

Hierarchies and Dignity: A Confucian Communitarian Approach

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ABSTRACT: We discuss workers' dignity in hierarchical organizations. First, we explain why a conflict exists between high-ranking individuals' authority and low-ranking individuals' dignity. Then, we ask whether there is any justification that reconciles hierarchical authority with the dignity of workers. We advance a communitarian justification for hierarchical authority, drawing upon Confucianism, which provides that workers can justifiably accept hierarchical authority when it enables a certain type of social functioning critical for the good life of workers and other involved parties. The Confucian communitarian perspective shows that promoting workers' good life or well-being is an important condition for protecting their dignity.

KEY WORDS: hierarchy, authority, dignity, Confucianism, communitarianism

INTRODUCTION

IN THIS ARTICLE, we discuss workers' dignity in hierarchical business organizations.¹ If a person who has a price cannot have dignity (Kant 1785/1996: 84 [4: 434]),² one might believe that firms are an ideal place for dignity, for, as Ronald Coase (1937) memorably claims, a price mechanism that occurs in a market significantly wanes inside firms. The moral reality, however, is not that simple. As Coase also points out, "[i]f a workman moves from department *Y* to department *X*, he does not go because of a change in relative prices, but because he *is ordered to do so*" (387: italics ours). In firms, hierarchy replaces much of the price mechanism³ and, as we explain below, poses challenges to a worker's dignity.⁴ Largely, two options exist to protect the worker's dignity: eliminate hierarchy altogether or reconcile it with dignity. In this article, we consider the feasibility of the second path, exploring ways that the problem of dignity, which we explain soon, can be handled without eliminating hierarchical structures altogether.

Non-hierarchical or structurally more egalitarian firms do exist (e.g., Powell, 1990). Nonetheless, many kinds of organizations are inevitably hierarchical (e.g., Leavitt, 2005), and we limit the scope of our exploration to such firms.

In *Section 2*, we elaborate on the problem of dignity. The problem is whether it is consistent with the dignity of low-ranking individuals (workers) to recognize in high-ranking individuals (managers) the authority to give orders to and direct the actions of workers. In *Section 3*, we ask whether there is any justification that reconciles hierarchical authority with the dignity of workers. We advance a communitarian justification for hierarchical authority, drawing upon Confucianism, which provides that workers can justifiably accept hierarchical authority without compromising their dignity when it enables a certain type of social functioning critical for the good life of workers and other involved parties. In particular, the authority of the manager is consistent with workers' dignity to the extent that the manager is committed to possessing and cultivating virtues, including primarily, but not limited to, what we conceptualize as a service orientation and a relational orientation. In *Section 4*, we conclude by discussing implications of this article for management research, education, and practice.

1. THE PROBLEM OF DIGNITY

1.1. The Reason-Responsiveness Aspect of Dignity

The term “dignity” is often used in two different senses (Hodson, 2001; Meyer & Parent, 1992). First, “dignity” signifies something that one should acquire by conforming to some moral standards; thus, not all people have dignity. The second sense involves a strictly egalitarian idea: that dignity is attributed to all persons by virtue of their distinctive character as persons.⁵

Kant offers perhaps the most sophisticated account of dignity in this second sense (1797/1996: 99 [6: 435]). For Kant, dignity, which he characterizes as “above any price” and “inalienable” (1785: 558 [6: 436]), is primarily grounded by autonomy (1785: 558 [6: 436, 440]; Hill, 1992: Ch. 2). Kant explains that autonomy—a property of the will of every rational being—is something that makes us capable of legislating to ourselves moral laws, which in turn makes us have dignity. What gives us dignity is that we are agents who are capable of acting for reasons that we justifiably see as reasons—that is, we are capable of *reason-responsiveness*, to use contemporary philosophers' language. Elizabeth Anderson (1997: 92) says, for instance, “we act for reasons that we endorse. We do not follow blindly....” Similarly, Gary Watson (2004: 2) says, “we are agents because (and in so far as) we shape our lives by the exercise of normative intelligence,” by which he means a rational capacity to act on reasons to which we relevantly respond.

This broadly Kantian idea that dignity is deeply associated with the reason-responsive aspect of autonomy is widely shared by Western philosophers (e.g., Anderson, 1997; Arpaly, 2003; Korsgaard, 2009; Nagel, 1978; O'Neill, 1989; Velleman, 2000).⁶ Contemporary Confucian philosophers admit that even Confucians, who barely developed any articulated concept of dignity, should

accept the idea about reason-responsiveness and attempt to show that Confucianism is compatible with the idea (Angle, 2009, 2012; Chan, 2002, 2014). The idea is that one respects another person's dignity only if one acts in ways that appropriately recognize another person's ability to engage in reflective reasoning and to make justifiable claims based on that reasoning—that is, to be reason-responsive. If a person is autonomous in this sense, she must be able to reflectively evaluate reasons for action and direct her own behavior based on reasons she rationally finds acceptable and authoritative, which confers dignity. In contrast, if one asks others to do a certain act without giving a reason that they can justifiably accept as a reason, the others have an objective reason to believe that their status as reason-responsive agents is compromised, so that a fundamental aspect of their dignity is compromised.⁷

Dignity is a contested notion and different conceptions of dignity can be developed in defensible forms (Bolton, 2007; Dillon, 1995; Hodson, 2001; Mayer & Parent, 1992; Rosen, 2012). Nonetheless, the broadly Kantian idea that dignity is associated with reason-responsiveness, upon which we rely, is itself plausible and found in various accounts of dignity (Feinberg, 1980; Harbermas, 2010; Kateb, 2011; Luban, 2007; Margalit, 1996; Nussbaum, 1998; Raz, 1985; Sen, 2001). Below, we explain how hierarchy challenges the reason-responsive aspect of worker's dignity.

1.2. Hierarchy, Authority and the Reason-Responsiveness Aspect of Dignity

Hierarchy is understood in organizational scholarship as “an implicit or explicit rank order of individuals or groups with respect to their relative possession of a valued social dimension” (Magee & Galinsky, 2008: 354). In firms, particularly, rank is represented by a specific position within an organizational structure (Mintzberg, 1983). Individuals' job titles denote their rank, and the organization has a formal reporting structure depicted by an organizational chart. Groups try to accord higher rank to those who help the group succeed (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989; Emerson, 1962; Goldhamer & Shils, 1939), and people generally assume that higher-ranking individuals possess greater skills, ability, and motivation (Magee, Kilduff, & Heath, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

Higher rank in formal⁸ hierarchies typically grants corporate decision makers power to control the behavior of lower-ranking workers (Scott, Dornbusch, Busching, & Laing, 1967; Weber, 1978). The power to control workers' behaviors is often called *de facto* authority—that is, power to rule (McMahon, 1994). Weber (1978) described how position in the organization serves as the source of *de facto* authority in modern bureaucratic organizations. Traditional roles (such as that of priest) and personal qualities (such as charisma and expertise) can augment *de facto* authority, but they are not necessary within bureaucratic organizations because *de facto* authority inheres in the hierarchical position a person occupies.⁹

The *inherent* nature of *de facto* authority seems inconsistent with a certain aspect of dignity. As Herbert Simon (1957) points out, higher-ranking decision makers who have authority have power to demand that low-ranking workers follow their orders *without giving reasons for demanding compliance*.¹⁰ In other words, when a manager with authority asks a worker to perform a certain act, for instance,

cleaning the windows, the worker is required to perform the task simply because the manager so directed it. But the mere fact that one person tells another what to do provides by itself no (acceptable) reason for him to do it (Christiano, 2012; Green, 1990; Perry, 2012; Raz, 1985; Simmons, 1979, 2001; Wolff, 1970). If people have dignity because they can act for reasons they endorse—that is, because they are capable of reason-responsiveness—, acting without reasons, or for reasons they find regrettable, imperils their dignity.

To address the problem of dignity, in this article, we develop the following argument:

Premise 1) The reason-responsiveness aspect of dignity requires that a higher-ranking corporate decision maker with authority give justification for exercising his or her authority that workers can reasonably accept (i.e., the problem of dignity).

Premise 2) The Confucian communitarian justification that we develop provides a reason for managerial authority that workers can justifiably accept.

Conclusion Thus, the Confucian communitarian justification meets the demand of the reason-responsiveness aspect of dignity.

3. CONFUCIAN COMMUNITARIAN REASONS FOR AUTHORITY

There are many communitarian views, but only some have been applied to business. Notably, Edwin Hartman (1996) and Robert Solomon (1992) have used Aristotle's communitarian conception of the *polis* as a model of the firm, and Thomas Donaldson and Thomas Dunfee (1999) offer a pluralist communitarian interpretation of the firm. To our knowledge, however, only one communitarian view—the Confucian view—focuses on the central issue of our discussion: the ethics of hierarchy and authority. First articulated by Confucius around the fifth century B.C., this view has evolved over the last thousand years through the work of many Confucian scholars (for reviews, see, e.g., Fung, 1948; Graham, 2003; Ivanhoe, 1993; Schwartz, 1985), and has recently been further developed by both Western and Asian theorists (Angle, 2009, 2012; Bell, 2008, 2012, 2015; Chan, 1997, 2002, 2014; S. Kim, 2011, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). Although many find the Confucian view largely consistent with other communitarian views or Western virtue ethics (Angle & Slote, 2013; Slingerland, 2011; Slote, 2013; Van Norden, 2007), we find it distinctive from them in its “frank acceptance of hierarchy and authority as a necessary and even good aspect of a civilized and harmonious society” (Schwartz, 1985: 68; see also Allan, 2015; Bell, 2008: Ch. 3; Tan, 2010).

The reason-responsiveness aspect of dignity requires that a higher-ranking corporate decision maker with authority give justification for exercising his or her authority that workers can reasonably accept. With what reason is it acceptable for the higher-ranking decision maker to issue an order to a low-ranking worker? Confucians have a distinctive answer that invokes the general communitarian idea that the existence of the hierarchical relationship makes available goods that are crucial to human flourishing, goods that would not otherwise be available. For Confucians, the hierarchical relationship exists to make it possible for the individual, in Stephen Angle's (2012: 130) terms, to be part of “fluid—and even graceful or beautiful—social functioning.” In fact, one of the most well-known

Confucian metaphors for authority is the wind that peacefully bends the grass in the field. Consider this:

Ji Kangzi asked Confucius about governing effectively (*zheng*政) ... Confucius replied ... The excellence (*de*德)[or virtue] of the exemplary person (*junzi*君子)[or higher ranking individuals] is the wind; while that of the petty person [or low-ranking individuals] is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend (*Analects* 12.19).¹¹

On a first encounter, the language of fluidity, grace, beauty, peace, wind, and grass makes the Confucian aim sound hopelessly soft, nothing that could guide a high-ranking corporate decision maker in practical decision-making. But note that the *Spring and Autumn* and *Warring States* periods (春秋戰國時代; about 770-220 B.C.) allowed Confucian thinkers little time to contemplate governance. After the movement of the *Zhou* capital eastward (東周; 771 B.C.), the ancient Chinese society became drastically unstable and chaotic with the collapse of centralized rule, facing new socio-economic developments (e.g., urbanization; see Allan, 2015: Ch. 2). In fact, Ji Kangzi of the above passage, known as chief minister of the feudal state of *Lu* 魯, was consulting Confucius about real politics. For Ji Kangzi, the Confucian aim was clear enough: a higher-ranking decision maker guides low-ranking individuals to harmoniously collaborate in a way that allows them to develop their strengths and virtues while complementing the strengths and virtues of others. The distinctiveness and power of this idea shows that contemporary corporate governance theorists can still learn something from early Confucians about what really justifies hierarchy and authority.¹²

Begin with etymology. A typical Chinese translation of the English term “authority” is *quanwei* (權威).¹³ Although *quanwei* is barely used in early Confucian texts, authority is a repeated theme in the transmitted texts (Elstein, 2009; Schwartz, 1985). Indeed, the two characters (*quan* and *wei*) often appear in the texts, although separately (Tan 2010). For instance, Confucius considers *wei* as a desirable quality of higher-ranking individuals, writing “If the gentleman (*junzi*) is not grave, then he does not inspire awe (*wei*)” (*Analects* 1.8)¹⁴ and “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) ... are awe-inspiring (*wei*) and yet not fierce (*meng*猛)[or bestial]” (20.2).¹⁵ A common contemporary translation of *quan* is “right,” “privilege,” or “claim,” but none of them closely approximates the philosophical meaning behind *quan*. Etymologically, *quan* refers to part of a scale (*Analects* 9.30, 20.1): the part that determines a standard or sets a model that governs lightness and heaviness, like the Western counterpart, *Lady Justice*. Ames and Rosemont, Jr. translated *junzi* (the gentleman or higher-ranking individual) as an “exemplary person” who serves as a model, and that Confucius says “Gravity” (*zhong*重) is an essential quality of *junzi* (1.8): for the person must bring awe-inspiring gravity to his community. In what follows, we explore what makes an awe-inspiring gravity—or what makes authority consistent with lower-ranking workers’ dignity. The following is the skeleton of the argument to be made:

Premise 1) The reason-responsiveness aspect of dignity requires that a higher-ranking corporate decision maker with authority give justification for exercising his or her authority that workers can reasonably accept (i.e., the problem of dignity).

Premise 2) Any reasonable individual necessarily has good reason to care about living the good life.

Premise 3) The Confucian communitarian account of authority explains how managerial authority defined by the account can help lower-ranking individuals live the good life.

Conclusion Hence, the Confucian account provides a reason for authority that low-ranking individuals can rationally accept, so meets the demand of the reason-responsiveness aspect of dignity.

We already discussed *Premise 1* above. We assume that *Premise 2* is widely acceptable. In the following sub-sections, we establish *Premise 3* and, thus, our conclusion.

3.1. The Service Conception of Authority

One of the most important ideas of authority in the entirety of traditional Chinese thought is Heaven's Mandate (*tianming* 天命: Allan, 1981, 2015; Chan, 2014; Ivanhoe, 2007; Pines, 2013; Schwartz, 1985; Stalnaker, 2013; Tiwald, 2008; S. Kim, 2011, 2015a, 2015b). Historians mostly agree that the idea of Heaven's Mandate became a substantive political narrative for the first time during the *Zhou* dynasty (Creel, 1983; Pines, 2002; Poo, 1998). After the *Zhou* conquered the *Shang* dynasty (商; about 16th-11th century B.C.) it needed to legitimize its authority with something other than hereditary succession. Remarkably, the ancient civilization attempted a radical, merit-based approach that authority does not come from lineage but from Heaven, which gives its Mandate to only those who work hard at promoting the good life of the governed. This idea is widely expressed and promoted in various early Confucian texts, including *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Book of History* (*Shujing* 書經) and *Way of King Tang and King Yu* (*Tangyuzhidao* 唐虞之道). Later Xunzi (around 3rd century B.C.) well articulated the idea in his often-cited passage in a chapter of Grand Digest (*Dalu* 大略):

Heaven's birthing of the common people [low-ranking individuals] was not for the sake of their lords [high-ranking individuals], but Heaven's establishing of lords was for the sake of the common people. ... Understanding people is the proper way of a ruler (*Xunzi* 27.425-430).¹⁶

Also consider a similar passage that Chan (2013: 31) draws upon from an ancient text, *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露):

If a person's virtue is sufficient to ensure peace and contentment for the people, Heaven will give its mandate to him to govern, but if the vice of a serving ruler is sufficient to seriously harm the people, Heaven will take away the mandate from him.¹⁷

One might think that this ancient Confucian thought is a far-fetched idea to the contemporary mind, because it is unclear whether or not Heaven is still an acceptable idea. Chan (2014) claims, though, that the ancient Confucian approach can make perfect sense even to the contemporary mind, because for early Confucians, Heaven, which is not equivalent to approval of people or popularism, is considered a third

party that genuinely cares, defends, and promotes the moral flourishing or good life of people (Ivanhoe, 2007). Roger Ames (2001: 165), pushing the same logic to the end, argues that Heaven is itself the good life of people, calling Heaven the “flower” of “the flourishing community.”¹⁸ There is room for debate about Ames’s understanding (Ivanhoe, 2007), but it cannot be denied that Heaven’s Mandate is deeply associated with *the objectively good life of people*.

The idea underlying Heaven’s Mandate can be captured by the less religious Chinese concept, “Elevating the Worthy” (*shangxian* 尚賢), which is one of the most important ideas in both China’s traditional and contemporary governance discussion (Pines, 2013). The idea is that high-ranking individuals’ authority is legitimate to the extent that they merit that authority; they merit it to the extent that they are competent and committed to enabling a certain type of social functioning critical for the well-being (or good life) of low-ranking individuals (Bell, 2015; Chan, 2013; Fan, 2013). The idea of “Elevating the Worthy” can surely be secularly interpreted and applied to organizational communities. That is, the fundamental purpose of conferring authority on a certain person in an organizational community is the well-being or the good life of those who obey the authority. In other words, for Confucians, the legitimacy of hierarchical authority depends fundamentally upon the high-ranking individuals’ commitment to using orders only in the service of protecting and promoting low-ranking individuals’ capabilities to lead the good life, to which Chan (2014) refers as the Confucian *service* conception of authority.¹⁹

Chan’s service conception can be sinologically further strengthened by the recently discovered ancient Chinese bamboo-slip manuscripts. Sarah Allan’s (2015) translations and commentaries show that the service conception was, in fact, the fundamental theme of the early Confucian political thought. For instance, consider the beginning of *Way of King Tang and King Yu*:

...The kingship of Yao and Shun benefited everyone-under-heaven, yet it did not benefit them. ... To benefit everyone-under-heaven and not to benefit oneself is the zenith of humaneness. In ancient times men of worth, humaneness, and sageliness behaved in this manner. ...[I(Slips 1-3; 22/1-9)].²⁰

Tang [or Yao] and Yu [or Shun] are the two legendary kings of the *Shang* dynasty whom early Confucian texts unanimously praise for Tang’s abdication in favor of the meritorious figure, Shun, rather than his own son. In early Confucian texts, selected histories of a past served as a ground for criticisms of existing politics (Lewis, 1999), and the historical legend was widely used in various early Classics to justify the idea of Heaven’s Mandate and “Elevating the Worthy” (Allan, 1981, 2015). Given that the discovered bamboo-slip manuscripts survived the *burning of books and burying of scholars* (*fenshu kengru* 焚書坑儒) in 213 B.C. by the first Emperor of the *Qin* dynasty (秦)—who allegedly attempted to weaken the idea of Heaven’s Mandate in the transmitted texts for his legalistic or anti-humanistic rule—the passage above in Chan’s (2014) service conception can be said to maintain the genuine Confucian idea about authority.

Unlike a contract-based Western view that authority comes from the consent of free individuals over whom authority is exercised, the Confucian service conception

takes the human good as the fundamental basis for possessing authority. Because the flourishing of the human good, well-being, or welfare is a reason that low-ranking workers can justifiably accept, then if the authority is committed to serving workers' good, to perfecting workers' virtuous relationships and to supporting or bringing about the good of the community workers care about, workers can reasonably accept and defer to the higher-ranking corporate decision makers' authority, without compromising their reason-responsive aspect of dignity.

What type of good does authority help individuals to realize? Consider the conductor of a symphony orchestra (Fingarette, 1972; Kim & Strudler, 2012). The conductor's authority to direct others creates a possibility for the members of the orchestra that would not exist without the conductor's authority: coming together in a successful performance. By respecting the conductor's authority to direct them, the symphony members can each improve their skills and together create a piece of art that could not be achieved without the conductor's authority, no matter how prodigious the talents of individual orchestra members. Coaches of successful athletic teams play identical roles. By developing the individual talents of athletes and coordinating the efforts of each person, a coach enables performances that the team could not attain without the coach's authority. Indeed music, coordinated dance, or team play are often-used metaphors in Confucian texts for the adept or good community (Fingarette, 1983; Ihara 2004). Authority in an organization can function similarly, as it can help individuals' capabilities and weave together their talents in ways that create a successful whole that individuals could not create or cultivate without that authority (see, e.g., Mencius 3A4).

Notably, this justification for authority hinges on the capability and the commitment of the authority in question. To the extent that high-ranking individuals are committed to achieving these performances in a way that undermines one or more lower-ranking individuals' ability to live the good life, the authority of high-ranking individuals is inconsistent with the lower-ranking individuals' dignity. For instance, an advisor can relegate graduate students in a lab to menial tasks, such as citing references for papers, and these tasks can often help students properly develop important intellectual capabilities required to be academics and contribute to the lab's productivity. But this exercise of authority would be unacceptable if instead of developing their talents, the students are instrumentally used to mechanically do the referencing job all the time, which disrespects their potential to flourish and undermines their overall good life. In this way, the service conception differs from mere coordination. Authorities may not coordinate in whichever way they see fit. Instead, authorities must coordinate in a specific way—one that respects and develops a place in the community for each member of the group.

We point out, however, that we construe the idea of what is good for a person broadly, in terms of what advances the reasons within a morally virtuous person's motivational set (Williams, 1981), that is, the reasons that can be derived from the desires with which a virtuous person, in fact, identifies. Because a virtuous person has other-regarding desires and not merely self-interested desires, our account may on occasion recognize a high-ranking individual's authority to order employees to

make a sacrifice, e.g., take a wage cut during a corporate financial crisis so that the firm can provide health care benefits to its poorest employees.

3.2. *The Relational Orientation of Authority*

Early Confucians believed that Heaven's Mandate is best known through an indirect proxy: (affective) relationships between rulers and people (Chan, 2004; S. Kim, 2015a, 2015b; Tiwald, 2008). Consider a passage from Mencius:

...Heaven does not speak, but simply reveals the Mandate through actions and affairs. ... He [Yao] put Shun in charge of affairs, and the affairs were well ordered, and the people were at ease [or content, pleased] with him. This was the people accepting him. Heaven gave it to him, and people gave it to him. Hence, as I said, 'The Son of Heaven [ruler] cannot give the world to another person' (*Mencius* 5A5.6).²¹

In the passage above along with many other passages, Mencius well articulates the idea that the best proxy of Heaven's approval of a certain ruler is overwhelming contentment, love, and admiration from the people. Mencius even developed various operational measures such as "keep track of the sentiments expressed in their [ordinary people's] songs and ballads, look for indications that oppressed peoples would welcome foreign intervention, and (most importantly) observe how the people 'vote with their feet'—that is, whose roads they travel by, where they choose to conduct trade, and in whose state they prefer to make their homes (*Mencius* 1A7, 1B10, 2A5, 5A6, 7B4)" (Tiwald, 2008: 277).

Setting aside the epistemic issues, the philosophical idea underlying Heaven's Mandate is that for Confucians, authority is acceptable for lower-ranking individuals to the extent that it is committed to creating the good life of lower-ranking individuals *by enabling positive and virtuous relationships with low-ranking individuals* (Chan, 2014). Early Confucians paid special attention to the connection between authority and human relationships by treating authority, as Angle (2012) explains, as a kind of knot that gracefully ties high-ranking individuals and low-ranking individuals. Similarly, Chan (2014) points out that what makes authority acceptable is not only the high-ranking individuals' capability and commitment to create successful performances for the good life, but also the positive relationship created between high- and low-ranking individuals. To show the relational orientation, Chan draws upon various passages from *The Analects*. Consider one of them:

Restore those states that have been destroyed, continue those lineages that have been broken, lift up those subjects whose talents have been lost to the people, and you will *win over the hearts-and-minds of the common people* throughout the land (20.10 italics added).²²

According to the above passages as well as many others (e.g., 13.16; 16.1; 20.1; 2.19), when authorities act in ways that enable positive relationships—for instance, those marked by trust, commitment, care, and support—lower-ranking individuals will be able to accept the authority *willingly and gladly*, and these can be understood as a proxy of Heaven's Mandate. That is, authorities become genuinely

acceptable only when they are recognized, and willingly complied with by the hearts of lower-ranking people (Chan, 2014).

The relational orientation embraced by early Confucians implies that authority is in fact a precarious, vulnerable, and fragile power, because it is in part constituted by the attitudes and commitments of both the high- and the low-ranking individuals. For instance, in *The Book of History* (*Shujing* 書經), the Duke of Zhou is repeatedly concerned that although Zhou has been given Heaven's Mandate to rule the people of Yin, the mandate can easily be lost if the new regime fails to win *the people's hearts* (see Chan, 2014: 36-7). In particular, Chan (2014: 37) considers the Song Dynasty (宋 960-1279 CE)'s famous poet and politician Su Dongpo (蘇東坡 or Su Shi 蘇軾), who makes the same point with an analogy:

It is said in *The Book of History*, 'In ruling over the people, I feel as if I were holding six horses with worn-out reins.' ... The basis of the ruler's [authority] lies, therefore, entirely in the support of the people in their hearts.²³

In other words, either side of the relationship can undermine authority by withdrawing the appropriate attitudes of trust, commitment, care, and support—virtues that enable positive relationships within hierarchies. As Schwartz (1985: 71) points out, for Confucians “[h]ierarchy itself, to be sure, does not preclude reciprocity.” Early Confucians never think that authority is something a ruler owns in perpetuity. Mencius, for instance, believes that a ruler is the least important element of a society and can be replaced, writing, “The people are the most important, the altars to the land and grain are next, and the ruler is the least important. For this reason, one who wins over the common people becomes the Son of Heaven” (*Mencius* 7B14.1-2).²⁴

In the Confucian view, leaders who want to be acceptably authoritative must strive to preserve and enhance their relationship by trying to build positive relationships with lower-ranking individuals. The Confucian tradition advises that high-ranking individuals continually remind themselves of the fragility of their authority and devote themselves wholeheartedly to serving others. Acceptable authority cannot be obtained through capability, might, rank, or institutional office alone (Chan, 2014; Elstein, 2009; Ivanhoe, 2007; Tan, 2010; Tiwald, 2008).

As we discussed above, an important aspect of winning the hearts of low-ranking individuals is to lead them in ways that are good for their moral life and for flourishing. Unless workers trust that their leaders sufficiently care about the good of the workers, the leaders cannot win the hearts of the workers. If leaders cannot win hearts, then the leaders' authority is not fully acceptable, so it is inconsistent with workers' reason-responsive aspect of dignity. How can leaders sufficiently care about the good of the workers? Angle's (2012) five defeaters of healthy hierarchical relationships, which he develops by drawing upon neo-Confucians' works like Mou Zongsan, can be good starting points. A leader has adopted a relational orientation only if a leader does not possess *at least* these defeaters.

The first defeater is rigidity of status or capabilities. If there is no chance for a low-ranking worker to be promoted to a higher position even if he deserves this, or there is no chance to learn capabilities required for him to be promoted, there

is not a healthy hierarchical relationship that sufficiently cares about the good of the workers. Unlike popular understanding of Confucianism, early Confucians wholeheartedly support abdication to the worthy (Allan, 2015; Tiwald, 2008), and Mencius is known for his radical suggestion that high-ranking individuals can be justifiably stepped down, exiled, and even killed if they fail to earn the hearts of people by failing to meet their obligations (*Mencius* 1B6, 1B8). Likewise, from the Confucian perspective, high-ranking corporate individuals should develop a virtue of promoting the worthy and, sometimes, honorably stepping down.

The second defeater is coercion. If a manager coercively exercises her authority to direct her workers to do something, her authority becomes unacceptable, since coercion is a constitutive part of neither the worker's good life nor the manager's (Tan, 2004). Confucius teaches in various passages of the *Analects* the importance of non-coercive, non-legalistic leadership or rule of virtue (e.g., 13.4, 13.6).

The third defeater is involuntary sacrifice or blind obedience. For Confucians, obedience is not always unquestioning. We explain this aspect in *Section 3.3* below.

Fourth is what Angle (2012: 132) calls omnivalence, which refers to "situations in which one individual is hierarchically inferior (or superior) across all contexts, even if he or she is not inferior (or superior) to the same others in every one of these contexts." If, for example, an experienced engineer's opinion about a mechanical issue is not appropriately respected by her manager because the engineer is hierarchically inferior to the manager, this is not a healthy hierarchical relationship constitutive of the good life for both of them.

The fifth defeater is indefeasibility of the superior's judgment. Again, unlike popular images of Confucianism, early Confucians believe that remonstrance (*jian* 諫) as well as deference is a virtue for a healthy hierarchy. Interestingly, Confucius admonished Yan Hui, one of his best students (*Analects* 5.9), saying, "There is nothing that I say that he doesn't like" (11.4).²⁵ David Elstein (2009) explains that Confucius regards himself as imperfect and fallible, so he gives room for debates to his students and sometimes even encourages disputes. Like Confucius, high-ranking corporate individuals must be open to the defeasibility of their opinions. Confucius consistently makes the same point in *Family Reverence* (*Xiaojing* 孝經).²⁶ Mencius even says, "If the ruler makes some great mistake, then they remonstrate with him. If he does it repeatedly and does not listen to them, they remove him from office" (142).²⁷ Accordingly, high-ranking individuals are advised to be open to workers' opinions about what is good for themselves and for the company.

3.3. Clarifications

Question 1: If the broadly Kantian idea of dignity that we endorse requires that workers be reason-responsive agents who define for themselves what constitutes the good life, isn't it fundamentally inconsistent with the Confucian idea that high-ranking individuals who serve workers define what is good for workers?

There is no inconsistency. The Kantian idea of reason-responsiveness is not the Wild West idea of freedom of choice, which provides that a person should directly

decide everything about his or her life, never deferring to anyone else. As David Luban (2007: 75) explains, this popular American idea is not consistent with the Kantian idea of dignity. A person who intentionally acts wrongly does not act in a reason-responsive way, even if he acts without the threat of coercion. Reason-responsive choice involves respect for the moral law or reason. To the extent that both a managerial leader and her employee both aspire to respect the moral law, there will ideally be congruence in their choices. To the extent that managerial choice involves reasonable attempts to coordinate actions of many different employees, each employee will ideally have reason to defer.

In reality, conflict between managers and employees occurs. For example, managers can act oppressively, exercising authority by assigning an onerous task to an employee or humiliating him. Elements of the Confucian account of authority can mitigate this concern. The moral significance of deference—an important virtue in hierarchical relationships—is undermined if the interaction is colored by oppressive factors (Angle, 2012; Chan, 2000, 2002; Stalnaker, 2013; Young, 1990). Thus an abusive exercise of authority is no acceptable exercise of authority at all, and does not merit deference, even on the Confucian account. More troubling instances of conflict occur when managers and employees reasonably disagree about the right action to undertake. Imagine a manager of a tree-trimming service, who conscientiously tells his employee to climb a tree, which the employee conscientiously believes to be unsafe to climb. If manager and employee reasonably disagree, the climber may thus refuse to climb the tree, and the manager may reprimand him or even terminate his employment in response. The Confucian account cannot explain how to resolve such a conflict, but that is no defect of the account. Some conflicts are intrinsically difficult, and good theory must reflect rather than dissolve that fact.

Question 2: Isn't the Confucian communitarian account of authority hopeless, because it does not seriously take into account important sociological facts that pervade modern business organizations?

Suppose that the employee has been promoted to a manager position and he has learned and seriously committed to the Confucian communitarian account of legitimate authority. He wants to use his authority to serve his workers and to serve the good life of all involved parties. He wants to win their hearts by sincerely attempting to care about what is good for them. But he faces several difficulties in exercising his authority in accordance with the Confucian idea. Specifically, the employee does not have enough power to do so; higher-ranking individuals constrain his options. Moreover, workers and other stakeholders often have conflicting interests. They share some, but not all, interests. The fundamental capitalist competition often pushes his company to be blindly self-interested and greedy for its survival. Hence, the Confucian communitarian account is a good *ideal* theory, but business operates in *non-ideal* conditions (Hamlin & Stemplowska, 2012; Stemplowska & Swift, 2012; Valentini, 2012).

Confucius himself waited for an ideal ruler, but “the phoenix does not come and the river does not give forth a chart” (*Analects* 9.9),²⁸ so he could not but admit that an ideal dynasty would not come true in his time. We do not deny that the Confucian account of authority is an ideal theory. By ideal theory, we mean

a theory that prescribes right action in ideal circumstances, that is, circumstances in which everybody plays by the moral rules. Plainly, all business now operates in non-ideal circumstances. But that does not indicate any problem with ideal theory. Ideal theory does not fail just because those who are to be guided do not comply with it. For example, Kant's moral principles prohibit lying, but his normative theory is not shown to be a failure just because people, in fact, lie (Korsgaard 2009). His moral principles still set out the *telos* or the goal to which we all have reason to strive to reach. Likewise, the Confucian account of authority is a model that high-ranking corporate decision makers can use to guide their endeavors. The account gives us reason to think about how to change existing business organizational structures and underlying economic structures, if there are fundamental limitations that high-ranking individuals cannot but face when they attempt to realize ideal behavior. If we have the Confucian view as an ideal, as John Simmons (2010) recently points out in a debate over the role of ideal theory, we can evaluate between corporate leaders who is closer to the ideal. Some corporate leaders want to use their authority to serve their workers and other stakeholders more than other leaders want to. Some leaders want to win workers' hearts by sincerely caring about what is good for them more than other leaders care. Acceptable authority is a continuum concept that admits degrees. Just as Confucians view life as a journey toward the good life, we view managers in non-ideal conditions as having the capacity to work toward genuinely serving the lower-ranking workers, and they will attain workers' hearts to differing degrees. Few are entirely consistent or inconsistent with workers' dignity.

Furthermore, the relational orientation helps to ameliorate the issues of power, conflict, and inequality described earlier. Conflict in hierarchical business organizations exists primarily because power is often exercised only in the interests of those who own the means of production (Sewell & Barker, 2006). When power is exercised in this way, managers dominate, subordinate, and exploit workers. The organization is then rife with conflict between those of differing hierarchical levels (Kabanoff, 1991). However, other forms of hierarchy are possible. Organizational theorists have long recognized that authority can be exercised in the interests of everyone. Authority can promote fairness and efficiency that benefit each organizational member (Gouldner, 1955; Weber, 1962). We suggest that authority can also promote positive relationships when authorities adopt a relational orientation. The service and relational orientations reduce conflict by requiring managers to promote the good of workers themselves, rather than using them as tools for others' benefit.

Question 3: Why not expand the scope of our argument beyond low-ranking individuals to also address concern for other stakeholders?

We agree with the core of the suggestion. In fact, by low-ranking individuals early Confucians mean, literally, all people including widows and orphans (S. Kim, 2011). The Confucian account can address the interests of various stakeholders. Suppose that a worker, Liang, is ordered by a high-ranking decision maker to do a certain corporate activity that, in turn, negatively influences the natural environment of a local community. Liang's compliance with the order is morally questionable to the extent that members of the local community have a valid interest in their natural environment. Typically, complying with an order that requires a person to

do an ethically questionable work is itself not a constitutive element of a person's good life. Thus, Liang cannot rationally accept an authority's exercise that entails unreasonably harming stakeholders' valid interests.

We focus primarily on low-ranking individuals because the authority relationship is between managers and workers, not managers and other stakeholders. That is, authority is fundamentally second-personal (Darwall, 2009). When a high-ranking individual issues an order to Liang, expecting him to comply with that order as one that gives him a reason for action, it is Liang who is expected to take the order as a reason for action. Members of the local community who care about the natural environment are not positioned to take the high-ranking individual's order as a reason for action, nor are they expected to treat it as a demand. The relationship between the high-ranking individual and stakeholders is, strictly speaking, not an authority relationship. This does not mean that stakeholders' interests do not matter to the legitimacy of managerial authority. As we discussed above, they indirectly matter.

3.4. The Problem of Dignity Revisited

Previously, we claimed that authority can be problematic for the dignity of lower-ranking individuals because it can require them to act without good reason. In this way, hierarchies seem to enable high-ranking individuals to insult the reason-responsive capacity of lower-ranking individuals that makes them have a certain dignity. Therefore, if the Confucian account of authority can provide a reason for authority that lower-ranking individuals can reasonably accept, then it can handle the problem of dignity while at the same time reconciling dignity with the authority conferred by hierarchy.

Any reasonable individual necessarily has good reason to care about living the good life. The Confucian communitarian account of authority explains how managerial authority defined by the account can help lower-ranking individuals live the good life. Hence, the Confucian account provides a reason for authority that low-ranking individuals can rationally accept.

As we have discussed, by the Confucian communitarian account, there are two primary conditions for justifying hierarchical authority. The first refers to the authority's commitment to creating excellent performances in a way consistent with the good life of low-ranking individuals. The second refers to the authority's commitment to creating positive and virtuous relationships between higher- and lower-ranking individuals to enable a good life for both parties. To attain acceptable and non-dignity compromising authority, high-ranking individuals are expected to show a good track record of competency in serving the well-being of the low-ranking individuals by enabling their performance and by creating positive relationships with them.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT RESEARCH, EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

Contributions to Theories of Hierarchy: Research on power, status, and hierarchy has proliferated in recent years (Anderson & Kennedy, 2012), and these

articles are often influential. Our research highlights an important but currently under-appreciated problem with hierarchical structures: By conferring authority, hierarchies risk undermining the dignity of low-ranking individuals. By describing the problem of dignity, we aim to contribute new language to theories of hierarchy. This is important because language “shapes what people notice and ignore and what they believe is and is not important” (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005: 9). By explaining how reason-responsiveness is central to dignity, we hope that concerns about dignity in organizations can be noticed and expressed, rather than ignored in favor of more traditional outcomes of concern to leaders, such as group performance (Podolny, Khurana, & Hill-Popper, 2004) or motivation (Anderson & Brown, 2010).

We aim to instigate greater attention to issues of the good life among hierarchy researchers. Currently, research on hierarchies has attended very little to the experience of low-ranking individuals or other involved parties. Instead, existing literature has focused nearly exclusively on issues of efficiency and performance rather than on issues of human welfare, a tendency that has led some to accuse the field of management as being adrift and misguided (Walsh, Meyer, & Schoonhoven, 2006).

By describing how authority may be exercised ethically, we aim to provide some answer to Walsh et al.’s (2006) third question—that is, how can we best live with the hierarchical structures pervasive in organizations? Although theorists have long been concerned about issues of dignity in modern organizations (Hodson, 2001; Lowith, 1932/1982; Marx, 1848/1968; Mommsen, 1985; Schroeter, 1985; Weber, 1922/1978), existing research has provided little guidance for obviating problems of dignity. We suggest that authorities’ intentions can ameliorate problems of dignity and reduce conflict between authorities and those they oversee. By engendering positive relationships through a relational orientation and by promoting the good life for workers via a service orientation, authority can serve the interests of members and of society at large.

Pedagogical Implications: Most existing literature in economics and theories of the firm tend to evaluate the value or status of hierarchies in business organizations exclusively or primarily based on organizational efficiency and financial performance. Yet, as we have discussed, individuals who issue orders to others guided with these justifications in mind may be acting unethically, creating a problem of dignity for lower-ranking individuals. As a result, a new and more nuanced understanding of hierarchies is needed within business school curriculum.

The new understanding of hierarchy should highlight the importance of exercising authority in ways consistent with low-ranking individuals’ reasonable interests, well-being, or the good life. It is not enough for high-ranking individuals to do what is best for the organization’s managers and owners. Instead, high-ranking individuals must adopt a service conception of authority and a relational orientation toward each of their lower-ranking individuals and other involved stakeholders to ensure that they are promoting an ideal form of social functioning for every person, not merely advancing the organization’s goals.

In practice, justifications for hierarchy and the interests of low-ranking individuals could be explored in the context of strategy, economics, leadership, or ethics courses. In our experience, students are often left without any clear guidance as to why hierarchy exists and what moral risks it poses. Our argument suggests that academics should highlight how hierarchy threatens workers' dignity and how it need not do so, if authority is exercised appropriately. What is required to exhibit service and relational orientations could be a fruitful basis for class discussion. These orientations can be contrasted with authority exercised purely in the interests of owners' economic outcomes.

Managerial Implications: Authority can both threaten and promote dignity. The challenge for managers is to wield authority in ways that are constructive for others' dignity. In practice, cultivating a service orientation requires knowledge of workers' goals and perceptions. Managers should proactively seek this knowledge from those who work for them, even though doing so requires time and energy. Managers could seek information about workers' goals at the time of hiring and then find ways to develop the worker to meet these goals. Managers must also seek feedback from workers to ensure that the five defeaters (Angle, 2012) are avoided. Doing so requires an efficient system for upward communication of sensitive information; whether it occurs face-to-face, in writing, or through a third party. It is important for managers to take workers' complaints seriously.

We defined a relational orientation as cultivating positive relationships with lower-ranking individuals and other parties more broadly. In practice, cultivating a relational orientation means setting relational goals alongside task goals. Recent empirical research could help managers assess progress toward relational goals. It has defined and measured relational and social capital among pairs and groups, respectively (e.g., Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006; Curhan, Neale, Ross, & Rosencranz-Engelmann, 2008; Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishi, & O'Brien, 2006).

Cultivating service and relational orientations is not easy in light of the state of modern organizations. Inside a capitalist economic structure, latent conflict between workers and managers may always exist (Kabanoff, 1991; Marx, 1848/1968; Wright, 2002). Even though our argument does not fully resolve this conflict, it shows promise for preventing managers from using workers as pawns in a game of economic value. Authority can be used to advance dignity, and managers should strive to do this alongside reaching economic goals. Though harmony may never be perfectly attained, is an ideal for which authorities should strive.

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NOTES

1. Hierarchies exist in non-business organizations, social groups, family, and society as well. In this article, our exploration is limited to business organizations because the moral nature of hierarchy in family, for instance, is different from that in firms, and different things must be treated differently.

2. Page numbers in brackets refer to the pagination of the standard German edition of Kant's works, Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences.

3. Alchain and Demsetz (1972) argue that there is no such thing as hierarchy or authority within firms, saying, "Telling an employee to type this letter rather than to file that document is like my telling a grocer to sell me this brand of tuna rather than that brand of bread" (777). We disagree with them. We agree with those who show that firms are distinctively different from the market and that authority is prevalent within organizations (e.g., Barnard, 1938; Coase, 1937; Weber, 1922/1978, 956; Williamson, 1991).

4. We do not assume that there are no other ways that workers' dignity is threatened. We assume only that one way to infringe workers' dignity is through hierarchy, and we explore how to reconcile hierarchy with dignity. We focus on the ways that hierarchical structures threaten dignity, because hierarchies are pervasive in business organizations and are unlikely to disappear any time soon. Understanding how dignity can exist alongside hierarchy is, therefore, an important and challenging problem that affects many people in modern organizations.

5. Kant uses dignity in both ways (Hill, 1992: 48). First, dignity is attributed to only dutiful people (Kant 1785/1996: 88 [4: 439-40, 434]). Second, dignity is attributed to all people (Kant 1797/1996: 99 [6: 435]).

6. By the broadly Kantian idea, we mean what Onora O'Neil means by "Kantian ethics" —"a much broader term ... used as a (mainly admiring) label for a range of contemporary ethical positions which claim descent from Kant's ethics, but which diverge from Kant in many ways" (1991: 175).

7. We do not make an empirical claim that when one asks another to do a certain act without giving a reason, the other feels insulted about their moral status. Our claim is that, regardless of whether or not the other actually feels insulted, the other has reason to feel insulted.

8. Hierarchies can also be informal. Informal hierarchies emerge naturally within groups as individuals make inferences regarding each other's qualities and skills (Anderson & Kennedy, 2012; Berger et al., 1972). In informal hierarchies, higher-ranking individuals are allowed more influence over decisions and tasks (Bales, Strodtbeck, Mills, & Roseborough, 1951; Berger et al., 1972) and more freedom to act independently (Hollander, 1958, 1960).

9. It is noteworthy, however, that the sociological fact that higher-ranking individuals exercise the actual power to control workers—*de facto* authority—does not by itself make the possession and the exercise of power legitimate. Of course, *de facto* authority is needed for higher-ranking individuals to exercise legitimate authority, because it does not make sense that higher-ranking individuals exercise authority legitimately but do not, in fact, have the power to do so. Nonetheless, *de facto* authority is not itself legitimate authority. Powerful managers can surely exercise the power illegitimately. Legitimate authority also differs from authority that is merely perceived as legitimate. Perceived legitimacy, from a sociological perspective, can be understood as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman 1995: 574). As Buchanan and Keohane (2006: 405) point out, the sociological sense of legitimacy is different from the normative sense, which we primarily aim to explore in this article. In the sociological sense, "[the authority of] an institution is legitimate ... when it is widely *believed* to have the right to rule," but "[s]ocial science inquiry into the conditions under which people believe an institution to be legitimate cannot substitute for a normative account of when it is legitimate." In a similar line of reasoning, Palazzo and Scherer (2006; also, Scherer & Palazzo, 2007) suggest that legitimacy cannot be properly understood through the sociological lens alone, because legitimacy is earned through rational deliberation. In this article, we advance an account of what reason or justification workers can rationally accept for the legitimacy of authority within hierarchical business organizations.

10. Simon writes: "An individual accepts authority when he sets himself a general rule that permits the communicated decision of another to guide his own choice (i.e., to serve as a premise of that choice) *independently of his judgment of this correctness or acceptability of the premise* (italics ours) (1957: 1).

11. Translation is from Ames and Rosemont (1998). Translations within brackets are from one of the authors (Kim).

12. One might think that we unjustifiably use an idea developed in political philosophy for corporate governance. There is room for debate (Phillips & Margoils, 1999), but we agree with those who argue that it is sometimes plausible to draw upon political philosophy to develop a theory of corporate governance or organizational ethics (Hartman, 2001; Heath et al., 2010; Moriarty, 2005). Further exploring this issue is beyond the reach of this article, yet it can be said that Confucian political philosophy may be more flexible than Western political theories to be applied to organizational ethics, given that Confucian political philosophy's main focus is interpersonal relationship between higher-ranking individuals and lower-ranking individuals, which makes it distinct from western political theories' focus on institutions or basic structures of society (e.g., Rawls, 1971). In fact, commerce was historically an important domain in which people in Later Imperial China (late *Song*, *Ming* and *Qing*) seriously attempted to realize Confucian values through merchant apprentice education (Lufrano, 1997). The Confucian merchants' self-cultivation approach to business is consistent with contemporary Confucians' vision to realize Confucian values in domains other than politics, such as medicine (Fan, 1999) and business (Kim & Strudler, 2012; T. W. Kim, 2014; Koehn, 2001).

13. The same term is used with different pronunciations in other Confucianism-influenced countries like Korean (*gwon-wi*) and Japanese (*ken'i*).

14. Translation is from Dawson (2008).

15. Translation adapted from Ames and Rosemont (1998) with a slight change.

16. Translation is from Hutton (2014). The system of notation follows Hutton.

17. This is Chan's own translation.

18. "There are several profound differences between this kind of religiousness [the Confucian kind] and that of the Abrahamic traditions that have defined the meaning of religion in the Western cultural experience. ... [U]nlike the 'worship' mode, which defers to the ultimate meaning of some temporally proper, independent, external agency—what Friedrich Schleiermacher has called 'absolute dependence'—Confucian religious experience is itself a product of the flourishing community, where the quality of the religious life is a direct consequence of the quality of communal living. Religion [Heaven's mandate] is not the root of the flourishing community, not the foundation on which it is built, but rather is its product, its flower" (Ames, 2001: 165).

19. Chan (2014) borrows the term from Raz (1986), but the contents of his account of service conception are different from Raz's.

20. Translation is from Allan (2015).

21. Translation is from Van Norden (2008).

22. Translation is from Ames and Rosemont (1998). Chan uses S. Leys's.

23. Translation from Yutang (2008: 33).

24. Translation from Van Norden (2008).

25. Translation from Ames and Rosemont (1998).

26. Confucius said: "[i]f confronted by reprehensible behavior on his father's part, a son cannot but remonstrate with him, and if confronted by reprehensible behavior on the ruler's part, a minister has no choice but to remonstrate with the ruler. Hence remonstrance is the only response to inappropriate behavior. How could simply obeying the commands of one's father be deemed filial?" (Ch. 15). Translation is from Rosemont and Ames (2009).

27. Translation from Van Norden (2008).

28. Translation is from Dawson (2008).

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