IS COSMETIC SURGERY CONSISTENT WITH CONFUCIAN HARMONY?

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Rejecting the notion of an independent atomic individual who chooses relationships, the Confucian sees the human self as essentially relational. Confucian ethics builds on this, stressing the embodiment of *jen* – the exemplification of one's human nature. Consequently, given that being a father and a son is essential to me, exemplifying my own humanity will require an embrace of the rituals (li) and responsibilities to others that pertain to my role within those relationships, this resulting in harmony (he). However, harmony does not imply mimicry of roles. First, one’s dispositions and emotions must be oriented towards the fulfillment of those roles so that their practice is infused with love and, where appropriate, reverence. Second, recognizing that one is not just any son, and that likewise one’s mother and father are particular parents, one must lovingly perform one’s roles in a way that expresses the particularity of those involved. For example, a healthy teacher-student relationship is one in which the teacher caringly adapts her pedagogical performances to embrace and reflect, instead of ignore, the differences among her students. When one cultivates one’s heart and mind (xin) in this way, the union of one’s character (de) and one’s actions embody the relational self and align with what is right or appropriate (yi), as the agent embraces the path of dao (the Way) and embodies humanity (jen). In contrast, we can say that actions that serve to detract from relational harmony in oneself or another, either directly or indirectly (by facilitating the development of non-jen character traits or dispositions) are inappropriate (pu-yi) or wrong.

I will focus my analysis here on commitment to the *jen* ideal as it should be expressed in the doctor-patient relationship. Specifically, the doctor must incorporate into her decision the recognition that proce-
dure or methods that might harm the patient’s health – which include capacity for harmonious living – would be inappropriate. Given that the desire to sacrifice for others (benevolence) and embrace difference (openness) serve as two central virtues constitutive of Confucian harmonious living, we can analyze the case of Kelly’s proposed surgical procedure to see if performing it would harm the development of those key virtues. If so, a jen-inspired version of the ‘no harm’ principle suggests that a physician cannot ethically perform the procedure.

THE VIRTUE OF BENEVOLENCE – SELF-SACRIFICE

Confucius’ most central warning in the Analects is that forming and acting on motives centering on self-gain facilitate the development of a non-jen character. In the Analects a key distinction is made between the character types of the ‘ethical person’ (junzi), who “thinks of virtue,” and the ‘small person’ (hsiao jen) who “thinks of profit.” Given this, we should ask: does the desire for cosmetic surgery fit into the motivational pattern of the small person? Clearly, such a desire can stem from the wish that others (more) frequently notice you in an accepting or flattering way. If so, a Confucian would see it as a narcissistic aim that is not only inappropriate, but also self-destructive, as it promotes the development of a selfish character. Moreover Confucius thinks that the cultivation of selfish character leads a person to view others as tools from which self-satisfaction can be derived, resulting in the view that human relationships are not opportunities for sacrifice or for expressing care, but are instead opportunities for gain. Not surprisingly, Confucius forcefully warns us to be wary of self-absorption, suggesting “don’t worry about not being acknowledged by others; worry about failing to acknowledge them.”

Dr. Daley has good reason to suspect that Kelly’s desire for breast augmentation is motivated by a desire for approval, as she claims to want a fuller figure “before leaving for college.” In addition, Kelly’s mother suggests that they both share a further profit-seeking motivation, namely the enhancement of Kelly’s opportunities as an actress. Here a Confucian would be further distressed by Kelly’s willingness to undergo surgical enhancement for career or monetary success. In contrast, when Confucius says that “the junzi is not a vessel” he means that it is inconsistent with a jen character to view oneself in a fundamentally instrumental way. Truly, a Confucian will argue, if we are willing to treat ourselves as tools, there is little reason to believe that we will not treat others similarly. Consequently, given that both of Kelly’s motives for the surgery strongly
promote a highly selfish view of the value of human relationships, her desires are thoroughly incompatible with jen.

THE VIRTUE OF OPENNESS – EMBRACE OF DIFFERENCE

Again contrasting the two basic character types, Confucius suggests that “the junzi seeks harmony rather than agreement, whereas the small person does the opposite.” Confucius here highlights the fact that the junzi respects the dignity of a human relationship by acting creatively to emphasize the appropriate differences within it, whereas the small person suppresses such particularity through imposed conformity. Given that acknowledging differences is difficult and often requires that one go against established norms, Confucius reminds us that “... failure to act on what is seen as appropriate is a want of courage.” He warns us that the desire for conformity is destructive to a jen character because it exemplifies a kind of cowardice that links the conformist to the small person. Specifically, the conformist makes profit his aim – he fears pain and so seeks the cessation of the states of discomfort that result from disapproval by others. This does not mean, of course, that the junzi never aligns with the majority, for as Confucius remarks, “the junzi agrees without being an echo, whereas the small man echoes without being in agreement.” The junzi aligns when it is appropriate (consistent with virtue), and so embraces differences when appropriate. The conformist is thus ill-equipped for harmonious human relationships because they make no distinctions based on virtue; when difference meets with majority disapproval, it fails to secure profit and so must be suppressed.

Whether the desire for cosmetic surgery always highlights a profit-seeking desire to conform is an open question. However, Kelly’s negative attitude towards bodily difference clearly motivates her to conform to the standards set by her peers; indeed, her initial rhinoplasty (at eleven) was motivated by the belief that looking more like her peers would prevent their taunts. Although Kelly’s desire to avoid taunting is natural for a child, from a Confucian perspective her mother falters in her parental duty here to teach Kelly to courageously stand by and appreciate difference when it is appropriate. Instead, she supports the development of Kelly’s ‘small’ character, endorsing the view that difference be obliterated, even if it requires medical surgery to do so. Consequently, Kelly has learned to be very attentive to majority views of feminine beauty. As evidence, her evolving surgical wish list does conform to the most popular procedures for young women – whereas rhinoplasty is most popular for
girls under eighteen, breast augmentation is most popular for girls nineteen to thirty-four. Clearly, Kelly’s conformism does not cultivate character receptive to difference.

Dr. Daley must be aware that if Kelly continues to nurture projects and aims that facilitate the development of ‘small’ character there will be little reason to believe that other areas of her life will not be affected; specifically, she will damage her capacity for reverent self-sacrifice and the loving embrace of differences in others. Likely, if she continues on this path, her human relationships will be rigid, self-serving, superficially homogeneous and characteristic of conditional caring – in short, they will lack harmony. For these reasons, Dr. Daley, whose primary role responsibility is to heal patients and not do them harm (morally and physically), now has enough situational knowledge (which he may have lacked for Kelly’s first operation, deferring instead to the parent’s judgment) to know that he must refuse to do the surgery. Of course, interesting questions arise here, which space does not permit me to pursue, regarding how Dr. Daley should carry out the refusal. Given that pointing out the unacceptability of the procedure in this situation may call the mother’s judgment and parenting into question (and rightly so, on Confucian grounds), he does have a simultaneous obligation to do so in a way that avoids doing harm to the familial relationship already in place.

**CONCLUSION**

The Confucian perspective both challenges and supports common intuitions about cosmetic surgery. On the one hand, many share the belief that repeated cosmetic surgery is psychologically harmful, and thus destructive to a person’s well-being. No doubt, the rising interest in concern about the ethics of such procedures is driven by the rise in their frequency (and social acceptability) in the United States – from 2 million procedures performed in 1995 to over 12 million in 2005. Confucianism fleshes out this cautionary intuition, giving us solid ethical reasons to wonder whether we should, as a society, give this trend our approval.

On the other hand, many share the intuition to respect the preferences of autonomous agents, particularly those choices that seem to result in some degree of happiness. Clearly, the surgery may make Kelly feel happy and even more socially integrated (as her mother reported happened after Kelly’s rhinoplasty). Still, the Confucian will argue that the satisfaction gained from the ease with which one navigates social relationships is no proof that those relationships are authentic, harmonious
or healthy. As a result, and perhaps this is where the Confucian perspective departs most clearly from the West – the doctor has an obligation to attend to the health of the field of relationships out of which the patient under her care is constructed. Accordingly, it is her overall relational well-being that has primary status, not her autonomy.

NOTES


2. *Analects*; 1-12 and 13-23.


4. Ames, Roger and Hall, David. *Thinking Through Confucius*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 166-167. They write that an essential aspect of harmony is “... the combining and blending of two or more ingredients in a harmonious whole with benefit and enhancement that maximizes the possibilities of all without sacrificing their separate and particular identities.”

5. *Analects*; 11-22.


8. There are numerous passages on this theme in the *Analects*, but a number occur closely together in book four, namely: 4-10, 4-11, 4-12, 4-16.

9. *Analects*; 1-16.

10. *Analects*; 2-12.


