



# STOIC AND CONFUCIAN VIRTUES

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## Virtues

Confucianism, like Stoicism, urges us to practice a set of virtues. In Stoicism the four cardinal virtues (practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance) are highly interdependent, basically four different aspects of the same underlying virtue (wisdom in the broad sense). Confucians, by contrast, rank their virtues according to their scope and importance. The two most crucial virtues in Confucianism are benevolence and righteousness.

## Benevolence

Benevolence means having compassion for others, *all* others, since “we are all under Heaven.” That said, Confucians think that we have special duties toward people we have a direct relationship with, beginning with our family and friends, and then people we know or who live in our same community.

## Righteousness

Righteousness, the second virtue, has to do with preserving our moral integrity, disdaining to do what is ethically shameful.

## Wisdom

The third Confucian virtue is wisdom, which helps you decide the best course of action when navigating ethically complex situations. In this sense, Confucian wisdom is analogous to the Greco-Roman concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Wisdom is also what allows you to be a good judge of character of others, to develop a prudent concern for your own wellbeing, and generally to work well with others, having developed a practical sense of how the world functions.

## Where Stoicism differs

So far so good, but then I stumbled onto to a place where I think Stoicism differs sharply from Confucianism: “*Ask yourself: as disappointed as you would be to discover that your father is a crook, would you actually turn in your own father to the police, or do you think that your obligation to him as your father trumps your normal obligation to report the guilty?*”

With the only minor caveat that this would depend, to an extent, on what my father was actually guilty of (and, of course, of my confidence that he was) my response as a Stoic would be different. I do have special duties toward those I directly interact with, because they depend on me, and because we have had a relationship over time. But such duties do not trump those toward the human cosmopolis at large, as Epictetus makes very clear.

## Propriety

The fourth and final Confucian virtue is propriety, which is concerned with respect of etiquette and the like. This is obviously less important than what we have been discussing before, and accordingly ranks propriety lower than the other virtues. Nevertheless, respecting social customs is one key to peaceful living, so one can see the point. Here too, however, there is a significant point of departure with Stoicism, since there is little trace that the Stoics cared much about local customs, especially those — like Epictetus — who were more influenced by the Cynic “wing” of Stoicism.

Interestingly, Confucians think that human beings are naturally prosocial (or “virtuous”), although to an

imperfect degree. And that we can perfect our virtue with reflection and practice, which is exactly the Stoic position:

*At our birth nature made us teachable, and gave us reason, not perfect, but capable of being perfected.* - Seneca, Letters to Lucilius, 49.11.

## Learning from role models

Confucians learn from the texts of their philosophy, from biographies, works of history, novels, and especially from others:

*When walking with two other people, I will always find a teacher among them. I focus on those who are good and seek to emulate them, and focus on those who are bad in order to be reminded of what needs to be changed in myself.*” - Confucius

Stoics too have developed a number of techniques that include those listed above. And we do learn from our association to others, both in the positive and in the negative:

*Choose therefore a Cato [as a role model]; or, if Cato seems too severe a model, choose some Laelius, a gentler spirit. Choose a master whose life, conversation, and soul-expressing face have satisfied you; picture him always to yourself as your protector or your pattern. For we must indeed have someone according to whom we may regulate our characters; you can never straighten that which is crooked unless you use a ruler.* (Seneca, Letters to Lucilius, 11.10)

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