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KONGZI AND VIRTUE ETHICS

*The gentleman has no biases for or against anything in the world.
He simply seeks to be on the side of the right.*

—Kongzi, *Analects* 4.10



This time-lapse photograph illustrates Kongzi's saying in *Analects* 2.1 that "one who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars."

In terms of the categories of Western normative ethics, Confucianism is a form of virtue ethics. In order to understand what is distinctive about virtue ethics, it is easiest to begin by explaining its alternatives: consequentialism and deontology. Most simply, consequentialism and deontology emphasize what kinds of actions one ought to *do*, while virtue ethics is about what kind of person one ought to *be*.

I. Three Normative Theories

Consequentialism is one of the most intuitive normative theories. Nineteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, a seminal Western consequentialist, argued that what makes an action right is that it produces the “greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.” For example, in considering whether capital punishment is morally right, a consequentialist would ask whether executing criminals produces more happiness, on balance, than other alternatives, such as life imprisonment. In most cases an execution will make the prisoner and his family unhappy, but it will make the victim’s family and friends happy. Bentham would also consider the long-term consequences of execution. Does the example set by execution deter crime and thereby increase happiness, or not? Does life imprisonment consume tax dollars that would produce more happiness if redirected to hospitals, schools, and public parks? Taking everything into account, if executing a prisoner produces more happiness than alternatives such as life imprisonment, then executing him is the right thing to do.

The form of consequentialism derived from Bentham and his later followers (such as John Stuart Mill and contemporary philosopher Peter Singer) is called “utilitarianism.” Utilitarians generally identify the good with some positive mental state, like pleasure, happiness, or, more technically, “preference satisfaction.” Act-consequentialists, like Bentham, say we should judge each individual action by how much impartial good it produces. Rule-consequentialists, like Mill, argue that we should act according to rules that, if we follow them, produce the most impartial good. For example, Mill would admit that particular instances of free speech may have bad consequences overall, such as a speech given by a Nazi. However, Mill thinks it will produce the best consequences if society follows a general rule permitting free speech, rather than tries to make a case-by-case judgment about when free speech should be allowed. (We’ll see in Chapter 4 that the Chinese Mohists were consequentialists.)

Some objections commonly raised against consequentialism are facile and easily refuted. For example, some people object that we can’t know every consequence of any one action. This is true, but we are only responsible for choosing the action most likely to have the best consequences. And our uncertainty about the future doesn’t stop us from making all kinds of other choices based on probable outcomes, from choosing whether

to try a new flavor of ice cream, to picking an elective course in college, to deciding where to invest our retirement funds.ⁱ

A deeper objection is whether good consequences are quantifiable in a way that allows us to add them up and determine the best possible outcome. How can I compare arithmetically the pleasure you get as a result of selling me candy, the pain I get from developing a cavity, and the pleasure the dentist gets from charging me to fix my cavity? Even within my own perspective, does the pleasure I get from reading a good book differ only in amount from the pleasure I get from eating ice cream, or are they different in kind? Utilitarian John Stuart Mill agreed that these pleasures are different in kind, but once one admits that, one can no longer simply add up pleasure as if it were a homogenous good.

The second deep objection to consequentialism concerns whether it is always right to do what has the best consequences. Consider the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II. There is continuing debate about whether these bombings were justified. Consequentialists debate whether, for example, it was possible for the United States to demonstrate the power of the bomb by dropping it on an uninhabited region of Japan and thereby convince Japan to surrender without having to obliterate a city. But if invading Japan had been necessary, it would have cost many casualties on both sides. Estimates of potential U.S. casualties alone range up to one hundred thousand. Suppose using the A-bomb on a city really would cost fewer lives than invading Japan. In that case, wouldn't everyone agree with the consequentialist that bombing Hiroshima was the morally right decision?

No. Philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe argued forcefully that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were intrinsically immoral and unjustifiable, regardless of whether on balance they saved lives by ending the war more quickly. Why? Anscombe states that it is justifiable to target soldiers in wartime, because doing so is an extension of one's general right to self-defense. However, she says that it is never justifiable to intentionally kill civilians, since they are not a direct threat. To put her point in terms with contemporary relevance, targeting civilians is *terrorism*, not an act of war. Now, one of the main reasons that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were "good targets" for the A-bomb was that they were largely intact, even after four years of war: they had not been targeted for prior aerial bombardment because they were of minimal military importance. In other words, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were *civilian* targets, not *military* targets. Consequently, according to Anscombe, bombing them was intrinsically morally wrong.ⁱⁱ

Anscombe was a deontologist. Broadly speaking, a deontologist claims that sometimes the right action is not the one that produces the most "good" (pleasure, happiness, and so on) overall. Ask yourself if the ends justify the means. If you think that the end does justify the means (as long as the end is good from an impartial perspective), then you are a consequentialist. If you think that the end does not always

justify the means (because some means are simply wrong), then you are a deontologist. Many deontologists are (like Anscombe) rule-deontologists. Rule-deontologists claim that we can do what we like as long as we do not violate certain moral imperatives, such as “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not lie,” and “Do not assault others.” At the other extreme, act-deontologists think that imperatives like those above are, at best, useful rules of thumb to which there will always be exceptions. For example, as a general rule, one should not steal, but what if one steals a loaf of bread from a well-stocked supermarket to feed one’s starving family?

So far I have explained some standard technical terms in philosophy and used them in well-established senses. However, it is useful at this point to mark a less-common distinction. Imagine a horizontal line representing a spectrum of views. At the left end is extreme generalism while at the right end is extreme particularism. Extreme generalism is the view that one substantive rule captures all moral evaluations. Extreme particularism is the view that there are no substantive, useful moral rules: all moral evaluation is completely context sensitive. Bentham’s utilitarianism is at the extreme generalist end of the spectrum while act-deontology is at the extreme particularist end. Most ethical views fall somewhere in between these two extremes, but they can be described as closer to the generalist or the particularist end of the spectrum. For example, some rule-deontologists think that there are several substantive, highly general, inviolable moral rules, such as “Do not lie” and “Do not murder.” Aristotle was a bit more of a particularist: he thought that moral rules provide guidance but they require substantial interpretation to be correctly applied in concrete situations.

As different as they are, consequentialism and rule-deontology both emphasize what a person ought to *do*. Virtue ethics is an alternative position that emphasizes what a person ought to *be*. To put it another way, consequentialism and rule-deontology are theories about *right action*, while virtue ethics is a theory about *good character*. There are different forms of virtue ethics, but all of them address four questions: (1) What is it to live well? (2) What traits of character (virtues) does one need to live well? (3) What is human nature like (such that one can live well and have the virtues)? (4) How can one cultivate the virtues (given what human nature is like)?

Virtue ethics can simply be a complement to a consequentialist or rule-deontological position. For example, a consequentialist like Bentham might answer the four questions of virtue ethics in the following way. (1) What is it to live well? Living well is being happy, including taking pleasure in the happiness of others. (2) What virtues does one need to live well? One needs to be intelligent and benevolent. Intelligence is the ability to figure out the best means to achieve happiness, and benevolence is enjoying the happiness of others. (3) What is human nature like? Human nature is not fixed but is shaped by social conditioning. (4) How can one cultivate the virtues? Through good childhood education, enlightened laws, and social conditioning, humans can be taught to take happiness in helping others, and their intelligence can be maximized. So consequentialism tells us what we ought to *do*, and a “moderate virtue ethics”

complements it by specifying what kind of person to *be* in order to do the right actions. Similarly, we could construct a moderate virtue ethics to accompany a rule-deontological position.

In moderate virtue ethics, claims about what kind of person one ought to be are logically dependent upon what one ought to do. However, according to “radical virtue ethics,” what one ought to do is derived from what kind of person one ought to be. How would this work? One possibility is that ethics is derived from human nature. Perhaps we must first determine what the potential and limitations of human nature are, and only then can we determine our ethical obligations. For example, a radical virtue ethicist might object to Bentham’s view, saying that before we know whether we ought to aim at the happiness of others, we must determine whether human nature allows us to do this. Suppose human nature makes it impossible for us to care about everyone equally. (This was the objection of some Confucians to the impartial consequentialism of the Mohists.) Or suppose human nature is purely self-interested, so that it is unnatural to care for anyone but oneself. (We’ll see in a later chapter that this was the objection of Yang Zhu to both Mohist consequentialism and Confucianism.)

Many advocates of radical virtue ethics are highly particularistic. In response to the question, “What should I do?” the particularistic virtue ethicist answers, “You should do what a virtuous person would do in your particular situation.” There is little to be said at a highly general level beyond this, because no simple rule captures what a virtuous person will do in every situation. She will, however, notice and appropriately respond to all kinds of aspects of situations that most of us will ignore or misinterpret. This is because the virtuous person has more wisdom than most of us. Wisdom is importantly different from intelligence. Intelligence comes in different forms, but we have ways to measure it, including IQ tests, standardized exams like SATs, and tests of skill at activities like mathematics. Wisdom is harder to quantify, but it is an important trait that we recognize and value in others. Think of someone who typically gives good advice about personal predicaments. Consider a person who is good at running meetings or solving practical problems. Imagine people who are generally happy and relaxed, but who also pay their bills, meet their deadlines, and are successful overall. All of these people are wise. One can just as easily imagine people who are extremely intelligent, but who fail miserably at all of these things, because they are not wise.

Many years ago, I was giving a guest lecture on Confucianism, and during the discussion session a young woman asked me, “What would Kongzi say if your parents didn’t approve of the guy you were dating?” I could tell by the tone of her voice and the look on her face that this was not a purely hypothetical question. I began by explaining that Kongzi lived in a very patriarchal and sexist society, so he assumed that women should just marry the men their parents picked for them. However, I went on to say, we don’t live in Kongzi’s society, so we should focus on how contemporary Confucians would address this issue. They would probably say that it depends on the details of the situation. Do the parents dislike the guy because of his race or religion? If so, one

should not follow their advice. Or do the parents dislike the guy because he treats their daughter disrespectfully? Do the young woman's friends agree with her parents' assessment? If her friends disagree among themselves, ask the friend who seems to be the best judge of people's characters. These are the kinds of questions and concerns that a wise person would begin by raising.

II. Confucianism as Virtue Ethics

It is a stereotype that Confucianism is monolithic and unchanging. In fact, Confucianism takes a variety of forms, which have evolved historically. However, Confucians disagree over the details of how to answer the four topics of virtue ethics.

1. Living Well

In the previous chapter, we saw that the Confucian conception of living well includes finding happiness and benefiting others in the everyday world, enjoying life with one's family and friends, a revivalistic use of tradition, participation in ritual, and educational activities aimed at making one a better person. A charming and moving passage that nicely illustrates the Confucian view of a good life is *Analects* 11.26:

Zilu, Zengxi, Ran Qiu, and Zihua were seated in attendance. The Master said to them, "I am older than any of you, but do not feel reluctant to speak your minds on that account. You are all in the habit of complaining, 'No one appreciates me.' Well, if someone were to appreciate you, what would you do?"

Zilu spoke up immediately. "If I were given charge of a state of a thousand chariots—even one hemmed in between powerful states, suffering from armed invasions and afflicted by famine—before three years were up I could infuse its people with courage and a sense of what is right."

The Master smiled at him.

Ran Qiu and Zihua (who noticed that Kongzi smirked at Zilu because of his overconfident answer) then tried to outdo each other in giving increasingly humble descriptions of their own political aspirations. Finally, Kongzi turned to Zengxi:

Zengxi stopped strumming his zither, and as the last notes faded away he set the instrument aside and rose to his feet. "I would choose to do something quite different from any of the other three."

"What harm is there in that?" the Master said. "We are all just talking about our aspirations."

Zengxi then said, “In the third month of Spring, once the Spring garments have been completed, I should like to assemble a company of five or six young men and six or seven boys to go and bathe in the Yi River and enjoy the breeze upon the Rain Dance Altar, and then return singing to the Master’s house.”

The Master sighed deeply, saying, “I am with Zengxi!”

Zilu, Ran Qiu and Zihua all aspire to help others via participation in government. This is a central aspect of the Confucian vision. However, Kongzi sighs in agreement with Zengxi, because his aspiration expresses the fact that political activity is merely a means to something that is even more important in Confucianism: enjoying simple everyday pleasures like a walk down to the river, going for a swim, singing, and hanging out with your friends and family.

2. The Virtues

So which virtues does Kongzi think one needs to live such a life? Kongzi’s primary virtue term is *rén* 仁, which several fine translations render “Goodness.” This reflects the fact that *ren* is, in a way, the highest human excellence for Kongzi. I slightly prefer to translate *ren* as “humaneness,” for several reasons. First, “humaneness” suggests that one of the most important aspects of *ren* is “caring for others” (12.22). Indeed, for later Confucians this is its primary sense. Second, just as the word “humaneness” has the word “human” in it, so does the character *rén* 仁 have *rén* 人, “person,” in it. (The other part of *rén* 仁 is 二, “two,” suggesting that this is a virtue manifested in relationships between people.) Ultimately, though, it doesn’t make much difference whether one says “Goodness,” “humaneness,” or something else, as long as one remembers that *ren* is the most important virtue for Kongzi, and it is manifested primarily in caring for others.¹

Almost as important as Goodness, for Kongzi, is wisdom. The relationship between the two virtues is illustrated when a disciple, Fan Chi, “asked about Goodness”:

The Master replied, “Care for others.”

He then asked about wisdom.

The Master replied, “Know others.”

Fan Chi still did not understand, so the Master elaborated: “Raise up the straight and apply them to the crooked, and the crooked will be made straight.” (12.22; cf 2.19)

“Straight” and “crooked” are metaphors for moral rectitude and corruption, so to “raise up the straight” refers to Kongzi’s strategy for reforming government by putting people with good character into positions of authority. Kongzi is implying that two traits are necessary to carry out this policy. One must be Good, which entails caring about the

well-being of others, but caring is not enough. One must also be wise, which involves being able to recognize who is upright and who is corrupt. Without Goodness, one lacks the proper motivation; without wisdom, one lacks the skill to achieve one's goal.²

An important part of wisdom is being able to judge the character of others. Indeed, much of Book 5 of the *Analects* is taken up with Kongzi's appraisals of other people. For contemporary Western readers, Kongzi's emphasis on judging others may seem off-putting because we live in a society that frowns on people who are judgmental. But there is great irony in this, because to condemn others for being judgmental is to judge them yourself. This is more than an amusing paradox. The fact is, it is impossible to live without sometimes evaluating others. We all condemn certain kinds of people, such as the racist, the misogynist, and the child molester. And if we are to be fair to our friends, we need to *evaluate* whether, for example, they are being honest for our own good, blunt but a bit tactless, or simply hurtful when they tell us a truth we do not want to hear. If being judgmental is a vice, it cannot mean simply having opinions about others, because we cannot help having opinions. Rather, to be judgmental is really to make judgments about others in a manner that is not informed and not thoughtful. A person cannot begin to be informed and thoughtful in her opinions as long as she keeps telling herself that she (unlike everyone else in the world) does not make any judgments.

The virtue of humility is required in order to avoid being judgmental, so Kongzi encourages us to "not delay in reforming if you make a mistake" (1.8*). He does not think he is above this advice: he admits that he is sometimes wrong in his judgments about others (2.9, 5.10), and he frequently notes his own failings (7.3, 7.33, 7.34, 9.8*) and praises the excellences of others (5.9). Kongzi sums up the importance of thoughtful evaluation when he says, "When walking with two other people, I will always find a teacher among them. I focus on those who are good and seek to emulate them, and focus on those who are bad in order to be reminded of what needs to be changed in myself" (7.22).

Appreciating the good and bad points of others is an important part of wisdom, but not the only one. Wisdom is also a metavirtue, in the sense that it requires understanding and being committed to other virtues. Thus, Kongzi asks, "How could someone who does not choose to dwell in Goodness be considered wise?" (4.1). General intelligence seems to be a third part of wisdom for Kongzi (5.9), as manifested in such things as interpreting the *Odes* with insight (1.15, 3.8, 3.11).³

Those who are familiar with Western ethics might wonder how Confucian wisdom differs from *phronēsis*, or "practical wisdom," in Aristotelian thought. There are some striking similarities. For both Kongzi and Aristotle, wisdom is something very different from theoretical intelligence, and it cannot be fully captured in any set of rules. Whereas some philosophers (such as the Mohists and Western utilitarians) think of ethics as being almost like mathematics, Confucians and Aristotelians conceive of wisdom as more like the learnable but uncodifiable skill of a master craftsman. Furthermore, for

both Confucians and Aristotelians, wisdom requires understanding and being committed to the other virtues. However, there are important differences between the two views as well. For Aristotle, *phronēsis* is the master virtue that subsumes all the others. In contrast, Goodness is the overarching virtue in the thought of Kongzi.

Righteousness, dutifulness, trustworthiness, and courage are four virtues that are important for Kongzi but much more narrow than Goodness. The Good person will possess these lesser virtues, but none of them, by itself, is sufficient to render a person Good. Righteousness is the integrity of a person who will not do what is wrong, even when confronted with strong temptations. The same Chinese term is used to describe the rightness of the actions the righteous person performs. In fact, many interpreters of the *Analects* consistently translate it “rightness” because they think that (for Kongzi at least) it is primarily a quality of actions rather than the name of a virtue. Insofar as it may be considered a virtue, it is clear that a righteous person does what is right even in the face of danger or the lure of wealth: “The gentleman understands rightness, whereas the petty person understands profit” (4.16).⁴

Dutifulness and trustworthiness are virtues that Kongzi frequently mentions together (1.4, 1.8*, 5.28, 7.25*, 12.10*, 15.6*). Dutifulness is a sort of devotion or loyalty, especially when that commitment conflicts with one’s own self-interest (5.19). However, Kongzi stresses that dutifulness is never blind loyalty: “If you care for someone, can you fail to encourage him? If you are dutiful to someone, can you fail to instruct him?” (14.7*).

As the structure of the character suggests, to be trustworthy (*xìn* 信) is to be a person (*rén* 人) who stands by his words (*yán* 言): to be honest and sincere. This is important for Kongzi, because he sees a key difference between genuine Goodness and the superficial semblance of Goodness that is provided by being “glib” (15.11) or having a “clever tongue” (1.3). A true gentleman is reticent (12.3*) and does not promise more than he can deliver (14.27).

Kongzi distinguishes being courageous from being rash. Thus, when the always headstrong Zilu expresses a willingness to rush into a dangerous situation, Kongzi dryly remarks, “Zilu’s fondness for courage exceeds my own” (5.7*). A person does not lack courage because she is unwilling to expose herself to needless danger. Rather, “to see what is right yet not do it is to lack courage” (2.24*). This is similar to the view of most Western virtue ethicists. However, Aristotle and Plato considered courage an extremely important virtue, whereas Kongzi seldom mentions it, and he seems to spend more time discouraging excessive courage than he does encouraging genuine courage (8.2, 8.10*, 14.4, 14.21, 17.8, 17.23, and 17.24*; but contrast 9.29). This may have something to do with the fact that a paradigm of courage (in both China and the West) is bravery in battle; however, Kongzi wanted to discourage his contemporaries from thinking in militaristic terms as much as possible.

A number of other virtues are named in the *Analects*, but the preceding are the most important.

Myth: “Chinese characters are all pictures.”

Fact: Fewer than 3 percent of Chinese characters were originally pictograms or ideograms. So what are they? Read Appendix B to find out.

3. Ethical Cultivation and Human Nature

It is not surprising that a philosopher’s conception of human nature and her theory of ethical cultivation are typically closely related: how we should cultivate the human potential to be virtuous depends upon what that potential is. We saw in the previous chapter that Kongzi stresses both thinking and learning in ethical cultivation (2.15). But Kongzi was vague about the relative importance of these two factors and how they relate to human nature. Consequently, this was the subject of intense debate in the later Confucian tradition. Here I shall present an interpretation of Kongzi that is close to that of Xunzi. However, be aware that for the last millennium, most Confucians have

believed that Mengzi’s position best elaborates what is implicit in Kongzi’s thought.⁵

One of the disciples closest to Kongzi remarked that one could not hear him talk about human nature (5.13). Indeed, his only explicit statement on the topic is that “By nature people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice” (17.2). But this is so vague that it is consistent with almost any view; human nature could be good, bad, or morally neutral. Kongzi does seem to have an implicit view of human nature, though. He praises a disciple who compares ethical cultivation to the laborious process of grinding and polishing jade (1.15). Furthermore, in what has been called Kongzi’s “spiritual autobiography,” he describes how he committed himself to learning at the age of fifteen and only fifty-five years later, at the age of seventy, could he “follow [his] heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety” (2.4). And in a pronouncement to his most talented disciple, Kongzi characterizes Goodness as “restraining yourself and turning to the rites” (12.1). Taken together, these comments suggest that humans are not innately disposed toward the virtues and that human nature is actually very resistant to ethical cultivation. Becoming ethical is a process of re-forming a nature with desires and dispositions that are actively opposed to virtue (such as arrogance, combativeness, inflexibility, greed, and lust). Although thinking is certainly important, what is really crucial in becoming a better person is to reshape oneself through studying classic texts, participating in communal rituals, and modeling oneself on sages and worthies.

It might not be clear at first why the issue of human nature is important, but consider some of the alternatives to Kongzi’s view, which we shall explore in later chapters. The Mohists held that human nature is morally neutral and highly malleable, so that humans

can easily be led to care for everyone impartially. Yang Zhu claimed that human nature is self-interested, so that trying to force humans to act for the benefit of others is impractical. Mengzi argued that human nature is good, so we innately have compassion for others, but this care is naturally stronger for our relatives and friends than for strangers. Finally, Xunzi stated explicitly that human nature is bad, in the sense that our innate desires are opposed to the Way, so we must arduously cultivate virtues that we do not have at birth.

III. Limitations of Confucianism

Now that we understand (at least at a basic level) what Kongzi's Way is, we are ready to discuss some common objections to it. We have seen that Kongzi is committed to a thoughtful and revivalistic appropriation of culture rather than blind traditionalism. Nonetheless, Kongzi does state, "I transmit rather than creating" (7.1), and many later Confucians have emphasized the conservative aspects of his teachings. The Mohists raise a sensible objection to this kind of traditionalism:

Confucians say, "A gentleman conforms to the old rather than creating." We answer them: In antiquity Yi created the bow, Zhu created armor, Xi Zhong created vehicles, and Qiao Chui created boats. Would they say that the tanners, armorers, and carpenters of today are all gentleman, whereas Yi, Yu, Xi Zhong, and Qiao Chui were all petty people? Moreover, some of those whom the Confucians follow must have been creators. So (according to their own teaching) what they conform to is the Way of petty people.ⁱⁱⁱ

If the Confucians acknowledge that the sages of the past created new things (like Fu Xi teaching people to hunt, Shen Nong inventing farming, and the Yellow Emperor's wife discovering the secret to silk making), how can they deny that people of the present and future will continue to innovate and create worthwhile texts, institutions, inventions, and ideas?

A second limitation of Confucianism is that it does not have a pluralistic conception of living well. The traditional Chinese social hierarchy was, from top to bottom, scholars-farmers-craftsmen-merchants. Ideally, people recognized that each class was necessary for the proper functioning of society and that membership in a class should be determined by talent rather than birth (so Shun, born a farmer, became Emperor Shun). However, being a scholar is simply a better life than being a farmer, which is a better life than being a merchant. In contrast, according to pluralism, there is more than one way to live a good life. The pluralist says that a senator, a kindergarten teacher, a corporate CEO, an auto mechanic, and a jazz musician all have the potential to lead equally worthwhile lives.⁶

In summary, traditional Confucianism has two major limitations: (1) it assumes all worthwhile cultural, social, and ethical innovation has already occurred; and (2) it does not recognize the plurality of worthwhile ways of life. Contemporary advocates of Confucianism as a philosophy acknowledge that these are weaknesses. However, they argue that the fundamental insights and values of Confucianism can be made consistent with recognition of social evolution and pluralism. For example, contemporary Confucians agree that democracy is a much better form of government than the paternalistic monarchy that Kongzi himself envisioned. However, they will add that even democracies need government officials who have virtues like Goodness, wisdom, and dutifulness. Similarly, present-day Confucians acknowledge that many different kinds of wedding and funeral ceremonies can perform the same functions as did the rituals of Kongzi's era.

There continues to be much debate about the extent to which Confucianism can be made consistent with modern life and whether a modernized Confucianism would be a quaint anachronism or a valuable contribution to contemporary thought. In this respect, Confucianism is in the same boat with other great traditional systems of thought, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.

IV. Kongzi's Particularism

We noted that moderate virtue ethics is logically subordinate to consequentialism or rule-deontology, while radical virtue ethics takes good character to be more fundamental. Kongzi's Way seems to be a sort of radical virtue ethics. For Kongzi, the Way does not simply aim to produce the best consequences overall. Indeed, Kongzi suggests that aiming at benefit is characteristic of a petty person rather than a true gentleman. Kongzi certainly did take very seriously ethical rules, such as those provided by the rituals. However, there is something more fundamental than the rituals, since Kongzi allows for ritual change or even violations of ritual in some cases.

Consider the immense variation in the answers Kongzi gives to the same question. When he is asked about Goodness, he gives five different answers to five different disciples (6.22, 12.1, 12.2, 12.3*, and 17.6*). He is asked how to govern a state on six occasions, and on each he gives a different answer (12.7, 12.11, 12.14*, 12.17, 13.1*, and 13.16). Kongzi's variability apparently puzzled even some of his own disciples. On one occasion, Kongzi's disciple Zilu asked whether one should immediately put into practice a moral teaching one has learned. Kongzi responded in the negative, telling Zilu that one must first seek the advice of one's elders before acting. Later, Ran Qiu asked the very same question: should one immediately put into practice a moral teaching one has heard? Kongzi replied that one should indeed act immediately. A third disciple heard both exchanges, and asked Kongzi why he gave different answers to the same

question. Kongzi replied simply, “Ran Qiu is overly cautious, so I wished to urge him on. Zilu, on the other hand, is too impetuous, and so I sought to hold him back” (11.22).

Kongzi hoped to produce gentlemen, people who had genuine Virtue (regardless of their original social class). These gentlemen would have compassion for the suffering of others and the wisdom to know how to respond to the complex and fluid political and social situations they faced. They would take seriously and generally uphold the moral rules, rituals, and laws handed down by tradition, but their virtues would enable them to go beyond any rules or formulations if required by the details of a particular situation.

Don’t we need more specific guidance about following the Way than this? Some philosophers long for a clearer and more direct standard for ethics. We turn to such a thinker in the next chapter.

Review Questions

1. How does consequentialism differ from deontology?
2. How is rule-consequentialism different from act-consequentialism?
3. How is rule-deontology different from act-deontology?
4. Explain the generalism-particularism spectrum.
5. What are the four questions virtue ethics addresses?
6. What is the difference between moderate and radical virtue ethics?
7. What is Goodness for Kongzi?
8. What are the different aspects of wisdom for Kongzi?
9. Explain the four other major virtues that Kongzi discusses.
10. How does Kongzi’s implicit view of human nature seem to require him to emphasize learning to a somewhat greater extent than thinking?

1. Some of the many passages in the *Analects* that discuss Goodness include 1.2, 1.3, 3.3, 4.1–6, 5.8, 5.19, 6.30, 7.30, 9.1*, 12.1–2, 14.1, 14.4, 51.9, 15.36, 17.6*, and 17.21.

2. Other passages that discuss Goodness and wisdom together include 4.1, 4.2, 6.22, 6.23, 9.29, 15.33*, and 17.8.

3. Other passages about wisdom (sometimes also translated as “knowledge” or “understanding”) include 2.17*, 5.18*, 7.20, 7.28, 8.9, 11.12, 15.4*, 15.8*, 15.34*, 16.8, 16.9, 17.3*, 17.24*, 19.25*, and 20.3*.

4. Other passages that discuss rightness/righteousness include 1.13*, 2.24*, 4.10, 5.16*, 6.22*, 7.3, 7.16, 12.10*, 12.20*, 13.4, 14.12, 14.13, 15.17*, 15.18, 16.10*, and 16.11*.

5. For Xunzi, see Chapter 10; for Mengzi’s view, see Chapter 6; for later Confucian views of Kongzi, see Chapter 12.

6. See Appendix A for a discussion of pluralism and an explanation of how it differs from relativism.