This article examines the origins of and philosophical justifications for Aristotelian friendship (philia) and early Confucian filial piety (xiao). What underlying assumptions about bonds between friends and family members do the philosophies share or uniquely possess? Is the Aristotelian emphasis on relationships between equals incompatible with the Confucian regard for filiality? As I argue, the Aristotelian and early Confucian accounts, while different in focus, share many of the same tensions in the attempt to balance hierarchical and familial associations with those between friends who are on the same footing.

I. Introduction

In contrast to utilitarian or deontological ethical theories which advocate impartiality, Aristotle and the early Confucians both hold partial relationships to be central to the ethical life of the individual and the political order of the community. Aristotle thinks that friendship is the basic link that holds the polis together. Special regard for loved ones also plays a role in the development of one’s virtue, for “to confer benefits is characteristic of the good man and of excellence, and it is nobler to do well by friends than by strangers. . . .” Confucius, for his part, takes filial piety to be the root of Goodness (ren). He further contends that regard for one’s parents and elders lays the foundation for obedience to political authority; in fact, he recommends being a good son as the highest form of political participation.

In emphasizing partial relationships, however, the two sides appear to be talking about fundamentally different kinds of association. While Confucius and Mencius have a notion of equality-based friendship, their primary focus is on relationships between people at differ-
ent levels of a family (father and son, elder and younger brothers) or a society (ruler and minister, ruler and subject). And though Aristotle has some extended discussion of familial relationships, he thinks the truest kind of friendship is between two people who are equal in virtue; sometimes he even talks as if bonds between unequals cannot be considered friendship at all. As such, this divergence between the two traditions would appear to thwart recent attempts to together bring their social and political philosophies into one coherent and compelling virtue politics. Are the two versions of relational ethics incompatible?

II. Equality- and Merit-Based Relationships

Discussions of Aristotelian *philia* usually begin by mentioning that this category is a very broad one, including relationships between lovers, members of the same community, fellow soldiers, business associates, hosts and guests, and childhood playmates, as well as the extra-familial platonic bonds that we might today label as friendship. The category also extends to the hierarchical relationships between family members that are of importance to the early Confucians. In the latter tradition, the Mencian doctrine of “human roles” (*ren lun* 人倫) takes into account not only familial relationships, but also those between ruler and subject and between friends who are of equal standing. Yet within these broader conceptions, each side focuses on a particular form of relationship.

Aristotle defines true friendship narrowly. Of his three kinds of friendship—based on utility, pleasure, and goodness—only that between two people who are alike in virtue constitutes the genuine variety. His arguments for this point in *NE* VIII: 3–5 generally have to do with goodness providing a more stable basis for friendship. He contends that the things we find useful or pleasant are always changing, but virtue is an enduring quality; and moreover, that friendship has to be able to withstand slander in order to survive, and only virtuous people really are able to trust one another. Further, he assumes that a stable friendship involves an equal exchange of things like goodwill and pleasantness, and argues that virtue friendship best fulfills this characteristic; “for friendship is said to be equality, and both of these are found most in the friendship of the good.”

It had been an open question for pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus and Empedocles whether friendship is defined by likeness or unlikeness. In his dialogue *Lysis* Plato takes up the same issue, with Socrates challenging the traditional Homeric notion that like always befriend like. Aristotle, notwithstanding the puzzles Socrates
raises, comes down on the side of likeness, stating simply that *hē d’ isotēs kai homoiotēs philotēs*—“equality and likeness are friendship.”

He even goes so far as to say that a friend is “another self” or that true friends possess a “single soul.”

Each of the three types of friendship Aristotle discusses subdivides into two further categories based on equality (*isotēs*) or superiority (*huperochē*). Introducing the latter in *NE* VIII: 7, Aristotle writes,

> But there is another kind of friendship, viz. that which involves superiority, e.g. that of father to son and in general of elder to younger, that of man to wife and in general that of ruler to subject. And these friendships differ also from each other; for it is not the same that exists between parents and children and between rulers and subjects, nor is even that of father to son the same as that of son to father, nor that of husband to wife the same as that of wife to husband.

Such friendships are unequal in three different senses: the two friends are of unequal roles or statuses; unequal amounts of love are required from each party; and there are unequal obligations depending on which sort of relationship it is. Although these associations appear to be a natural and necessary part of human social and political life, Aristotle thinks that they are secondary to those involving *isotēs*. In fact, he sometimes excludes familial associations in particular from the category of *philia* altogether.

Friendships are thought to satisfy five basic characteristics: (i) wishing and doing good for the sake of one’s friend; (ii) wishing one’s friend to exist and live, again for his own sake; (iii) living with one another; (iv) sharing the same tastes; and (v) sharing each other’s joys and sorrows. Though family members have the advantage in the case of living together, the same does not hold for the other characteristics. Aristotle believes that when there is a great inequality between two people, especially in terms of intellect, they cannot continue to share the same things. The primary example he gives is a case in which one of two childhood friends develops into a mature adult, while the other retains the mind of a child. Since they no longer enjoy the same things, their relationship soon dissolves. This illustration does not bode well for the parent–child friendship.

There is also some difficulty with the first two criteria since, although mothers may be paradigms of well-wishing for their children, children can feel affection toward their parents “only after time has elapsed and they have acquired understanding or perception.” Furthermore, genuine reciprocal love depends upon choice, and this is a faculty that children do not exhibit. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the greater burden of love by rights should fall on the child, since the father is to the child like a god or ruler is to an ordinary
Aristotle makes some attempt to rectify this situation with his notion of proportionate exchange. He distinguishes between two senses of “equal”: equal with respect to merit (\textit{kat’ axian}) and equal in quantity (\textit{kata poson}). Quantitative equality refers to friendships in which there is an equal exchange of respect and affection. Equality of merit is that in which each party is given his due; it governs relationships between unequals, as when a son is expected to give more affection and respect toward his father than he receives in proportion to the father’s superior merit. Yet he contends that it is quantitative equality and not equality of merit that is the necessary sort in friendship; for “where there is a great gulf, as between the gods and man, friendship becomes impossible.”

In the discussion of relationships of superiority in the \textit{Eudemian Ethics}, he is even more emphatic on this point, writing that “only those between whom there is equality are friends”; for “it would be absurd for a man to be the friend of a child, yet he certainly loves and is loved by him.” He even questions the motives of those who seek friendships with unequals, claiming that what they want is flattery rather than friendship. In light of these claims, it is difficult to make sense of Aristotle’s more constructive remarks about family friendship in both works. Because of his assumptions about equality, this kind of friendship seems excluded from the start from his conception of \textit{philia}.

For Confucius, in turn, filial piety is the foundational sort of relationship. In this regard he is representative of wider cultural norms. Donald Holzman notes that in the time before Confucius filial piety was treated “as something one might almost call an absolute, a metaphysical entity, something so exalted in their minds that it becomes difficult for us of another culture to appreciate it today.” This is all the more remarkable when we notice that Confucius makes the qualifications for filial piety even stronger than those of his predecessors, emphasizing that it is not merely a matter of providing material sustenance to one’s parents, but of maintaining a respectful disposition.

Whereas Aristotle questions the grounds of relationships involving superiority, the \textit{Analects} recommends filial piety as a practice that instills a lifelong attitude of deference toward one’s superiors. In the case of one’s parents, filial respect remains intact even after their deaths. A good example is the character of Meng Zhuangzi, who does not change the ministers or policies that his father had put in place in governing, and is on this account held up by Confucius as the ideal practitioner of \textit{xiao}. According to the commentarial tradition, what makes Meng Zhuangzi particularly filial is that his father’s ministers and policies were bad ones. The primary maxim when it comes to
filial piety, as Confucius sums it up, is “Do not disobey.” This extends even to cases in which one’s parents are apparently in the wrong.

Confucius and Mencius both emphasize natural equality, with the former teaching that humans are “by nature, close together” and the latter writing that “things of the same kind are all similar” and thus all humans are of the same kind as the sage. Yet both have been criticized for lacking conceptions of social equality. The latter is of course a hotly contested topic in discussions of Confucianism, and there are different views about the reasons for and the extent of this lack.

Determining the nature of the Confucian familial hierarchy is important here, since this is both the locus of certain inequalities and the place in which broader social inequalities are prefigured.

We find a more elaborate defense of the Confucian position in Mencius. The latter’s view on familial relations is shaped by two opponents: Xu Xing, who opposes social hierarchy, and Mozi, who argues against distinguishing between one’s loved ones and the rest of society. In one passage in the Mencius, several disciples of Confucius convert to the teachings of the former, who leads an unorthodox community in which the members barter handmade goods in exchange for the daily necessities and the ruler works the plow and eats meals alongside his subjects. Upon meeting the one-time Confucians, Mencius criticizes Xu Xing’s philosophy for being impracticable. It is impossible for the ruler to perform all of the tasks that are necessary for the community’s subsistence; Xu Xing himself, as he points out, does not make the plow he uses or the pots in which he cooks his food. Even if it were possible, avoiding all division of labor entirely would lead to confusion. The same goes for ruling: the ruler cannot do his job if he is too busy doing the tasks of others. Thus, in order to avoid anarchy, “there are activities of the great people and the affairs of the petty people.” Mencius criticizes Xu Xing’s system of barter in which the prices are stabilized so that goods of the same size or same weight cost the same amount, on similar grounds. “Things are inherently unequal,” he writes. “One thing is twice or five times more than another, another ten or a hundred times more, another a thousand or ten thousand times more. If you line them up and treat them as identical, this will bring chaos to the world.” While in this quote he is responding to Xu Xing’s economic policies, in the broader context of the passage we also may read it as an indictment of a form of social equality in which the appropriate place of each member of society is not distinguished.

Mencius makes a similar point in criticizing the philosopher Mozi, who recommends impartiality as the key to a well-off society. Mozi’s criticism of partiality focuses almost entirely on family ties rather than extra-familial friendships. He argues, among other things, that sons who are truly filial would best serve their parents by going out and
taking care of those of other people, since then others will respond in like fashion. But as Mencius points out, “This is not to have father. To not have a father . . . is to be an animal.”31 What distinguishes human beings is that we naturally feel love for our parents or respect for our elder siblings. Our actions ought to reflect this. By doing away with this aspect of human reality, Mozi risks bringing a similar chaos to human affairs.

Both the social order and the primary role of familial relationships are brought together in the Mencian theory of the so-called “five relationships.” This theory not only orders society according to different roles, but also cements the centrality of the family by codifying the relationships that are thought to maintain it. Mencius tells how the sage-king Shun, worried that his subjects might descend into an animal-like state focused solely on physical comforts, appointed Xie to educate them about human roles (ren lun): “between father and children there is affection; between ruler and ministers there is righteousness; between husband and wife there is distinction; between elder and younger there is precedence; and between friends there is faithfulness.”32 Wise governance thus is based on instruction in specific human relationships and the respective virtues, emotions, and duties associated with each. With the exception of the mention of relationships between friends, the passage is remarkably similar to Aristotle’s statement regarding friendship of superiority quoted above. For Mencius, however, relationships involving merit are by no means secondary to those involving quantitative equality.

While Aristotle generally focuses on friendships between equals, and Confucius and Mencius on those involving superiority, neither Aristotle nor early Confucianism ignores the other category. At times, in fact, it appears that Aristotle holds family friendship on par with that between equals, and that Confucius and Mencius put friendship between equals on the same level with filial piety. Both of the Chinese thinkers have a place for friendship that involves mutual growth in virtue. Mencius emphasizes that all other considerations in a friendship are secondary: “One does not become someone’s friend by presuming upon one’s age or social status or family relationship. One befriends the Virtue of another person. There may not be anything else one presumes upon.”33 (Here he is talking about the friendships of Meng Xizi, who maintained them in spite of the superior wealth of his family.) Confucius says that the gentleman should accept only his equals as friends,34 and also claims that friends play a key role in the cultivation of the gentleman’s virtue.35 Aristotle, for his part, sometimes displays a view of family friendship that is far more optimistic than that detailed above. Later in the Nicomachean Ethics, he extends his “other self” thesis to familial relationships, writing that children
are “other selves” with respect to their parents, and that brothers
are “in a sense the same thing, though in separate individuals.” Moreover, like virtue friendship, filial friendship involves all three
categories of things that are loved, since parents are responsible for
providing all sorts of good things for their children, and the common
life of the family provides more opportunities for pleasure and utility
than do relationships with nonfamily members.

Yet these statements sit uneasily with the main focus of either side.
If quantitative equality is what primarily defines genuine friendship,
then Aristotle’s relatively brief comments about the merits of family
friendship, while interesting, are beside the point. Yet it is difficult to
ignore that these comments present family friendship as having the
best qualities of complete friendship. As a result, scholars have
diverged on the proper place of this category in his account. Julia
Annas, on the one hand, argues that kin relationships “fit badly into
[Aristotle’s] account of friendship,” and this is the reason that he does
not follow up on his remarks with a full treatment of the subject. Elizabeth Belfiore, on the other, claims that family friendship and
virtue friendship “represent two paradigmatic ways of being ‘other
selves,’” and concludes that the discussion of family friendship is an
essential part of Aristotle’s larger account of the matter. In light of
the above discussion, this disagreement appears to reflect a real con-
fusion in his view. While there is no corresponding debate on the Con-
fucian side, there is a similar difficulty present. If considerations of
virtue are of primary importance in one’s friendships with others, as
Mencius says they are, and considerations of rank should be given less
weight, then why does not this principle apply to familial relationships
as well? Yet neither Mencius nor Confucius appears to follow up on
the possibility of virtue friendships within the family.

III. Friendly Goodwill and Filial Respect

Equality- and merit-based friendships are characterized further by
different emotional experiences. The central emotion in Confucius’s
filial piety is respect (jing 敬); this has a parallel in Aristotle’s notion
of “honor” (timē) in his discussion of children’s obligations to their
parents. Yet the Greek thinker believes that friendship in general is
based on the mutual exchange of goodwill (eunoia) among those who
are friends, which when experienced between intimates turns into the
stronger bond he calls “friendly feeling” (philēsis). The latter bears
some resemblance to Mencius’s discussion of the emotive bond of the
“affection” (qin 親) that is felt between family members.

Respect and honor imply merit or worth. We see this in Aristotle’s
definition of timē in the Rhetoric as “the token of a man’s being
famous for doing good.” In the *Analects*, Confucius recommends *jing* as a feeling that subjects should manifest toward their rulers or superiors. Affection and goodwill, on the other hand, are neutral with regard to merit, and both Aristotle and Mencius suggest that they are felt in their purest form for people who have done nothing to deserve them.

As mentioned in the previous section, it is Confucius’s emphasis on respect that distinguishes his view of filial piety. Elaborating on this notion, he says that filial piety means more than doing household chores and serving your elders first at the table; rather, “It is the demeanor (*se*) that is difficult.” Commentators have taken different views about the precise meaning of this phrase, but usually it is taken to invoke a contrast between the empty, mechanical repetition of one’s filial duties and the internal emotional commitment that genuine filiality requires—a commitment so thorough that it manifests itself in one’s external appearance. Confucius himself was someone who had mastered the latter element with regard to his performance of the rites. In Book 10 of the *Analects*, the character *se* recurs several times in reference to how his expression and demeanor would change themselves reflexively so as to mirror the circumstances.

Mencius’s contribution is to provide a deeper foundation for this emotion by showing how it is rooted in human nature. He incorporates it into his theory that there are four innate dispositions that all human beings possess, and connects it with the feeling of propriety. Respect counts as “genuine knowledge” (*liang zhi* 良知): human beings understand the feeling without having to think about it. Where Confucius emphasizes the difficulty of maintaining a respectful countenance, Mencius underlines the ease with which the basic sense of respect arises.

On the Greek side, Aristotle primarily thinks about honor (*timê*) as an obligation that a son owes to his father. This is in exchange for the latter giving him existence, and also for providing for his nurture and upbringing. (The same reasoning, he says in passing, explains why ancestors hold sway over their descendants.) Since a son cannot ever repay his father entirely for bringing him into being, the son is always in the father’s debt; for this reason, sons cannot disown their fathers, though fathers can disown their sons. Since the burden of respect is so disproportionately weighted, the father–son relationship is less like that between a ruler and subject and more akin to that between god and man. For this reason, Aristotle believes that it is worse to harm one’s father than anyone else.

We also find an enumeration of filial duties in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that is not unlike to the list that could be compiled from the
Analects: when it comes to food we should help our parents before anyone else; we should honor our parents like we honor the gods; we should honor our elders by rising when they enter and making sure they have places to sit; and we should allow our brothers to speak openly and to share all of our possessions; and in general give each of our relatives the honor that is appropriate to him or her. This list illustrates that while we owe the most honor to our father, the obligation does not end with him.

Aristotle’s account of philia, however, centers on the qualities of goodwill (eunoia) and friendly feeling (phileσis). He initially casts friendship as reciprocal exchange of goodwill on the basis of the mutual utility, pleasantness, or goodness of those who are friends. Goodwill is connected with wishing what is good for someone for that person’s own sake; the first two of the five features of friendship that Aristotle lists reflect this aspect of altruistic well-wishing. Goodwill is only the beginning of friendship, however, as Aristotle says in his more prolonged remarks on the feeling. He points out three differences between goodwill and friendly feeling: goodwill may be unreciprocated, and friendly feeling is mutual; it does not involve intensity or desire, whereas friendly feeling does; and friendly feeling requires prolonged intimacy, whereas goodwill may be a fleeting feeling. Goodwill, however, is a necessary initial condition for friendship to arise.

Despite this initial characterizations, there is a problem about whether all the kinds of friendship Aristotle discusses involve the mutual altruistic concern that goodwill entails. He sets utility and pleasures friendships in a less noble light, noting that “those who love for the sake of utility love for the sake of what is good for themselves, and those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is pleasant to themselves, and not in so far as the other is the person loved but in so far as he is useful or pleasant.” As we saw in the previous section, there is also some difficulty with the exchange of goodwill in friendships involving superiority, particularly in those between parent and child, since children need some development before they can show goodwill to their parents, and they owe their parents far more goodwill than they can ever pay them in any case. Yet one notices a couple of more optimistic strains in Aristotle’s discussion of goodwill in the context of the family. The first is that in terms of the stability it affords the exchange of love between family members is more akin to virtue friendship than it is to the lesser two varieties; for “when children render to parents what they ought to render to those who brought them into the world, and parents render what they should to their children, the friendship of such person will be lasting and excellent.” Second, whereas the feeling of honor mainly occurs in a child’s relation toward his father, goodwill is
reflected primarily in a mother’s feeling toward her child. Aristotle, in defense of the point the friendship consists more in loving than being loved, points out that mothers who have given up their children for adoption still love them even if the children themselves are unaware of their existence.\(^5^6\)

Aristotelian *eunoia* and *philesis* resemble a second emotion that Mencius introduces into the discussion of filial relationships, namely affection (*qin*). Confucius characterizes love and affection as feelings one should have toward people in general, but never connects it with filial feeling in particular. In the doctrine of the five relationships, however, it is affection rather than respect or obedience that is the dominant emotive bond between fathers and children.\(^5^7\) Other passages extend this emotion to familial associations in general. While one might exercise affection toward strangers, it is always stronger for one’s close relatives, such as one’s nephew or one’s younger brother.\(^5^8\) According to Mencius, this involves avoiding anger or antipathy toward them, as well as doing as much as possible to promote their worldly success. This holds true even in cases where anger and resentment might be justified. Mencius tells a story about Shun’s conduct toward his brother Xiang, who wants to kill him. While Shun executes others for their unrighteousness, he puts his brother in charge of the territory of Youbi (albeit in a proxy position, where other officials are instructed to engage in the actual business of administering the state). When someone points out to Mencius the apparent unfairness of this act, Mencius replies, “‘Benevolent people do not store up anger nor do they dwell in bitterness against their younger brothers. They simply love and treat them with affection. Treating them with affection, they desire them to have rank. Loving them, they desire them to have wealth.’”\(^5^9\) This principle, for Mencius, is sufficient to explain Shun’s special treatment of his younger brother. While it is possible that such a friendship could exist between two benevolent brothers, in the example Mencius gives the relationship is clearly one-sided.

Affection is similarly grounded in human nature; like respect, it counts as “genuine knowledge.” Mencius says that just as young people naturally feel respect toward their elders, even when they are babies they already have a feeling of affection toward their parents. The same passage goes on to cite affection and respect as the respective natural bases for the development of the Mencian virtues of benevolence and righteousness. And although affection is not mentioned in the “four roots” theory, here at least Mencius thinks that it exists prior in time to the feeling of respect.\(^6^0\)

Aristotle reaches a similar conclusion, claiming that it is loving (*to philein*), and not honoring, which “seems to be the characteristic
excellence of friends.” While being loved and being honored are similar in that they both put a person in a position of superiority, being loved is desired for its own sake, whereas people desire honor only because they want some further benefits from those honoring them, or want to validate their own good opinions of themselves. For this reason, in relationships involving inequality, it is the disproportionate exchange of love that provides the best hope for making the relationship equal. This runs counter not only to Confucius’s emphasis on respect for one’s father and superior, but also to the primary place afforded to honor in Aristotle’s own discussion of the father–son relationship.

IV. Shared Life and the Fulfillment of Individual Roles

The last three of Aristotle’s five features of friendship—living together, having similar tastes, and sharing each other’s joys and sorrows—emphasize the shared life that he takes to be characteristic of friends. All varieties of friendship, Aristotle believes, involve koinōnia, “association” or “community.” The Greek term comes from the adjective koinos which means “common” or “shared in common”; indeed, Aristotle writes that “the proverb ‘the property friends have is common (koina)’ expresses the truth; for friendship depends on koinōnia.” Furthermore, as the amount of things held in common increases, so does the degree of friendship: for example, brothers who have everything in common are more to be called friends than business associates who share only a little bit of capital.

A defining feature of Aristotelian koinōniai is that they aim at some common advantage for their members. Besides family members and fellow citizens, Aristotle cites the examples of sailors going on a commercial voyage or members of the same social club—groups which are motivated by utility and pleasure, respectively. Since the term “community” suggests to us the unselfish participation of its members in the greater good, some commentators argue for translations like “association” or “partnership” instead. This raises an issue of classification. Aristotle notes at the beginning of NE VIII: 12 that many koinōniai, such as those between fellow voyagers or fellow citizens or host and guest, depend on a compact (homologia), but those involving kinship or comradeship do not. This fact means the former kinds “are more evidently friendships of association,” and sets apart the latter two species. Probably what Aristotle has in mind here is not that family friendship or comradeship count less as koinōniai—for members of both share more in common than those in the other forms—but simply that their foundations are more difficult to pinpoint.
Community goes hand in hand with equality. In *Pol.* IV: 9, Aristotle considers the problems that arise in states where there is an uneven distribution of goods like wealth or strength or beauty. Those who have an excess of these goods grow up to be arrogant, never learning what it means to obey authority, and thus end up ruling like dictators; those with a deficiency become envious and often turn to criminality, and hence are fit to be ruled only as slaves. Inequality thus leads to enmity and discord, and these are both antithetical to friendship and community. A city, he therefore concludes, “ought to be composed, as far as possible, of equals and similars” (ex isōn... kai homoioōn).69

Though he lacks a counter-concept to Aristotle’s *koinōnia*, Confucius clearly has a notion of shared life. The *Analects* opens by remarking on the joy of friends coming together. Friends also take on a shared commitment to virtue; this can take place even between people of different rank or economic status.70 On the civic level, in turn, the ruler maintains community through participation in the rites (li).71 Nonetheless, Confucius’s conception of filial piety generally focuses on the fulfillment of individual roles rather than on the shared life of family members. Role-fulfillment is different from shared life in that it defines familial relations by emphasizing the distinct duties of each family member instead of in terms of what they have in common. On the positive side, this means that each member is encouraged to live up to a precisely defined role in a way that leaves little room for shirking one’s responsibilities.72 Negatively speaking, however, the focus on roles can promote rivalry or a rigid hierarchical structure within the family unit.73

When Confucius is asked about his first priority in governing, he answers that it would be rectifying names (*zhengming*) so that speech is in agreement with reality. Without this basic concord between words and things, a society is on a path that leads to disorder.74 In terms of social policy, attaining this agreement has two components: rectifying language so that it fits with reality, and rectifying reality so that it fits with language. With regard to the latter, Confucius mainly seems interested in people living up to their social roles—what we might more appropriately call “rectification of roles.” The most well-known instance of this is when Confucius says, “Let the lord be a true lord, the ministers true ministers, the fathers true fathers, and the sons true sons.”75

There is a long-running debate regarding how central *zhengming* is to Confucius’s philosophy.76 Here we need to consider only its aspect concerning the fulfillment of familial roles (the son “being a true son” and the father “a true father”). If we make a tally of the passages discussing these roles, we see that they are relatively few in number in
comparison with other concepts in the *Analects*. Yet it should also be noted Confucius directly connects filial roles with the most central concepts in his teachings. Different passages link *xiao* and *ren, li,* and government (*zheng 政*)—three concepts that are hardly peripheral to his worldview. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Mencius incorporates filial respect into what is arguably his main doctrine, the theory of the four roots. In this light, the argument that the rectification of familial roles is not central to Confucianism is a difficult one to sustain.

In *NE* VIII: 9–11, Aristotle connects the roles of family members with relationships found in larger communities. Specifically, he thinks these roles correspond to the threefold classification of political constitutions in the *Politics*, under the assumption that we may find “resemblances” (*homoio¯mata*) or “patterns” (*paradeigmata*) of these constitutions in households. Kingship, aristocracy, and timocracy are the correct forms of constitution, involving rule of one, few, or many, respectively, for the advantage of all those ruled; tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy are the respective deviations of these, in which the ruling entity rules only for its own advantage. Aristotle says that the rule of a father over his sons ought to be like monarchy, and not a tyranny; that the rule of husband over wife should be aristocratic and involve proper distribution of power, and not like an oligarchy wherein the husband hoards the power for himself; and that brothers should associate like equals as in a timocracy. Unlike with the city, however, Aristotle does not appear to think that we should strive for quantitative equality in a family. For in a democratic family where the father is weak or absent, he points out, everyone just does whatever he pleases.

The separation of roles in both Aristotle and Confucius relies on functional differences between family members as well as upon hierarchical ones. The latter constitute an important obstacle for each thinker’s conception of shared life, for as we saw above, the unequal distribution of goods within a community can lead to discord among its members. To see this point more closely, let us focus for a moment on the roles of husbands and wives in each philosophy.

In presenting his theory of the five relationships, Mencius says that between husband and wife there is “distinction” (*bie* 彼). One view is that *bie* only denotes a functional difference between men and women: men take care of matters outside the household, and women inside it. In 3A: 3, however, the only other passage in the *Mencius* in which *bie* appears, one notices that he uses it in a hierarchical sense, to distinguish common people from those above them. In other passages where husbands and wives are mentioned, he apparently has this latter sense in mind. In 3B: 2, he discusses a mother’s admonition to
her soon-to-be-married daughter not to disobey her husband. He then comments that “Making obedience one’s standard is merely the Way of a wife or concubine.” With this he contrasts the proper attitude of the great man (da zhang fu 大丈夫), which is not to submit to any worldly authority in putting into effect the Confucian dao 道. While Mencius’s reference to wives and concubines in this passage only serves to illuminate his larger point about the way a great man comportst himself, clearly he thinks that husbands and wives are separated by more than just differences in function.

As with the Confucian side, Aristotle’s view of the roles of husbands and wives is a complicated one. In the Nicomachean Ethics, he initially bases his theory of friendships of superiority on differences in the excellence and function among the parties involved. Similarly, men and women have different functions, so “they help each other by throwing their peculiar gifts into the common stock.” Yet as mentioned above, their koinonia is like an aristocracy, with the husband in charge while distributing power appropriately to his wife: “for the man rules in accordance with merit, and in those matters in which a man should rule, but the matters that befit a woman he hands over to her.” While the husband–wife relationship, to be sure, is not a tyranny or monarchy, it is not akin to a timocracy or democracy either.

This illustrates a wider conflict in each philosophy between the shared life of friends and family and the fulfillment of individual roles. On Aristotle’s side, if shared life depends to a certain extent upon equality and having things in common, it is difficult to see how a hierarchically structured family unit can attain these qualifications. Since individual role-fulfillment involves the utilization of talents peculiar to one’s age or gender, it is not so obvious how these qualities fit in with the goal of shared life. The members of the family unit will not always share common functions, daily tasks, or equal part in deliberation; yet friendship increases or decreases as commonality does. For Confucius and Mencius, on the other hand, the notion of shared commitment toward virtue seems incompatible with the distinction between husband and wife, and with the injunction of obedience that is placed on wives and children. This incompatibility reaches its peak in the conflicting emphases on natural equality and social hierarchy in early Confucianism: anyone can become a sage, but only a father can rule a family.

V. Conclusion

In sum, the conflict between equality-based friendships and familial relationships is not just one between Aristotle and the early Confu-
cians, but also to a large extent one within their respective philosophies. From a comparative point of view, we are surprised to find the two sides in agreement regarding the continuity between the two kinds of relationships: both think that friendship between members of the same community is predicated on the prior existence of familial bonds. Aristotle writes in the *Eudemian Ethics* that “in the household first we have the sources and springs of friendship, of political organization, and of justice.” This is because the different relationships in the family prepare us for different sorts of friendships in the *polis* and the exercise of justice each entails: the father–son relationship prepares us for the ruler–subject one, the husband–wife one for friendships involving mutual utility, and that between brothers for friendships involving equality. Moreover, family also contributes to the development of virtue friendship, since it first provides us with our moral habituation and we first practice virtuous acts with regard to our siblings or parents. While Confucius emphasizes filial piety as the root of Goodness, acquiring this quality also requires relationships with one’s equals. Not only are friendship and filial piety corequisite for Goodness, but acts of respect toward one’s parents reinforce the bonds one has with one’s friends. If a person’s friends see that his parents are not happy, that person will not have the friends’ trust.

But in spite of this sense of continuity between familial bonds and friendly ones, each side has trouble balancing both within its overarching account of human relationships. This is partially explained by Confucius’s emphasis on filial obligations and Aristotle’s focus on friendship between equals. Yet it also stems from the uneven nature of the relationships themselves, something we see most closely when we try to put them together in each thinker’s account. Bonds between equals and those between family members often involve different kinds of feelings, dissimilar obligations, and varying levels of choice. Bringing these two kinds of association together into a single unified theory, as illustrated by ongoing attempts of contemporary philosophers, is no simple matter.

ENDNOTES

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University Press, 1984). Henceforth, the following abbreviations will be used: EE = Eudemian Ethics, MM = Magna Moralia, NE = Nicomachean Ethics, Pol. = Politics.

2. NE, 1169b: 12–13.

3. Analects, 1: 2 and 2: 21, respectively. Translations of Confucian texts are taken from Confucius: Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003); and Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries, trans. by Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008). I’m grateful to the journal’s editors for suggesting the term “early Confucianism” to refer to these texts.


5. NE, 1157b: 34-1158a: 2; cf. 1156b: 34–36.


8. NE, 1159b: 3.

9. EE, 1240b: 2.

10. NE, 1162a: 35-b: 4; EE, 1239a: 1–3.

11. NE, 1158b: 12–17.

12. Ibid., 1166a: 3–8.


15. EE, 1238b: 27 ff.

16. NE, 1158b: 29–33.

17. Ibid., 1159a: 5–6.

18. EE, 1239a: 3–5.


22. Analects, 1: 2.

23. Ibid., 19: 18.


25. Analects, 2: 5.

26. See also ibid., 4: 18 and, of course, 13: 18. This element of Confucian filial piety has caused continuous controversy; most recently, two issues of Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy, 7, nos. 1 and 2 (2008), were devoted to a symposium on “Filial Piety as the Root of Morality or the Source of Corruption.”

27. Analects, 17: 2; Mencius, 6A: 7.


30. One of Mozi’s arguments in fact considers caring for one’s friends and their parents as examples of what the impartial person does, in contrast to the partial person who

32. Ibid., 3A: 4.
33. Ibid., 5B: 3.
34. *Analects*, 1: 8 and 9: 25.
35. Ibid., 12: 24, 15: 10, and 16: 4. The last of these passages distinguishes between “beneficial” (*yi* 益) and “harmful” (*sun* 害) types of friendship; my discussion in this article is limited to the former kind. Thanks to Chung-ying Cheng for this point.
37. Ibid., 1162a: 4–10.
42. *Analects*, 2: 8.
43. Ibid., 10: 3, 10: 4, 10: 5, and 10: 25.
45. Ibid., 7A: 15.
47. Ibid., 1163b: 19–22.
50. Ibid., 1156a: 2–5.
51. Ibid., 1166a: 3–8.
52. At ibid., IX: 5.
55. Ibid., 1156b: 20–23. A passage in the *Magna Moralia*, in fact, puts familial love above all the other kinds: “Among all the above-mentioned forms of friendship love is strongest in that which is based on kindred, and more particularly in the relation of father to son” (1211b: 18–20).
56. *NE*, 1159a: 26–33. Though, as Nancy Sherman notes, this notion of the mother as an exemplar of goodwill is difficult to mesh with Aristotle’s general view of women as rationally defective and incapable of full virtue; *The Fabric of Character* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 154–55.
58. See ibid., 3A: 5 and 5A: 3.
59. Ibid., 5A: 3; translation slightly modified.
60. Ibid., 7A: 15.
61. *NE*, 1159a: 34.
62. Ibid., 1159a: 18–24; cf. 1095b: 26–9. Moreover, as he points out in his analysis of the three types of life in *NE*, I: 5, honor depends primarily on the people who bestow it, so it cannot be the primary end of the good life.
63. Ibid., 1159b: 2–3.
67. *NE*, 1161b: 14–15; translation modified (the Greek at 1161b: 14–15 is *koinōnikais eoikasais mallon*, which in the Barnes edition of *The Complete Works* is rendered as “are
more like mere friendships of association”; there is nothing in the original text, however, that corresponds to “mere”).

68. I owe this point to Pakaluk, Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics Books VIII and IX, 128.


70. Analects, 12: 23, 12: 24, and 15: 10; Mencius, 4B: 30, 5B: 3, and 5B: 7.


72. This is illustrated most forcefully perhaps in Mencius 1B: 8, in which Mencius down-plays the assassination of the tyrant Zhou on the grounds that his disregard for governing with benevolence and righteousness has downgraded his status from “ruler” to that of a mere “fellow.”


74. Analects, 13: 3.

75. Ibid., 12: 11.

76. For a discussion of some of recent views, see Van Norden, Virtue Ethics and Consequ-entialism, 82 ff.

77. Analects, 1: 2, 2: 5, and 2: 21, respectively.

78. NE, 1160b: 23–24.


80. NE, 1158b: 18.

81. Ibid., 1162a: 23–24.

82. Ibid., 1160b: 33–35.

83. Gareth Matthews refers to two opposed aspects in Aristotle’s view of gender which exist alongside each other: the “Complementary Theory” and the “Norm-Defect Theory.” In the former, men and women are seen to have contrary features that balance each other; in the latter, the male offers a normative standard of which the female is defective (“Gender and Essence in Aristotle,” The Australasian Journal of Philosophy 64 (1986): 16–25). These roughly account for the functional and hierarchical distinctions, respectively, between husbands and wives in the family unit.

84. EE, 1242b: 1–2.

85. On these points, refer to Belfiore, “Family Friendship,” 126; and Sherman, The Fabric of Character, 151–155.

86. Mencius, 4A: 12.

87. The recent attempts to reduce filial obligations to the model of friendship provide just one example. For summary and criticism, see Simon Keller, “Four Theories of Filial Duty,” The Philosophical Quarterly 56, no. 223 (2006): 254–74, at 262–64.