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Wise Women: The Female Junzi in Confucian Ethics

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In the context of Confucian ethics, there are few concepts as indefinable yet centrally important to the system of thought as a whole as the ideal of the sage. The sage is a key topic of discussion in *The Analects* of Confucius*,* and has been the subject of much reflection, revision, and discussion by neo-Confucian scholars throughout history. For centuries, however, one segment of the population was largely absent from the annals of Confucian scholarship, namely, women. The goal of this essay is to argue that, although women are rarely addressed in the canon of Confucian writings, women are not in essence excluded from pursuing Confucian sagehood, or the moral designation of *Junzi.* To support my argument, I will first define the Confucian sage (and differences, if any, between the sage and the *Junzi*), then examine the actions and traits required for becoming a sage in contrast and comparison with women's roles in the 5th century BCE, and finally, end with a brief acknowledgement of Im Yunjidang, a female scholar in the 18th century who exemplified and deliberately aligned herself with the picture of the Confucian sage.

In order to make an argument as to whether women are able to achieve sagehood within the Confucian definition of sagehood, we must first clearly identify the characteristics required for being a sage, and attempt to formulate a robust definition of sagehood based on the available texts. Confucius never explicitly outlined the "textbook" definition of a sage, but his followers made sure to include a variety of passages (supposedly transcribed sayings of Confucius himself) that address the topic of sagehood in *The Analects,* several of which we will examine here. One of the early passages in *The Analects* relating to sagehood and Confucian scholarship says this: "The Master said: 'A Scholar sets his heart on The Way; if he is ashamed of his shabby clothes and coarse food, he is not worth listening to.'"[1] This passage helps to lay an important piece of groundwork for our definition of the Confucian ideal of sagehood. It hints in its affirmation of shabby clothing and poor food that status and rank are

[1] Simon Leys, ed., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 16.

not necessary conditions for becoming a Confucian scholar. Another passage says, "The Master said: 'Do not worry if you are without a position; worry lest you do not deserve a position. Do not worry if you are not famous; worry lest you do not deserve to be famous.'"[2] In this passage, like the previous one, Confucius remarks that the moral condition (possibly integrity) of the individual seeking to become a Confucian gentleman (or *Junzi)* is more important than any political position that could be obtained. These two passages point to the idea that the possibility of becoming a Confucian scholar was not necessarily bound by socioeconomic privilege or position during the time they were written.

In the early chapters of *The Analects,* several passages point to a boundary between the Confucian "gentleman" and the "small man." One such passage reads, "The Master said: 'A gentleman seeks virtue; a small man seeks land. A gentleman seeks justice; a small man seeks favors.'"[3] Another passage comparing the gentleman and the small man says, "The Master said: 'A gentleman considers what is just; a small man considers what is expedient.'"[4] Another simply says, "The Master said: 'A gentleman should be slow to speak and prompt to act.'"[5] All of these passages paint a picture of the Confucian gentleman as an individual who values justice, virtue, and thoughtfulness above all else, and is comfortable with waiting, and paints this picture in contrast with the foolish person who demands quick results and material possessions.

At this point in our examination, the question naturally arises: if the passages that have been included up to this point all speak about the "scholar" or the "gentleman" and none of them explicitly refer to or use the word "sage," does that mean that there is a difference between the Confucian scholar or gentleman and the Confucian sage? If so, what is the difference, and what defines each designation? To begin to answer these questions, we will briefly step away from *The Analects,* and look at the writings of neo-Confucian scholars attempting to expand upon and clarify the thought of Confucius.

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[2] Simon Leys, ed., *The Analects of Confucius*, ibid.
[3] Simon Leys, ed., *The Analects of Confucius*, ibid.
[4] Simon Leys, ed., *The Analects of Confucius,* 17.
[5] Simon Leys, ed., *The Analects of Confucius,* ibid.

Zhu Xi, as cited by Stephen C. Angle, says that "in sages, 'all goodness is completely present.'"[6] Wang Yangming, another later neo-Confucian thinker active in the Ming dynasty, reworked Zhu Xi's conception of sagehood into an even more simple and elegant definition, stating that absolute moral purity was the defining mark of a sage. "The reason the sage has become a sage is that his mind has become completely identified with universal coherence (...) and is no longer mixed with any impurity of selfish human desires."[7] Wang Yangming also stressed that those who were closest to attaining sagehood throughout history "recognized that knowing and acting were ultimately one thing."[8] These brief but evocative quotes from Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming both point to the idea that the true Confucian sage is not only a virtuous individual, but one who is utterly morally pure and who acts correctly without laboring over choosing between the good or the bad action. The idea of goodness being "completely present" together with the phrase "identified with universal coherence" connotes a certain effortlessness and elegant simplicity that isn't present in the passages from *The Analects* that point to justice, discipline, virtue, and integrity as the basis for what the Confucian *Junzi* is. While the designations from Wang Yangming and Zhu Xi both seem to include inherent goodness and virtue, there is also a transcendent quality to those descriptions that implies that sagehood is indefinable and mysterious. After all, being completely free from selfish desires and attaining utter moral purity appears fairly impossible to define concretely, let alone achieve. Angle remarks that Zhu Xi considered sagehood to be an ideal that was not necessarily meant to be "achieved" in the sense that a scholarly designation or political post might be achieved, and asserts that to claim that one had arrived at sagehood would be to rest on one's laurels, and thus invite selfish desires and pride back into the equation. Within the broader picture of Confucian and neo-Confucian thought, according to Angle, the argument can be made that the Confucian gentleman, knight, or *Junzi* is a definable milestone along

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[6] Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.
[7] Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy,* ibid.
[8] Bryan Van Norden, "Wang Yangming," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, July 11, 2014, , accessed December 11, 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wang-yangming/.

the constantly extending and undulating path toward moral perfection as a sage.[9] While the category of *Junzi* connotes a remarkably high level of virtue and discipline, it seems to be closer in essence to the Confucian gentleman than the mystical ideal of the true Confucian sage, and represents a level of virtue and moral goodness that is at least theoretically attainable.

Another interesting consideration found in the moral philosophy of Wang Yangming is the idea that "the people filling the street are all sages."[10] Angle points out that Wang's intent here is not to imply that all individuals are sages, but to make the point that the aforementioned identification with universal coherence is attainable for anyone, i.e., that no one is barred from sagehood (at least not by their occupation or socio-economic position). The idea of sagehood as open to everyone, including those who were excluded from political power or any sort of societal influence is perhaps most ironically and fittingly seen in Confucius himself. "Confucius was recognized as a unique figure, a sage who was ignored but should have been recognized and become a king."[11] If the argument is made that sagehood was available to those who were systematically marginalized or shunned during Confucius' time, then there could be an argument for the ideal of sagehood being open, at least theoretically, to women. After all, to return to Wang Yangming's imagery, if one can conceptualize a street where there are at least a handful of women walking along and filling the sidewalks, then the argument could be made that Wang's claim ushers women into the arena for pursuing Confucian sagehood along with other typically marginalized members of society. Also important to note is the fact that there are no passages in *The Analects* that explicitly bar women from participating in the pursuit of sagehood. That being said, the fact still remains that there are few, if any, women present in history that are designated as Confucian *Junzi* pursuing sagehood. Later, I will examine the case of a

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[9] Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood*: *The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy,* 21.
[10] Quoted in Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood*: *The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy,* 19.
[11] Jeffrey Riegel, "Confucius," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013, accessed December 12, 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=confucius.

notable exception to this trend, the female Confucian scholar and ardent pursuer of sagehood, Im Yunjidang.

If the words on the pages of *The Analects* and the writings of notable neo-Confucian scholars don't explicitly bar women from participating in the pursuit of sagehood, then why don't any women appear in the annals of history alongside Confucius' followers and neo-Confucian scholars like Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming? In order to answer this question, I will outline as concretely as possible the required steps toward becoming a *Junzi* in the quest to embody the notion of sagehood, and then examine these requirements alongside historical conceptions of the woman's role in society. In *The Analects,* a follower of Confucius recorded this statement: "The Master said: 'I enlighten only the enthusiastic; I guide only the fervent. After I have lifted up one corner of a question, if the student cannot discover the other three, I do not repeat.'"[12] In another translation of *The Analects,* this passage is worded like such: "The Master said, Where there is no agitated attempt at thinking, I do not provide a clue; where there is no stammered attempt at expression, I do provide a prompt. If I raise one corner and do not receive the other three in response, I teach no further."[13] In both of these passages, we can clearly see that Confucius had in mind someone who was willing to work hard and work independently in their quest to attain the status of *Junzi,* and ultimately pursue the state of sagehood. I included the second version of this passage of *The Analects* because it conveys distinctly with the phrases "stammered attempt" and "agitated attempt" the sense that Confucius was not seeking immediate perfection from his students. The sense that one gets from this passages, especially when considered along with the passages that we looked at earlier in this essay, is that mental fortitude and commitment and a willingness to think creatively are far more important than the would-be *Junzi* having a particular occupation or certain position of power or marginalization in society.

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[12] Simon Leys, ed., *The Analects of Confucius,* 30.
[13] Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation*, PDF, Bloomington: Indiana University, 2015, 30.

The commitment and energy required of would-be *Junzi* may not have been feasible for young women in the 5th century BCE (when *The Analects* were written). Even though poverty, war, and occupational demands may have prevented some men from pursuing the Confucian ideal of the *Junzi,* the demands placed on women during this time in history (and for many centuries thereafter) would have made it virtually impossible for most women to even be exposed to the information or freedom that would have allowed them to begin reflecting on the path to moral purity and Confucian self-cultivation. Women during the 5th and 6th centuries BCE were typically forced to marry extremely young. A myriad of cultural factors including disproportionate rates of female infanticide, polyamory in the aristocracy, and general concerns about early mortality and reproduction made it very common for women to get married as young as thirteen, and a precious few would ever have had a future outside of marriage, homemaking, and childrearing.[14] This set of circumstances imposed on most women during the 5th and 6th centuries supports a conclusion that the time and commitment required for becoming a *Junzi* would likely have been outside the realm of possibility for a majority of the female population.

In another passage from *The Analects,* Confucius is thought to have said this: "The Master said, Set your heart on the *dao*, base yourself in virtue, rely on ren, journey in the arts."[15] In a footnote by Indiana University professor Robert Eno, the "arts" mentioned in this passage refer to "archery, charioteering, and writing, and the Confucian rituals of *li* and music."[16] The *dao* mentioned in this (and other) passages in *The Analects* is summed up in another note by Eno on an earlier passage: "Dao 道: The 'Way'; the Confucian notion of the evolved moral & cultural pattern of past eras of sage governance. Dao is also a generic

[14] D. Zhang, "[Changes of Marriage Age in Ancient China].," Ren kou xue kan (Changchun shi, China)., April 1991, , accessed December 12, 2017, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12285484.
[15] Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation,* 30.
[16] Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation,* ibid.

term for any fully conceived behavioral path."[17] Finally, the term "virtue," while it tends to slip under the radar for many modern readers, is actually a rough translation of the ephemeral Chinese word *Ren* 仁, described by Eno as " The key moral term in the Analects. Rendered as 'humanity,' 'goodness,' etc., its rich meaning is a mystery to many in the text, and defies translation."[18] Before moving forward into an evaluation of these requirements for *Junzi*-hood in comparison with and in the context of women's roles in the time period when *The Analects* was written, it is important that we expand on the crucial terms *dao* and *ren* and their place in Confucius' conception of what a *Junzi* is. In the context of *The Analects,* the *dao* is positioned as a time-tested model of a richly and completely conceived pattern of moral behavior (as Eno said in his note), and is the result of a careful and gracious observance of the structure of filial piety (the Confucian notion of a structure of hierarchical relationships and mutual respect as the basis for a thriving society). *Ren,* on the other hand, is conceived as the goal of a lifelong pursuit of virtue and humane-ness, although (as Eno mentioned) any attempt at English translation seems to incompletely capture this transcendent Confucian term. "Master You said: It is rare to find a person who is filial to his parents and respectful of his elders, yet who likes to oppose his ruling superior. And never has there been one who does not like opposing his ruler who has raised a rebellion. The *junzi* works on the root – once the root is planted, the *dao* is born. Filiality and respect for elders, are these not the roots of *ren*?"[19] In this passage, we see that the "root" of Confucian *Junzi* (and therefore, at least theoretically, the root of Confucian sagehood) is nurtured by respect for one's parents and one's hierarchical superiors in the structure of filial piety. Joseph A. Adler remarks on expectations for women during Confucius' time: "The proper place for women was in the home, where they were largely responsible for the upbringing and education of children. The "woman's way (dao)" was to

[17] Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation,* 1.
[18] Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation,* ibid.
[19] Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation,* ibid.

assume the roles of wife and mother. The chief virtue proper to these roles was obedience: first to her father, then to her husband, and finally to her grown son."[20] Adler's remark brings up an interesting point, namely, that women in Confucius' time period, although they may not have been able to devote the time or energy to the continuous, reflective commitment supposedly required for pursuing *Junzi* (as we saw in the previous section), the argument could be made that just by diligently fulfilling their place in the scheme of filial piety, women were included in the category of those who were eligible for pursuing the *dao* of *Junzi.* That being said, fulfilling one's role in society and observing familial ritual isn't the only component involved in becoming a *Junzi*. A diligent cultivation of *ren,* that transcendent virtue of humaneness, is just as important, and that trait is much more difficult to define than any set of rites and familial duties.

During the Han dynasty and later, a group of texts called *The Four Books for Women* was compiled, written by female scholars on such topics as proper husband-wife and parent-child behavior, proper education for women, and how to be a moral person. In the third book, titled *Domestic Lessons,* Empress Wu discusses the importance of moral behavior and propriety from a standpoint that isfar more theoretical than the two preceding books, and includes sections on topics such as "Virtuous Nature," "Self-Cultivation," "Moving Toward Good," and "Honoring the Lessons of the Sages,"[21] along with other sections that focus more directly on domestic practice. In this section of the *Four Books for Women,* we can see what could be considered a push toward moral goodness that is more than just an observation of ritual and filial piety; Empress Wu's *Domestic Lessons* seems to be painting a picture of womanly propriety that, beyond outlining methods for child-rearing and being a good wife and housekeeper, carries a distinct emphasis of moral growth and humaneness, and looks similar to the Confucian ideal of *ren.* Although this development didn't occur until a couple thousand years after the

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[20]Joseph A. Adler, "Daughter/Wife/Mother or Sage/Immortal/Bodhisattva? Women in the Teaching of Chinese Religions," *ASIANetwork Exchange* 14 (2006): accessed December 12, 2017, 11.

[21] Zhang Mingqi, "The Four Books for Women: Ancient Chinese Texts for the Education of Women," Four Books for Women, , accessed December 12, 2017, http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln471/fourbookwoman.htm.

publication of *The Analects,* the argument can still be made that there is an element of *ren* along with *dao* and ritual for women in the Confucian framework, it just took a few thousand years for someone to articulate how the way that women were already expected to behave was compatible with the process toward becoming a *Junzi.*

The topic of education is another consideration that may have bearing on the argument for women being allowed to be *Junzi,* especially in the context of Confucius' sayings as recorded in *The Analects* and the cultural expectations surrounding education of women during the time when *The Analects* were written. In the second section of *The Analects,* Confucius' disciple recorded this quote: "The Master said: 'To study without thinking is futile. To think without studying is dangerous.'"[22] In the other translation of *The Analects* that I have been using for this paper, this particular section is translated as "The Master said: If you study but don't reflect you'll be lost. If you reflect but don't study you'll get into trouble."[23] Both translations of this portion of *The Analects* seem to be painting a clear picture that, while reflective thought and critical thinking are important, some measure of education or focused study is important for attaining the high level of moral and scholarly aptitude required to become a *Junzi* according to Confucius. Before the end of the Qing dynasty, education for men and women in China was extremely different, both in form and content, as well as in the intended outcome. While young men were educated in trades in order to make a good living, or apprenticed in the lower ranks of government with the intent of eventually climbing to a higher and better paying position, the typical curriculum for young women and girls focused on cultivating domestic skill and fulfilling the expected role of the virtuous wife and good mother. This course of education was necessarily restrictive on the experiences that young women were able to have outside of marriage, child-rearing, or preparing for one of those two tasks. Wong Yin Lee sums up this cultural dynamic: "On reaching the age of 10, girls would be mostly confined to their boudoirs and brought up by their

[22]Simon Leys, ed., *The Analects of Confucius,* 8.
[23] Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation,* 7.

parents to be subservient to the menfolk. In fact, the whole of a girl's upbringing would be centred around becoming acquainted with the all-important virtue of being docile and obedient."[24] The idea that women were best suited for child-rearing and housekeeping (which does not require any advanced education or training, but is a demanding and time-consuming vocation nonetheless) was an expectation from families and society at large, and fed into the descriptive stereotype that "Men never talk inside. Women never talk outside."[25] From a very young age, women were expected to be quiet and submissive, and they were raised with the idea that chastity as a form of loyalty to one's future husband was an absolute requirement, a ritualistic practice that led to many young women being sequestered from society at a young age, at the risk of coming in contact with too many members of the opposite sex. This type of social conditioning "...was a form of moralistic social control over women, and since it began in early childhood, women would have little chance of questioning its legitimacy."[26] This rigid control over the activities and habits of young women as a preparation for marriage into a stable, financially sound family also had the inevitable effect of preventing young women from doing much else besides learning the rituals of homemaking and child-rearing. By extension, since women being educated formally outside of the home was exceptionally rare in Confucius' day, it seems reasonable to argue that Confucius never explicitly addressed female followers or female *Junzi* because the idea of a woman being outside of the home to study with a man who wasn't her husband or father, let alone to be a full time student, would likely have been outside of the realm of reality.

In section eight of *The Analects,* a remark is made that further supports the idea that to pursue sagehood as a woman in Confucius' day would likely have been impractical: "The Master said, A student

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[24] Wong Lee, "Women's Education in Traditional and Modern China," Women's History Review 4, no. 3 (1995): , accessed December 13, 2017, doi:10.1080/09612029500200092, 345.
[25] Wong Lee, "Women's Education in Traditional and Modern China," ibid.
[26] Wong Lee, "Women's Education in Traditional and Modern China," 349.

willing to study for three years without obtaining a salaried position is hard to come by."[27] This remark implies that, behind and amidst all of the musings found in *The Analects* that position reflection, study, and moral self-cultivation as intrinsically valuable*,* there is still an underlying expectation that to be a student of the Confucian way and to be a *Junzi* would not only require a significant time commitment, but that some level of professional sacrifice would have to be made. For a woman, tasked with raising children and keeping the home and afforded far less freedom than her male counterparts, the sacrifice of time and mental energy required to cultivate the Confucian way would have posed a significant obstacle.

In the last section of this paper, I would like to acknowledge a female scholar who offers a glimpse into what the pursuit of Confucian sagehood unfettered by restrictive, gendered expectations for a woman might have looked like. Im Yunjidang was an 18th century woman who was orphaned at a young age, had no surviving children, and was a widow for most of her life because (ironically) traditional-cultural Confucian restrictions on aristocratic women prevented her from being allowed to find another husband after her first spouse's death.[28] While this series of deaths of loved ones undoubtedly caused Yunjidang great misery, it also placed her in the unique position of being a woman in a heavily Confucianism-influenced society who was relatively disconnected from the traditional boundaries and rigid structure of filial piety. This unusual set of circumstances, combined with her intelligence and upper-middle class socioeconomic status, gave Yunjidang the freedom to openly learn about and pursue Confucian sagehood. Yunjidang was one of the first female scholars to formulate a robust argument for the moral equality of men and women, and also to promote the idea that women were not excluded from pursuing the Confucian ideal of the *Junzi.* Yunjidang composed this succinct, poetic, Analect-esque passage that confers the status of *Junzi* upon herself without carrying over any of the gendered implications native to *The Analects*:

> "While a petty man [xiaoren] finds life profitable,
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> A *junzi* finds righteousness [yi] profitable.21

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[27] Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation,* 38.

[28] Sungmoon Kim, "The Way to Become a Female Sage: Im Yunjidang's Confucian Feminism," Journal of the History of Ideas 75, no. 3 (July 1, 2014): , accessed December 14, 2017, doi:10.1353/jhi.2014.0026, 399.

If it is difficult to have both [life and righteousness],

I would rather take the latter. (...)

Both practice and nature will be perfected."[29]

This verse was one of many penned by Yunjidang that displays a remarkably subtle understanding not only of the content and underlying thrust of *The Analects* and the way of becoming a Confucian *Junzi,* but also mimics the form of *The Analects* by contrasting the "small" or "simple" man with the "*Junzi"* or sage. This verse also includes a nod to the Confucian requirement for sagehood that thought and action become completely unified and spontaneous, or "perfected." For the purposes of this essay, I don't have time to examine Yunjidang's extraordinary course of scholarship in any more depth, but I do believe that her story offers us a glimpse into what a true female *Junzi* (or pursuer of that designation) might look like, and also supports the argument that restrictive cultural expectations and a lack of education for women were the main reasons that women weren't addressed by Confucius as candidates for discipleship of the path to sagehood.

After characterizing the Confucian ideal of the *Junzi,* examining the steps involved in the process of becoming a *Junzi,* and comparing these steps with the expectations placed on and resources available to women during the time when *The Analects* was written, I have attempted to make the argument that there is no essential reason why women can not be included in the category of individuals who are theoretically able to pursue sagehood. It is crucial to note that, like I hinted at earlier in this essay, the term *sage* (more so than its companion term *Junzi*) inherently defies definition, both because of the inexactness of translation from Chinese to English, and because of the ephemeral and ultimately unattainable nature of this state of being. The argument can be made that, outside of the cultural and gendered restrictions that prevented women from even being "in the running" for pursuing sagehood, there is also a dynamic of indefinability and intangibility surrounding the pursuit of

[29] Sungmoon Kim, "The Way to Become a Female Sage: Im Yunjidang's Confucian Feminism," 402.

sagehood that guides me to the conclusion that ultimately, there is no institution, teacher, or cultural structure that can confer the status of sagehood upon an individual, either male or female. Instead, it is only through the continuous process of reflection, learning, and moral self-cultivation that the gap between human imperfection and sage-like moral spontaneity and unity can become ever narrower, but never nonexistent. I think that it is fitting to end this essay by honoring again the women who began the work of examining the Confucian path toward sagehood and putting it in terms accessible to women. Empress Wu began this work in the 7th century AD by including a nod to moral self-cultivation and sagehood in her domestic lessons for women, and the 18th century scholar Im Yunjidang continued the conversation by conferring the status of *Junzi* upon herself, and therefore ushering all subsequent female scholars into the framework of Confucian ethics and the pursuit of sagehood.

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