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Commentary 2 on *Di Zi Gui*:

Confucius' Teachings are Compatible with and Conducive to a Modern Society Based on Freedom and Volition

By Feng Xin-ming, October 22, 2007

Di Zi Gui is all about Confucius' teachings, and Confucius' teachings are, first and foremost, about the Cardinal Relation-Defined Obligations.

In traditional China, what transpires between the parties in society's Five Cardinal Relations (五倫 *wu^ lun*), is described by the term *lun' chang* 倫常, which I translate as the Cardinal Relation-Defined Obligations. So what transpire between the parties in society's Five Cardinal Relations are the obligations that the parties in each Relationship owe to each other and must fulfill.

To explain, the Five Cardinal Relations are those between the ruler and the subject, between the father (parent) and the son (offspring), between the older and the younger brothers (siblings), between husband and wife, and between friend and friend. These comprise the most important relations in society.

Of course, today we have to add a sixth, that between buyer and seller. Probably most economic relations can be included in this relationship: buyer also includes the employer since he's buying labor power, and seller includes the employee who is selling his labor power. So in the modern world we should speak of the Six Cardinal Relations.

In traditional Chinese thinking, what the parties in society's fundamental relations do is to bestow kindness on and carry out obligations to, each other.

How is this compatible with, nay, conducive to, a modern society? Well, modern society is based on exchange, and exchange is nothing but mutual help.

What do all of the Five (or Six, as proposed by me) Cardinal Relations have in common? They all have in common the fundamental feature of human society: mutual help. Let's go through each Cardinal Relation one by one.

Reflecting the fundamental property of human society, the Cardinal Relation between government and subjects is but a relation of mutual help: the government is there to help its subjects by protecting them and keeping order, and in turn the subjects help the government by obeying the government's laws so as to make order possible, and by paying taxes to sustain the government.

Also, the Cardinal Relation between parents and offspring is a relationship of mutual help: the parents help the offspring survive, grow up, and learn (become educated). When still immature the offspring help the parents by cooperating with them in the upbringing by obeying and respecting the parents, and when grown up, the offspring help the parents by providing sustenance and care to them in their old age and debility.

The Cardinal Relation between older and younger siblings is a relation of mutual help: the siblings help and cooperate with each other; the older siblings look after the younger when they are still young and dependent.

As for the Cardinal Relation among spouses, the husband and wife help each other by building a life together.

As for the Relation between friends, mutual help is the real link underlying friendship. Friends encourage and advise each other, and even when it comes to just mutually entertaining and amusing each other, that is a form of mutual help.

Finally, there is the sixth Cardinal Relation proposed by me, the Cardinal Relation between buyer and seller – since the profit motive is involved here, is buying and selling also a relationship of mutual help? Yes, it is. The honest, non-cheating profit motive is not the same as dishonest, cheating "greed." The honest, non-cheating profit motive means striving to help one's customers with one's profession, e.g. farmer, tailor, builder, etc. In turn, one's customers help one by paying one money. With this money one can then obtain other's help in the form of clothing, food, housing, etc. So the profit motive, pursued honorably, is nothing other than striving to conduct mutual help: I help you by giving me my services or products, you help me by giving me money. Such laudable and honorable strivings are the only real ways to make profit honestly.

What about pursuing customers to collect payments from them? Well, collecting on payments due is part of the honest profit motive, and is absolutely necessary to ensure that the provision of the valuable and useful product or service under consideration is sustainable. It is absolutely honorable, therefore, for a seller to demand and collect on payments due him, otherwise he will not be able to continue producing his product or service, it will become unsustainable, and soon no one else will be able to enjoy his product or service. A seller is only being responsible to other consumers and would-be consumers of his product or service, when he strives to make its provision sustainable.

What about taking advantage of and cheating people as part of the profit motive? Taking advantage of one's customers in price, quantity, or quality is the surest path to ruin for a seller, because there is only a one-time, short-term profit, the customer will never come back, worse, he'll tell ten, twenty, one hundred people about it, and they will in turn tell others. Soon there will be a real dearth of customers as the cheater's putrid reputation becomes known.

Buying and selling then is truly mutual help on the grandest scale:

"An extraterrestrial visitor will find the massive and intricate amount of mutual help in human society simply amazing. Millions upon millions of people go to their jobs at set hours and perform their tasks more or less to order, day after day, providing goods and

services to help other people. These producers then go regularly to yet other people, like the grocer, the hairdresser, the doctor, and so forth, and receive help from them in the form of needed goods and services, just so much and no more, with little or no fighting, scrambling, or whining. Everything is very orderly, yet there is no one controlling or directing all this traffic!"

Indeed, advance in the level of wealth and modernization of a society can be seen as nothing other than increase in the quantity and complexity of the mutual help in a society. Every new product or service is just another type of mutual help being brought into being: whereas before we have no life-saving treatment for say, appendicitis, and appendicitis is a sure death sentence, with modernization and medical advance in a society a new type of mutual help is born, the persons called surgeon, surgical nurse, anesthesiologist, operating room architects, builders, maintainers, janitors, and so forth, who can come together to help people by providing them with the service called an appendectomy, come into being.

Should it be any wonder that, where there is prevalent recognition of buying and selling as being honorable and respectable, where sellers and buyers are usually honest and usually don't cheat, the society is relatively rich, and where the opposite is prevalent, the society is poor? It is not an accident; it is cause and effect.

In the old days, when China has been one of the richest, if not the richest, country in the world, the attitude prevalent in society has been that one must be honest, must not be greedy, and must not cheat. In the past, Chinese businessmen have had a sterling reputation for honesty, fairness, and being true to their word. In fact, an article in Readers' Digest that I've read during the sixties talks about how the secret to success of the overseas Chinese businessmen in Southeast Asia, besides an amazing work ethic, is their legendary honesty and integrity.

Therefore, making the Cardinal Obligations supreme, treating them as the supreme value, as the Confucian-Chinese tradition has done for over two thousand years, is most compatible with a modern free society, because the Obligations are most conducive to the fundamental nature of human society: mutual help, exchange.

Indeed, making the Cardinal Obligations supreme is conducive to the development of an even freer society than what we have now.

The reason the supremacy of the Cardinal Obligations is good for more freedom in a society is because, except for the relationship between the government and its citizens, the obligations are voluntary; therefore, government coercion is unnecessary.

Since the obligations are based on mutual benefit, one violates them at one's own peril. One gets punished by natural means; if one violates one's obligations then one loses the reciprocal obligations the other party owes oneself.

Thus, if a son is not *xiao* he risks his parents becoming unkind, as the reciprocal of the offspring's *xiao* is the parents' kindness; and if a husband is not respectful and cooperative he risks his wife becoming disrespectful and uncooperative, as spouses' respect for and cooperation with each other are reciprocal.

Furthermore, other people who are in a relationship with him, seeing that he does not carry out his Cardinal Obligations, may also cease carrying out their obligations to him. Thus the son who is not *xiao* to his parents risks having his own son being not *xiao*, and the seller who cheats his buyers risks having people who sell to him cheating him.

Not only that, but also other people who do not now have a relationship with the obligation violator will refrain from having any relationships with him. Thus, a seller who violates his obligations to his buyers will find fewer and fewer customers, a husband who violates his obligations to his wife will lose friends and few will become his friends, and so forth.

The supremacy of the Cardinal Obligations is the supremacy of mutual help, nothing more. It is the honor code for mutual help. It codifies honorable conduct for relations of mutual help in human society, relations that can be life long, relations that no human can live without. Adopting this honor code is entirely voluntary, but extremely beneficial. It is most conducive to success and happiness. Having such weighty incentives, once people understand the idea, they will conduct themselves according to this honor code, and there is no need for external coercion in the form of legal authority and government.

People are free to adhere to the honor code or not. If they do, they get rewarded, automatically, without getting the authorities involved. If people don't adhere to the honor code, they get punished, again automatically, without getting the authorities involved.

Therefore government can be as minimal as possible, intrude into the lives of citizens as little as possible, and yet society runs harmoniously and justly, with everyone looked after. The weak, the aged and the disabled will be cared for by those who know them and are close to them, rather than by some anonymous big brother government agency. Society will thus be much freer from government intrusion and government coercion than is the case now. Freedom can truly reign.

As more and more people adopt the idea of the supremacy of the Cardinal Obligations, it will usher in a new era of truly free societies.