

Book Review

Cline, E. (2015). *Families of virtue: Confucian and Western views on childhood development*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Reviewed by Ottis Murray, Ed.D.
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 12, Number 2 (2015)
Copyright 2015, Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB)

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of ASWB.

Erin Cline is currently a professor at Georgetown University in the departments of theology and philosophy. Her areas of interest and specialization are Chinese and comparative philosophy, religion, and political thought.

The author suggests that “there is considerable evidence that parent-child relationships during infancy and early childhood serve a unique and irreplaceable role in moral development” (p. xi). And, a simple Google search confirms the continued interest with 3,880,000 hits for the term, “the role of family in moral development.”¹

Professor Cline helps the reader explore the potentially significant contributions to be gleaned from an examination and contemporary interpretation of classical Confucian philosophy with a focus on parent-child relationships and moral cultivation. Using Confucian texts (i.e., the *Analects*, the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*) she develops the argument of the validity and import of these works to family and moral development and illustrates their uniqueness, especially when compared to Western philosophy. One clear theme in Chinese culture is the focus on filial piety (e.g., “there is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father and the son is son.”²), which is seen as a key virtue. Historian Hugh D.R. Baker suggests that respect for the family is the only element common to almost all Chinese believers.³

¹Google search, August 21, 2015

²*Analects XII*, 11, trans. Legge.

³Baker, H. D. R. *Chinese family and kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979. pg. 98

In my view, Chapter 3, “Parents, Children and Moral Cultivation in Traditional Western Philosophy,” is the most significant and instructive chapter in the book. While the canons of traditional Western philosophy focus on matters that are important, attention to parent-child moral development is tangentially noted but not seriously examined. To illustrate this, the author provides clear examples that range from the ideas of Plato to John Dewey, which are focused through the lens of a Confucianism perspective. From her vantage point, “... the Confucians had not only more to say about these topics but much more that turns out to accurate in light of what we know now about the role of parents in the moral development of their children.” (p. 140). The following chapter examines feminist philosophy, as represented in the works of Nel Nodding, Virginia Held, and Sara Ruddick, which focuses on the parent-child relationship and what I choose to call a symbiotic relationship (unintended?) with Confucian ideals.

“Evidence based practice (approach, etc.)” is a buzz phrase, along with “gold standard,” that I daily hope to see die a painful death. While catchy, it is often a red flag in that it camouflages rather than illuminates. But, the author provides the context for the casual reader to appreciate the focus and importance of the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program. And by examining the successes of the program’s dramatic evidence of achievement, one can also appreciate the significance and insight of Confucian thought. Scientific evidence rocks the Western world and from this bedrock, policy can

be informed, discussed and rationally formulated. Professor Cline's words, "... I have argued that more than any other tradition or philosopher, early Confucian thinkers communicate these goods to us in moving, vivid ways that speak to the heart, prompt reflection and inspire change" (p. 294).

As a first step, I would suggest the reader, unless familiar with Confucian philosophy, first dip his or her toes in the water by exploring the classics (at least the *Analects*) to develop an appreciation of the range and depth of the approach offered. Then using this book, methodically consider and evaluate the possibilities. I would recommend this book to the seasoned social worker, who with benefit of

experience and knowledge of the often unfortunate realities of bureaucracies, may gaze beyond and explore the possibilities of alternatives to enhance current practice and policy.

For me this book was a challenge in several ways. However, it is not formulistic; it is not proscriptive; it is not the much sought after touchstone. But, it is unique, clearly and well written, passionate and resolute in the view that other cultures (i.e., Confucian philosophy) can well teach us a lesson if our hearts and thoughts are not habitually judgmental or dismissive.