in general natural or permanent, *or* that only people of the primary gender are true members of a lineage.

The institution of the many-generation household built around a tight lineage network or endoskeleton of its primary members might drive the institutions of lineage and family even farther apart, even for the primary members, if larger households mean less interaction with one's close family members in other households, or if such large endoskeletal households bring a greater sense that lineage rather than family is what matters.

Granted, on the one hand, if we use the countable noun "family" precisely to mean a married couple and their minor children (or: their minor sons and unmarried daughters), we can say that in a patrilineal society of many-

generation households, no family straddles households. Every family is co-resident.

But on the other hand, recall that within a "family" in that narrow sense no adult has filial or sibling relations. Filial and fraternal excellence would not be "family" virtues except for children. And in a society of many-generation households, no "family" in that narrow sense would constitute a household nor be headed by parents who head their household (unless by mishap). The latter facts would make it harder, in such a society, for a "family" in that narrow sense to constitute an integral community or a prominent cultural idea. Anyway the artificially precise sense of "family" we have been using here, a couple and their minor children, is *not* the focal image of today's English countable noun. Rather, the focal image is parents and minor children constituting a household. In a society of many-generation households, "families" in the focal sense of the word would be unfortunate deviations.

In certain ways the institution of the lineage would seem to push against family feeling, not just because lineages divide families, but for another reason. While a society's valuing and maintaining the lineage as an institution depends on and supports the feeling that by nature only one gender really counts, a society's valuing the family may depend in important respects on the opposite. Departures from profound gender inequality arguably tend to improve the quality of family interaction and make it more nutritious morally, and thus invite the greater valuing of family, at least among the wise (even if "family" as a political buzzword in the United States today can stand for the subordination of women). Perhaps only a culture of principled feminism, based on an articulated understanding of its importance, can adequately counter the biological facts that threaten the moral quality of the spousal relation, such as men's greater size and testosterone, the distinctive burdens and attractions of motherhood and potential motherhood, and nature's trick of making men look and sound more different from children than women do. Seeing only one gender as significant reduces the apparent moral *significance* of the spousal relationship for the

significant gender while it worsens that relationship for both genders and worsens family life for children—other things equal.

Of course extreme gender inequality is hardly special to the Chinese or Confucian tradition as against the Western. What Anglophones have called a "family tree" has usually been a lineage tree.

And for at least two reasons it could be misleading to characterize a society focused on many-generation lineage-based households as one in which the family is not seen as important. **(1)** The eyes and voices of a patriarchal society belong to the males. From their point of view, the divide between patrilineage and family is less stark. The many-generation household arguably includes all the *important* members of a man's *immediate* family circle: parents, wives in case they are important, and brothers and sons. These are all in his lineage if women change lineage upon marriage. And **(2)** insofar as any system is costly for its members or its younger members, it may always loom large in people's imaginations because it asks so much.

Another Chinese word that overlaps somewhat with the English "family" is *qīn* 親. Depending on the context, this word might mean "oneself" as in "do it oneself" (*Analects* 14.7); or "associate with" (1.6); or "kin" (20.1); or "parents" (19.17); or "close ones" (e.g. a close family circle, or close friends or advisers, as might conceivably be meant at 8.2 or 18.10). At *Analects* 1.13, *qīn* seems to mark a bond that crosses lineage boundaries (even if the idea is used metaphorically in that passage). I do not know whether or how commonly the word *qīn* was used in such a way that a person's *qīn* was a small *group* including the person, a group that might have a sense of itself as a community; or whether such a group would include the person's spouse (or that spouse's other spouses if any).

We have been discussing terms for institutions similar to family, to get a clearer view of our Anglophone concept "family" and to raise the question whether the long Chinese tradition has or emphasizes that concept. A different

conceptual question for our survey is whether we should count an interest in one or two family relations or positions as an interest in *family*, or as an interest in family relations as a category. For just as a person's interest in silver and gold is no evidence that they are interested in chemical elements as such or even have the concept of chemical element, and an interest in everyone's legitimate rights regarding any children they may have does not evidence the concept of "human rights," similarly a thinker's emphasis on one or two of what would be classified in English as "family" relations does not directly evidence the thinker's having the concept of family or an interest in the family as such, nor does it directly evidence a recognition of or interest in a *category* of relations that includes all of what Anglophones would call the core family relations and excludes non-kin relations.

Similarly, using a family position or relation as a model or metaphor is on its face different from using *family* as a model or metaphor. Someone who speaks of "the family of man" is using the family as an image, but not using any specific family relation. Conversely, when we speak of sister cities or the City of Brotherly Love, we are not appealing to the image of a (whole) family. When a prophet envisions God as Israel's father and then as Israel's bridegroom, or a poet calls a king "father and mother to the people," the image is not on its face that of a *family*—a strange family in which a man is married to his daughter or himself.

Sign displayed at my neighborhood pool throughout the inter-neighborhood round-robin children's swim competition season. Northeastern Virginia, June 2019.

On the other hand, this sort of scruple about what counts as a focus on "family" is alien to the spirit of the three negative reports about the West, and of the partner idea that Confucianism is the emphasis on family. Hence for purposes of the cultural and philosophical comparison at issue, we might decide to take a tradition's emphasis on any one family relation as an instance of its emphasis on family, at least if (a) the tradition focuses on one family relation here and another family relation there rather than focusing all or most of its attention on one relation or one position, and (b) these relations add up to a representative sample of family relations. This relaxed standard will make it easier to find both Confucianism and the West emphasizing the family.

As an example of how the Chinese Confucian tradition has language carrying the concept of family, we might want to point to the lists of relations (sometimes also specifying their leading norms) that appear in many old Chinese texts, usually in terms of pairs of correlative positions. The lists usually include

two or three core family relations properly so-called, sometimes include the spousal relation, and rarely if ever include more distant family relations. But if the various lists collectively evidence or carry a general idea, the idea would seem to be *dyadic relation*,[22] not family relation or lineage relation. Where the lists include the spousal relation at all, I think they also include at least one non-family relation. One of the three relations in the *Liù dé* (strip 23[23]) is a non-family relation. In the original Mencian version of the "five relations" (3A4), perhaps only two are family relations.[24] In the list of the "ten relations" (*shí lún* 十倫) in the *Lǐjì*, only two or three of the ten are matters of family or kin, one of the three being not really a relation but rather simply the dimension of distance in relations. The lists as a meme do not carry or evidence the concept of family (or lineage), either as a kind of community or as a category of relations.

Turning from lists of relations to the short list of virtues *xiàotì* 孝悌, we note that this list (as it is usually understood today) alludes to two of what we would call nuclear family relations, as it names a man's being good to his parents and to his older brother(s). Scholars of Chinese philosophy often seem to assume that this list stands for family virtues as a class, thus evidencing the idea of family. Certainly the list reminds us of family if we bring to the table an interest in family and no rival thought of lineage—or if we are thinking only of very small children, for whom relations with parents and older siblings might tend to be the main close family relations; though such children might be too young to be sensitive to "closest family" as a category excluding grandparents, aunts and nursemaids. (And we might find the focus on males so ordinary that we do not quite notice it, or so wrong that we do not quite take it in, or both.) But in fact the list does not evidence the concept of *family* or *family virtues*, as the two

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[22] I am not sure to what extent one should envision the relations evoked in e.g. *Analects* 12.11 as one-to-one or one-to-many.

[23] Cook 2012, p. 783.

[24] The *Mencius*' emphasis on the relation between elder and younger as such is often slighted or mistaken for an emphasis on the relation bewteen older and younger brothers; see Haines 2026, "Impartiality in the Ancient Root," pp. 98-134.

virtues cannot reasonably be seen as a representative sample of family virtues.[25] As its two terms are usually understood, I submit, the list plainly and directly stands for *men's respecting lineage rank*, for the list is a comprehensive catalog of the virtues that lineage hierarchy most basically relies on. If every son in the lineage obeys his father, and (within that constraint) every man obeys his older brothers if any, then the hierarchy of lineage males is in good order. For people who are alive to the idea of hierarchy among the men in a lineage, as early Confucians presumably were, I imagine that that pair of virtues quite plainly stands for lineage hierarchy.[26]

The even shorter list *xiào* 孝, or filial piety, may suggest to us the idea of family, especially if we think of parents as symbolizing the family in the way that ancestors symbolize a lineage. This thought might in turn suggest replacing the translation "filial piety" with "family piety" (though this phrase is more naturally parsed, as it is parsed by Lutherans, to mean piety by the family together) or, as has been proposed, "family reverence" (parsed as "reverence for family"[27] or as "revering family members"[28]) or "family feeling." Such a device creates mentions

[25] The two family virtues usually evoked by the term *xiàotì* are unrepresentative of the kind "family relational virtues" by being both upward, both primarily or exclusively of males, both primarily or exclusively toward males, and both for blood rather than spousal relations. So far are the two from being representative that one of them has *no* application within a significant proportion of what Anglophones call "families" in the core sense: for there is no younger of two brothers in nuclear families with just one offspring, nor in the vast majority of nuclear families with just two offspring, nor in half of nuclear families with three offspring, etc. Further, at least in earliest Confucianism the two virtues are conceived mainly as virtues of adults, and as such they have no place in relations within families in the focal sense of that word: a community comprising a married couple and their minor children.

[26] Whenever the Confucius of the *Analects* mentions *xiào* and *tì* as a pair, he is plainly not speaking of two family virtues (1.6 and 13.20; cf. 14.43). Rather he is pairing a kinship virtue with a non-kin virtue, as the context makes clear.

[27] E.g. Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 1.

[28] E.g. Ames 2020, p. 79

of "family" in translated texts from early China, by taking the main Chinese virtue term that suggests an interest in any of the following:

(a) differentiation among family-positional virtues

(b) asymmetry in family dyads

(c) a focus on relating to parents and/or patrilineal progenitors as distinct from other family members,

and erasing all three suggestions from the English rendering (for readers who encounter the proposed rendering without having read an explanation of the phrase).

The new English rendering is sometimes explained as meaning reverence for the generations above one's own in one's family and lineage.[29] So understood,

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[29] Both halves of the phrase "filial piety" are uncommon words today; so to the Anglophone eye new to the phrase, fortunately it can read like a technical term for which one must consult the notes or a dictionary. "Family reverence" might not read that way, and "family feeling" has an established English sense that connotes mutuality (symmetry) and commonality. If we come fresh to the phrase "family reverence" without explanatory notes, we might most naturally take it to mean reverence *by* the family as a group. (Compare "family tradition," "family vacation," and "family worship.") Almost as natural might be to read the phrase as meaning reverence for one's family as a whole, or reverence for each member by each other member. But scholars who recommend the translation of *xiào* seem to intend reverence for elder generations of one's family, which is not a natural suggestion of the phrase.

> What recommends "family reverence" as a translation is that in degree it disassociates *xiao* from the duty to God implied by "piety" and from the unilateral obedience that is assumed in *paterfamilias*. "Family reverence" is collateral, with the elder generation receiving appropriate deference from their younger members within their family lineages and the younger generation deriving pleasure from deferring to those who have given both meaning and substance to their lives. (Ames 2020, p. 78; Ames 2024b, p. 54; and similarly at Ames 2023b, p. 606; etc.)

(Regarding the associations of the term "piety," Merriam-Webster defines "piety" as "the quality or state of being pious: such as **a.** fidelity to natural obligations (as to parents); **b.** dutifulness in religion: devoutness." Replacing "filial piety" with "filial reverence" or "filial feeling" might be questioned as removing concrete actions from the suggested focal meaning, leaving only feeling. "Filial devotion" might better capture actions along with feelings, and the extreme character of the Chinese idea. "Reverence" to my ear carries a greater load of sanctimony than "piety" or "devotion," and a much stronger suggestion of objective evaluation.) →

The quotation above offers the only proposed reason I have found to replace "filial" with "family" in translating *xiào*. The reason may be puzzling. Readers who can read anything into "filial" are those who know the word, and hence know it as referring to one's position in relation to one's mother and father. Those who know the word do not expect the ordinary reader to read it as focusing on one's relation to one's father only, nor as alluding to an unfamiliar conception of fatherhood as "power and privilege" (Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 88), nor to the little-remembered and only metaphorically paternal institution of the *paterfamilias*: absolute rule over a many-generation household (including its adults) by its oldest living male who is also the household's sole property owner (rule as a legal power, not a norm of disregard for others). Indeed, for most of our readers, even the idea that the father is the head of the household (the other meaning of 'paterfamilias' in English) is no longer common sense. Writing at time when it was common sense, one of the architects of utilitarianism, Adam Smith, expressed the usual complacent Western view about fatherhood in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*. "Nature, for the wisest purposes, has rendered, in most men, perhaps in all men, parental tenderness a much stronger affection than filial piety" (Smith 1976, p. 240). And Smith captures our Anglophone readers' view of the associated common norms (at least among males) when he says approvingly,

> But when a father fails in the ordinary degree of parental affection towards a son; when a son seems to want that filial reverence which might be expected to his father; when brothers are without the usual degree of brotherly affection; [etc.] …; in all these cases, though every body blames the conduct, nobody imagines that those who might have reason, perhaps, to expect more kindness, have any right to extort it by force. (p. 155)

Granted, readers could miss some of what is good (or bad) in Confucianism or the West if they bring to either an erroneous view about traditional expectations or enforcement. But such prejudice does not arise from the translation "filial piety."

One might argue against the translation "filial piety" in favor of "family feeling" on the grounds that precisely because the term "filial piety" is a combination of somewhat uncommon words, the term fails to suggest that the practice is normal and naturally attractive and personal; it suggests instead a commitment based on a propagated norm. But that very contrast between the two phrases argues for the traditional translation and against "family feeling." While on the one hand exemplary *xiào* may have graced certain mythic exemplars without needing cultivation, suggesting that we have only ourselves to blame if we do not measure up, on the other hand an assumption that most people and even the *jūnzi* would have to work on that root is suggested by (a) the burdens of the practice as Confucianism understands it, (b) Confucius' own report of most people's attitude (*Analects* 2.7), (c) the tradition's emphasis on the word *xiào*, (d) the tradition's emphasis on the ritual elements of *xiào*, (e) the teaching of the practice by stories of filial heroism, and (f) the prominent place the tradition gives to extrinsic reasons for filial piety.

family reverence would not at its focus *include* revering one's minimal circle of family (parents, spouse, siblings, offspring) nor either of one's nuclear families, nor one's household family, nor any community or group to which one belongs as a member.

The intended image from the Chinese tradition may be as follows:

> Ideally, each generation instructs and inculcates in the succeeding generation a reverence for the family by modeling the appropriate conduct toward the generation that preceded them, **thus** suffusing the family with unconditional love and a sense of belonging.[30] (emphasis added)

But it is unclear how well this picture can express the self-understanding of an institution that expels half its people at a vulnerable age. If the main unconditional love in focus is unconditional love toward prior generations, such unconditional love is available to us only when and if we are old enough to have trained our offspring to it by our love for their paternal grandparents, or found for our sons wives who, before they stopped belonging to their first lineage, were trained in that way to give us that love.

Missing from the "history" of Western philosophy

One finds little about family in Western philosophers' surveys of the history of Western philosophy. As Jeffrey Blustein has written about the West,

> Philosophers have been criticized for writing very little about families. It would be more accurate to claim, however, that it is historians of philosophy, rather than philosophers, who have been guilty of this. … We might then get the erroneous impression that moral

[30] Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 1.

> philosophers seldom took the organization of private affairs very seriously.[31]

There are some general reasons to expect that much of Western thought's past and present interest in family, especially as an inspiration for other order, would and should not be adequately represented in current philosophers' histories of Western philosophy.

First, the main kind of scholarship on past philosophical literature that has a proper home in philosophy departments is not true history. It does not seek a balanced narrative of past views and reasons, nor an understanding of causes and effects; nor does it seek to weave the story of philosophy deeply into general history. The proper work of a philosophy department is doing philosophy and teaching others to do it. Philosophy faculty are not trained or tested for general historical competence. Instead, the usual and proper focal task of their scholarship on old philosophy is to interpret it toward mining it for ideas and arguments potentially useful to current philosophical inquiries. Philosophers' study of old philosophers is consultation of colleagues in history (though a few specialists focus on the mining rather than the philosophizing it might serve). Today's philosophical interests determine what is reported and what is passed over.

And these interests differ from the interests of the dead philosophers in ways that pertain to our inquiry. For, first, current Anglophone philosophical inquiry has little sympathetic interest in many of the kinds of extra-family order most prominently inspired by family in the Western past: monarchy, nationalism, ecclesiastical roles, and family relations structuring the cosmos.

Advances in understanding have made monarchy and theism less respectable intellectually, and we have further grounds for withholding reverence from officials of church and state as such. Second, while family as topic, root, model and even normative fundamental has drawn new attention from

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[31] Blustein 1982, p. 19.

Anglophone moral philosophers since 1979 or so, what was meant by the family in most other ages hardly exists today. The recent interest in family does not assume the kind of society where the household is the primary institution of production and of education and for the procurement of spouses, and where lineages are the main local and national powers.[32] Family today can afford to be less regimented, more responsive to personal variation. That is not to say that we think morality does not apply; it is to say that less of the applicable morality is about sharply defined roles for genders and positions. Nor does today's philosophy much participate in the debate between the pre-industrial picture of the role of kinship in society and the different picture that has supplanted it. Much of our philosophical interest in family in the last hundred years has centered on legal and moral issues that have come to the fore only recently, when our workplaces have become separate from the home, we have had refrigerators and public schools, women have had the vote and then jury service and bank accounts, and much home life has come to center not on the hearth but on looking elsewhere through the family screen.

But today we live in an even newer world. In a change that is both cause and microcosm of a wider catastrophe, the shared hearth-screen in the family room showing us reassuring little moral dramas of non-screen-centered family life in the classical genre of comedy has been replaced by individual interactive and addictive screens that we each bring with us as we go in and out, so that novels, movies and television are increasingly challenged to portray the human experience when they still try (except insofar as a glut of murders, corpses and superpowers is an apt portrayal of our collective inner life). I have not looked into how or whether very recent philosophy has been nimble enough to try to address

[32] In the words of Yuval Noah Harari, "Prior to the Industrial Revolution … most people worked in the family business – the family farm or the family workshop, for example – or they worked in their neighbours' family businesses. The family was also the welfare system, the health system, the education system, the construction industry, the trade union, the pension fund, the insurance company, the radio, the television, the newspapers, the bank and even the police" (Harari 2014, p. 356).

either this challenge to family or the broader crises of which this challenge is a part, as technology and assisted market forces ever more quickly (a) undermine human and other nature and the possibility of imagining our world's near future with intellectual confidence or without despair; (b) dismember collaborative knowledge, individuals' general orientation to their world, and principled collaborative action; (c) outcompete and disorient human dignity; and (d) seem on track to making people everyone's second choice, leaving us dispensable, angry, and ever more liable to be removed from land, liberty, or life.[33] We have an urgent need to recover some of what has been lost in the many changes. A new look at old or forgotten materials, East and West, *might* help us understand our predicament and give us ideas about where to go from here.

A **second** reason is that the centerpiece of the usual *historical* entrée to Western philosophy for undergraduates has long been a specific conversation on metaphysics, epistemology and language, in which the main thinkers have engaged deeply with each other's now-antiquated views, marking a trail from quasi-Aristotelianism to Kant over the 17th and 18th centuries. In mentally rehearsing the "history of Western philosophy," one may think especially of that conversation,[34] in which family does not figure because moral and social philosophy do not figure (though of the curricular conversation's seven canonical thinkers the political philosophy of one, the metaethical ideas of a second, and the moral fundamentals of a third figure prominently elsewhere in department's

[33] The number of incarcerated people grew explosively in the United States from the 1970s to the 2000s, to the point where this country of 5% of the world's population holds 25% of the world's currently incarcerated. Further, the rapid cycling of people through the criminal legal system and its plea deals (coerced by the new common practice of long detention without trial in jails, which are in many ways worse than prisons) has meant shackling a vastly larger number of people, mostly Black, outside of carceral institutions with ankle monitors or lifelong disqualification for jobs, food stamps, public housing (even in others' households), driver's licenses, and the vote. See Alexander 2020 and Barkow 2025, *passim*.

[34] See e.g. Rosemont 2015, p. 219.

curriculum[35]). In contrast, the three great brands of past work in *ethics* are seen rather as a trio of living general conceptions not much dependent on ideas from metaphysics, epistemology or the philosophy of language, and whose classic texts do not closely engage each other in such a way as to encourage a digestible historical narrative. For the most part Aristotelians, utilitarians, and current Kantian moral philosophers do not claim to derive their ethical views from metaphysical views.

Third, Western philosophy has always been pursued alongside important discourses on family that philosophy may know and respect without including, such as scripture and theology, myth and epic, sermons and advice, poetry and aphorism, novels and plays, film and song, biography and history, law and ideology, news and epistle—each of which may have analyzed, evaluated and been inspired by family dynamics. Histories of Western philosophy do not normally aim to tell the story of these other parts of ethical thinking, religion and culture. Nevertheless, these other discourses are part of the broad collaborative project of thought in which philosophy sees itself as a participant.

In the West, philosophy (with an arguable exception at the Academy) has usually conceived itself as an academic discipline focusing on very broad generalities and fundamentals of justification (ethical and epistemic), aiming to abide by what we today think of as academic standards. Hence unlike statute, exhortation, literature and song, philosophy aims at literal truth. It usually strains (and often spectacularly fails) to use language in a way that lives up to standards of clear explicitness, standards that academia has cultivated in its various disciplines to serve collaborative inquiry by serving mutual understanding and mutual check across concrete differences in assumptions and forms of life. This use of language is much narrower and less paronomastic (equivocating, punning) than is appropriate in many discourses outside academia, as academic philosophy aims more to articulate than in some other

[35] Even the metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language of the other four have long received little attention outside that curriculum for undergraduates.

manner to evoke or inspire. That narrowness is also a handicap, as it is a very awkward vehicle for an individual's practical thinking. Much of the difficulty of academic philosophy is in translating what common sense understands into the peculiar medium of academia. Philosophy works alongside e.g. literature and song, and benefits from them as a sources and vehicles of wisdom for philosophy to try to articulate, rather than aspiring to replace or outpace them as a direct source of wisdom for life.

In addition, recent centuries have seen the rise of special academic disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology, including moral and developmental psychology, whose projects philosophy respects but no longer includes.

If by "philosophy" in the Chinese context we mean to include the whole range of ancient Chinese thought and hortatory literature about general matters, while by "philosophy" in the modern Western context we mean one little cog in a broad scheme of intellectual collaboration on general matters, then we will find modern Western philosophy underemphasizing topics that Chinese philosophy includes. The double standard would be even greater if we were to compare that little Western cog with Confucianism as a *culture*. For responsible comparison we should either compare Western philosophy with Confucian efforts to articulate and defend accounts of justificatory fundamentals in clear literal terms, or compare Confucianism with a wide swath of Western thought and culture. Indeed the three negative reports claim in places to characterize not only Western philosophy but also Western ethical thinking, religion and culture. (Or we should compare Western philosophy with Confucian efforts to articulate and defend accounts of justificatory fundamentals.) The present survey focuses on Western philosophy but also touches on religion, political thought and culture.

Which quantitative questions?

My survey does not argue for any answer to the quantitative questions how much the West has emphasized family as compared to other *topics* or *models*, or as compared to other *traditions*, or in proportion to the *need*.

The survey speaks more directly to the non-comparative quantitative questions how much thought in the West has been given to family or inspired by family, and with how rich a diversity of approaches and how much depth of analysis and argument. For in giving examples, the survey says "at least this much."

That may be the question that should interest people whose philosophical interest is Confucian (as that term is sometimes understood); i.e. whose interest is to find ideas to aid their own project of **(a)** trying to articulate and evaluate candidate norms for family relating, so as to improve the family if possible or defend the status quo if not; or **(b)** explaining whether and why moral norms and cultivation should take family relations as basic, or deciding how far family should outweigh other values or social forms; or **(c)** applying the family as a model to understand or prescribe other things, or deciding where we should do so.

If instead the reader's project is to merely to decide whether it is urgent to *commend* philosophical or quasi-philosophical projects (a)(b)(c) to the West, she will want to know especially whether the West underemphasizes those projects today in relation to the *need*. And if the aim is to decide whether to commend *Confucianism* to the West because of its superiority in (a)(b)(c), she will especially investigate whether Confucianism's pursuit of (a)(b)(c) has done a better job of serving society's need for these projects, or has tended to get better answers.

If the reader's project is to understand how to promote communication and mutual engagement between the West and another tradition, then she may want to know whether the West has emphasized family more or less than the

other tradition has, but will be more concerned perhaps with the differences in *how* the traditions have approached family.

As has been well explained by Henry Rosemont, Jr. and Roger T. Ames,[36] we should bear in mind that some differences we might seem to see between Chinese Confucian materials and Western materials may be artifacts of our comparing Chinese Confucianism mainly from pre-industrial times to Western thought and culture mainly after the Industrial Revolution was well underway. Industrialization and science bring profound changes to the nature of family life and the family's role in society, and to the forms of the state and religion, and to conceptions of what is natural. As the scholars point out, one key lesson from comparison may be that greater attention to *old* thought and culture from anywhere might help us better understand and perhaps change our ailing world.

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[36] Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 30f.

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