



Happiness and the Good Life: A Classical Confucian Perspective

Shirong Luo¹

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Abstract

This essay examines the classical (or early) Confucian perspective on the topic of happiness through the lens of three Western theories: hedonism, desire satisfaction theory, and objective list theory. My analysis of the two classical texts—the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子)—reveals that three salient aspects of the Confucian conception of happiness, namely ethical pleasure, ethical desire, and moral innocence, play the fundamental role in the guidance and evaluation of an individual's life. According to Confucius (Kongzi 孔子, 551–479 BCE) and Mencius (Mengzi 孟子, 371–289 BCE?), happiness consists primarily not in pleasure, but in ethical pleasure; the good life is not a life in which all or most of one's desires are fulfilled, but a life in which the satisfaction of prudential desires is subject to the constraint of ethical desire; the source of the greatest happiness lies not in the attainment of the greatest political power, but rather in the cognizance of one's moral innocence. For classical Confucian thinkers, the relationship between happiness and the good life is that happiness is a critically important constituent of the good life. However, happiness—defined in terms of pleasure, desire satisfaction, or a list of goods—needs to be tempered by moral constraints. In light of their views on happiness and the good life, I conclude that Confucius and Mencius each lived a good life that exemplified the three salient features of happiness, and to that extent they were happy.

Keywords Confucius · Mencius · Happiness · Ethical pleasure · Ethical desire · Moral innocence

1 Introduction

Commentators of the early Confucian tradition have been fruitfully engaging Western philosophy on various topics. In recent years a new subject of engagement has come to

✉ Shirong LUO
luo8@simmons.edu

¹ Philosophy Department, Simmons University, 300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115, USA

the fore: happiness. In “Happiness in Early Chinese Thought,” the noted scholar Philip Ivanhoe has introduced to Western readers the views of two seminal early Chinese thinkers—Confucius and Zhuangzi 莊子—on happiness (Ivanhoe 2013). My goal in this essay is to pursue this thread a little further. I will concentrate only on early Confucian thinkers—Confucius and his famous successor Mencius.¹ I not only extract and reconstruct what may be called a *classical (or early) Confucian perspective* on happiness and the good life, but also give a preliminary answer to the question whether they themselves were happy. In order to engage Western theories of happiness, I will take three prominent theories of happiness as my point of departure: hedonism, desire satisfaction theory, and objective list theory.²

While each of the above theories truly captures certain aspects of happiness, they also falter in various ways. An objection to hedonism is that it is too narrow—pleasure is a good but not *the* good. Desire satisfaction theory has its own share of problems. For example, some desires are better left unsatisfied than satisfied. John Stuart Mill famously said, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (Mill 1998: 57). Objective list theory fares better because it casts its net much wider. With a variety of items listed as contributing to the good life, new questions arise—how are the various goods on an objective list related to each other and to the good life or happiness? Are they comparable? I submit that there are three salient features that distinguish the early Confucian perspective on happiness from the aforementioned theories—ethical pleasure, ethical desire, and moral innocence. Given the fact that the teachings of early Confucians still exert considerable influence in contemporary Chinese society, it is beneficial to understand their views on a topic as crucially important as happiness. In order to do so, we need to answer the following questions: (1) What is happiness? Without a clear understanding of the concept we cannot make a judgment with regard to a particular individual. (2) What characters in early Confucian texts are the counterparts of the English term “happiness”? (3) Who were early Confucians?

Happiness is a confusing, multifarious concept which we must clarify. One source of confusion is that there are two senses of happiness: a psychological or descriptive sense and a well-being or prescriptive sense (Haybron 2005: 289). The psychological sense of happiness pertains to a particular mental state, namely, pleasure, whereas the prescriptive sense refers to a person’s well-being. James Griffin refers to the distinction as that between a state of mind and a state of the world (Griffin 1986: 7). Philosophers do not always use the term “happiness” consistently. When Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* asserted that the ultimate good is happiness (Aristotle 1999: 3), he used the term in the prescriptive sense. In Thomas Hurka’s theory, happiness, identified with “feeling good,” clearly refers to a state of mind (Hurka 2011: 119). Laurence Sumner understands well-being in terms of happiness with some

¹ Xunzi 荀子 was undoubtedly an important early Confucian thinker, but due to space constraints, his views on happiness are not included in my discussion.

² The simplest forms of those “theories” are simply ideas. These ideas exist in the Chinese tradition as well. For instance, it was written in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) that the desires for food, drink, and sex (*yinshi nannü* 飲食男女) are major human desires. A sensory hedonist would say the same (see Legge 1885). The holiday greeting *wan shi ru yi* 萬事如意 (literally “ten thousand things go as you wish”) contains the idea of happiness as desire satisfaction. Another traditional idea of the good life is the five constituents of happiness (*wu fu* 五福)—longevity, wealth, honor, virtue, and a good ending—which look like items on an objective list.

qualifications (Sumner 1996: 139). Another source of confusion is that there is no consensus about the nature of happiness. Scholars have proposed many theories of happiness and each of them has some variation on the theme. According to Derek Parfit's tripartite taxonomy (Parfit 1984: 493), there are hedonistic theories, desire satisfaction theories, and objective list theories. For the sake of simplicity, I will treat them as if there were only one theory in each category. For example, I will refer to hedonistic theories simply as hedonism, desire satisfaction theories simply as desire satisfaction theory or DST for short, and objective list theories as objective list theory or OLT. Each theory has different versions, some of which are more sophisticated and defensible than others. However, I prefer the simple version to more complex ones as it is easier to use as a launch pad for a preliminary exploration of early Confucian perspectives on the subject of happiness.

The simple form of hedonism identifies happiness with pleasure experienced by the individual in question. According to hedonism, the more pleasure one experiences, the happier one gets. If there is little pleasure in a person's life or there is much pain, that person cannot be happy. While hedonism is intuitively appealing, it has been called a "doctrine worthy only of swine" (Mill 1998: 55). Such notoriety seems to rest on a narrow understanding of the term "pleasure," that is, pleasure from eating, drinking, or sex. However, gastronomic and sexual pleasures are just a tiny part of the vast array of pleasures human beings are capable of experiencing. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, pleasure has several senses. First and foremost, it is a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment. Sensuality is just one sense among many. Mill tried to defend hedonism by proposing the distinction between *higher* and lower pleasure (Mill 1998: 56–57). The contemporary philosopher Fred Feldman takes a similar approach in his defense of hedonism by introducing *attitudinal* pleasure (Feldman 2004). As we will see, the early Confucian perspective on happiness laid great stress on ethical pleasure, ethical desire, and moral innocence.³ In its simplest form, desire satisfaction theory identifies well-being with desire satisfaction, *regardless of what one desires* (Heathwood 2006: 540). Since the concept of desire is not restricted, it leaves the door open for all kinds of desires. This conceptual openness makes the theory broadly applicable, but also vulnerable to objections. Two kinds of desires undermine the simple form of DST: ill-informed desires and evil desires. The objection that the satisfaction of an ill-informed desire may result in a reduction of one's well-being has led to a revision of the theory according to which someone's life goes well to the extent that her *well-informed* desires get satisfied. The problem posed by evil desires for the theory is obvious—it is not plausible, for example, to say a torturer whose many sadistic desires get satisfied has lived a good life or enjoyed a high level of well-being. However, I will focus on a different challenge posed by early Confucians who insisted on the supremacy of the ethical desire. As we will see later, there are two kinds of ethical desires: the teleological and the instrumental. Since the instrumental ethical desire constrains the satisfaction of certain prudential desires, it may lead to self-denial or self-sacrifice, which tends to reduce the well-being of the person in question rather than enhance it.

The underlying assumption of hedonism and desire satisfaction theory seems to be that there is only one key to the good life, happiness, or well-being. For hedonism, that key is

³ For a fine discussion on ethical desires, see Tan 2014: 189–212.

pleasure; for desire satisfaction theory, it is desire satisfaction. For objective list theory (OLT), however, the good life is constituted by a variety of goods such as knowledge, pleasure, achievement, virtue, and so on. It does not even require one to *desire* all or any of them. That is why it is called *objective* list theory (Parfit 1984: 493). Many such theories include an ethical dimension. For instance, virtue is listed in W. D. Ross's theory (Ross 1930: 140); it is also in Thomas Hurka's (Hurka 2011). What makes the early Confucian perspective different is that the ethical dimension defines the good life and plays the fundamental role in the life of the virtuous individual (*Analects* 12.1, 15.24).

What Chinese characters in early Confucian texts correspond to the English term "happiness"? This is an area where it is a tall order to achieve a high degree of semantic precision. The difficulty lies in that many Chinese characters mean something like happiness, but the English word "happiness" itself has many synonyms, such as pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, merriment, joy, and so on. In the *Analects*, Confucius used *yue* 悅 (1.1), *xi* 喜 (4.21), and *le* 樂 (1.1), to mention just a few instances. Mencius frequently used *le* 樂 in his eponymous text—the *Mencius*. These, of course, do not exhaust all of the Chinese characters that roughly correspond to "happiness," but for the present purpose, they suffice. When scholars discuss "early Confucians" they often have in mind three preeminent Confucian thinkers during the pre-Qin (xian Qin 先秦) period—Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi 荀子. In the confines of this essay, I will focus my discussion on Confucius and Mencius as well as Confucius' best disciple YAN Hui 顏回. The inclusion of YAN Hui is due to the fact that Confucius famously praised Yan for his cheerfulness in the face of adversity. It provides a window through which we can examine the perspective adopted by Confucius with regard to happiness and the good life. While Mencius did not comment on Yan's happiness, he did make many general remarks on the topic. As we can see, Mencius not only transmitted Confucius' view on happiness and the good life, he also enriched it and contributed to what may be tentatively termed "a Confucian perspective" on the subject. I will extract and reconstruct the Confucian perspective through the comparative lens of hedonism, desire satisfaction theory, and objective list theory. I also look into some major aspects of the lives of Confucius and Mencius to answer the question whether they were happy. My discussion begins with YAN Hui.

2 YAN Hui

The case of YAN Hui is interesting and straightforward because it exposes some obvious limitations of a hedonistic conception of happiness. My discussion of the case of YAN Hui will be brief. YAN was Confucius' best disciple. He was academically outstanding and morally irreproachable, and by all accounts had a promising future, but unfortunately he died prematurely. Confucius' following remarks have a direct bearing on the question concerning YAN Hui's happiness:

How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most people would find unbearable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy (*le* 樂). How admirable Hui is!" (*Analects* 6.11; Lau 1979: 49)

From the standpoint of the simple form of hedonism, that is, sensory hedonism, YAN Hui had little (bodily) pleasure, but much pain—he obviously did not have enough to eat; there was no animal protein in his diet; he was evidently malnourished. Such nutritional deficiency probably resulted in his premature death. If his life was evaluated in terms of sensory (or bodily) pleasure, it would be hard to say that he was happy, but he was. Clearly his happiness was different from sensory pleasure. Confucius' observation that Yan was happy was premised on a principle different from (sensory) hedonism. We may say that Yan's happiness was in part the joy of learning as he was Confucius' best student. The very first sentence of the *Analects* is, "The Master said, 'Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals?'" (*Analects* 1.1; Lau 1979: 3). His happiness probably also came from his pride in his outstanding academic performance. More importantly, however, Yan's happiness had ethical significance: Confucius called him "admirable" because he exuded joy despite his abject poverty. Elsewhere, Confucius made a similar point,

In the eating of coarse rice and the drinking of water, the use of one's elbow for a pillow, joy is to be found. Wealth and rank attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds. (*Analects* 7.16; Lau 1979: 61)

For Confucius, the most important sort of happiness is not from learning, nor is it from pride in one's academic achievements; it is from steadfast adherence to moral means to attain prudential goals such as wealth and rank; if such goals could not be attained through moral means, the virtuous would find pleasure even in poverty. Such pleasure would be ethical. Broadly speaking, *any pleasure could be ethical if it was in keeping with ritual (li 禮) or virtue*; any pleasure that was contrary to ritual or virtue would be unethical. Early Confucians were not ascetics; they did not oppose bodily pleasures categorically. It all depends on the nature of means through which such pleasures are obtained. The Ji 季 Family certainly enjoyed the dance performed by eight rows of eight dancers, but in the eyes of Confucius, their pleasure was unethical because the very act of arranging a performance of such a scale was in contravention of ritual (*Analects* 3.1). The virtuous could not find pleasure in fine food, clothes, and music during the *mourning* period. If they could, their pleasure would not be ethical and would reflect badly on their character (*Analects* 17.21). What one found pleasurable would be an indication of one's character. If one regulated every aspect of one's life by ritual, one would be morally innocent (*bu jiu* 不疚) (*Analects* 12.4).⁴ Moral innocence, discoverable from daily practice of reflection on one's conduct, would give rise to ethical pleasure (*Analects* 12.4). Confucius stated, "We all dislike poverty and low social status, but unless they could be disposed of in the right way, I would not get rid of them" (*Analects* 4.5; my translation).⁵ Yan did not let poverty dampen his cheerfulness because he was cognizant of his moral innocence and confident about his future.

⁴ "Moral innocence" should not be construed as "moral naivety" (lack of experience or judgement); it should be contrasted with "moral guilt" just as in criminal justice innocence is contrasted with guilt. I will discuss the notion of moral innocence in more detail in the section concerning Mencius.

⁵ Passages 8.13 and 14.1 can shed light on 4.5 because in those two passages Confucius explained what he meant by "the right way" for the virtuous to pursue wealth and rank.

Ethical pleasure is not only related to moral innocence but also to *ethical desire*. Confucius said, “If you set your heart on the virtue of *ren* 仁,⁶ you will be free from evil” (*Analects* 4.4; my translation). Yan set his heart on (the attainment of) the virtue of *ren* and pursued it with great determination and perseverance (*Analects* 6.7). His desire for *ren* is an example of ethical desire. *Ren* is not only desirable, but also attainable. Confucius remarked, “As soon as I *desire ren*, it is here” (*Analects* 7.30). The passage shows that the desire for *ren* could be satisfied easily because it would be entirely up to oneself to control one’s *natural* desires (such as the desire for food or sex) and inclinations and regulate them in accordance with ritual (*Analects* 12.1). In *Analects* 7.15, Confucius commented that if one sought the virtue of *ren* and obtained it, one would be *content*. Such contentment is an example of ethical pleasure resulted from the fulfillment of ethical desire. Thus, ethical pleasure can be understood in terms of the satisfaction of ethical desire.

Can the simple form of hedonism accommodate ethical pleasure? If pleasure is defined only in sensory terms, the answer is: it depends. Early Confucians did not reject bodily pleasures *in toto*. They would oppose them if their attainment was contrary to ritual or virtue. Confucius stated that during the period of mourning the virtuous could not find pleasure in good food, clothes, and music (*Analects* 17.21). While sensory pleasure can be ethical, the extension of ethical pleasure is much wider. Thus, sensory hedonism is unsatisfactory. However, if the conception of pleasure is broadened to admit all sorts of pleasures, including the ethical kind and Mill’s higher pleasure, then the modified version of hedonism may be in a better position to account for YAN Hui’s joy. Feldman, a contemporary defender of hedonism, has developed what he calls “intrinsic attitudinal hedonism” (IAH) as opposed to “sensory hedonism” or “default hedonism” (DH). According to Feldman, many enjoyments can be subsumed under “attitudinal pleasure”: “A person takes attitudinal pleasure in some state of affairs if he enjoys it, is pleased about it, is glad that it is happening, is delighted by it” (Feldman 2004: 56). Yan’s ethical pleasure seems to fit into the category of attitudinal pleasure, but it is a particular kind of attitudinal pleasure—the ethical kind. Yan was delighted in the fact that for an extended period of time his heart did not deviate from the virtue of *ren* (*Analects* 6.7).

Yan’s joy can be seen as ethical pleasure not only because he enjoyed making progress toward possessing the virtue of *ren* 仁, but also because he was delighted by his fortitude in the face of adversity. Yan’s case shows that the simple form of hedonism, namely, sensory hedonism, is inadequate. While Feldman’s intrinsic attitudinal hedonism (IAH) fares better in explaining Yan’s joy, it is unable to resolve the conflict between moral goodness and personal welfare, as illustrated by the case of Mother Teresa, whose “moral standing was high, but her welfare was low” (Feldman 2004: 10–11). Since to some extent Yan’s situation is similar to Mother Teresa’s, IAH would assess his case similarly—Yan’s moral standing was high, but his welfare was low. However, as we have already seen, Confucius did not use a bifurcated standard to evaluate Yan’s life (*Analects* 6.11, 7.16).

⁶ *Ren* has been variously translated as “perfect virtue,” “humanity,” “benevolence,” “humaneness,” “Goodness,” “authoritative conduct,” and so on. Unfortunately, none of these translations truly captures the meaning of *ren* as defined by Confucius on various occasions, so I leave it untranslated.

As we have seen from Confucius' remarks about ethical pleasure, there is a relationship between ethical pleasure and ethical desire (*Analects* 7.15). Yan followed Confucius' teaching that he should regulate every aspect of his life by ritual (*Analects* 12.1). We can imagine that in the initial stages of his moral self-cultivation, there must have been lapses, that is, violations of ritual here and there. Whenever there was a lapse, Yan would feel bad about it, but as time went on, there were fewer and fewer instances of failure until he reached a point where for an extended period of time there were no lapses at all (*Analects* 6.7). That, of course, would be a cause for joy, which is an example of ethical pleasure because Yan had the ethical desire for the virtue of *ren* and its fulfillment would constitute ethical pleasure. As we will see, the desire for the virtue of *ren* is just one kind of ethical desire; there are others, which we will explore in the next section.

3 Confucius

Since Confucius frequently used the term “desire” (*yu* 欲) in his teachings, including his famous Golden Rule (*Analects* 2.4, 4.5, 6.30, 7.15, 12.2, 15.24),⁷ it seems apropos that we start the analysis within the framework of desire satisfaction theory (DST). Once we have reached a clear understanding of Confucius' perspective on happiness, we will be in a position to answer the question whether he was happy or whether he lived a good life. In its simplest form, desire satisfaction theory equates happiness with desire satisfaction, regardless of the objects of desires. Its conceptual openness certainly has room for the ethical desires Confucius often discussed. Ethical desires are often contrasted with prudential desires. A prudential desire may be defined as a self-regarding desire, as opposed to other-regarding desires. I desire wealth and rank because obtaining them makes *my life* go better. Additionally, prudential desires seek the most efficient way for their satisfaction, independent of morality. On the other hand, the object of an ethical desire is the interests of other people or of the *community*. In the *Analects*, Confucius often contrasted prudential desires for wealth (*fu* 富) and rank (*gui* 貴) with ethical desires. He remarked, “We all desire wealth and rank, but unless they can be obtained in the right way, I will not obtain them” (*Analects* 4.5; my translation⁸). The virtuous, like everyone else, desire wealth and rank. Unlike everyone else, they also desire to achieve prudential ends through ethical means. Ethical means is an abstraction, so let us examine it in the early Confucian context. Consider rank. Like others, the virtuous also desire rank, that is, an official position (*wei* 位). Confucius had such a desire, as did many of his disciples. However, Confucius taught his disciples to focus their attention on what would make them qualify for an official position. He advised, “Don't worry over not having an official position; worry about what it takes to have one” (*Analects* 4.14; Ames and Rosemont 1998: 92). But what does it take to have an official position? At the very least, an aspirant politician should study ritual

⁷ Confucius' Golden Rule states, “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” (*Analects* 6.30, 12.2, and 15.24).

⁸ The character *gui* 貴 in this passage is often translated as “honor.” D. C. Lau translated it in 4.5 as “high station” but “rank” in 7.16. In this passage I follow Arthur Waley, who rendered it as “rank.”

because, according to Confucius, if one does not learn ritual, one will lack the qualification for a government position (*Analects* 16.13, 20.3).⁹ The idea behind this requirement is that a state is governed by means of ritual (*Analects* 4.13, 11.26). The most important part of governing a state is the management of the people. “If those in high positions love ritual [and regulate their conduct accordingly], the common people will be easy to employ” (*Analects* 14.41, cf. 13.4 and 13.6; Watson 2007: 103). However, mastering ritual does not mean memorizing the rules or reciting them; one must put them into practice—let ritual govern every aspect of one’s life. Confucius told YAN Hui,

Do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual. (*Analects* 12.1; Slingerland 2003: 125)

So what it takes to have an official position is a ritualized body and mind. That, according to Confucius, is the right means for obtaining a government position. Not all desire satisfactions conduce to one’s well-being; if the means is not right, satisfying the prudential desire for wealth or rank will diminish rather than enhance the well-being of the virtuous person because it engenders guilt, shame, worry, and fear in the virtuous (*Analects* 6.11, 7.16, 12.4, 14.1). A life lived with these negative emotions is not a good or happy life. What distinguishes the virtuous from the rest is not that the former have ethical desires while the latter are devoid of them. Most people do have ethical desires but those desires are not as potent as their prudential desires for wealth, rank, or the beauty of the opposite sex (*Analects* 5.11, 6.7, 9.18). The ethical desires in the virtuous are sufficiently strong to override the motive force of prudential desires if they are in conflict. Thus, what distinguishes the virtuous from the rest is not simply ethical desires *per se* but their strength. The ultimate test of the potency of one’s ethical desire is whether it is strong enough to override the desire for life (*Analects* 15.9).

I call the ethical desire for the right means the “instrumental ethical desire” as opposed to what may be called the “teleological ethical desire.” When asked about the *ultimate* purpose of moral self-cultivation, Confucius replied, “To bring peace and security to the people” (*Analects* 14.42; Lau 1979: 147). If one wants to bring peace and security to the people, then one has an ethical desire whose object is a state of affairs rather than an approach that one must take to achieve a goal. Two sorts of ethical desires may be distinguished—the teleological and the instrumental. The satisfaction of the aforementioned teleological ethical desire requires that the virtuous take office. However, obtaining an official position should be constrained by the instrumental ethical desire for the right means; the right qualification for public office, according to Confucius, is that one had to be an embodiment of ritual

⁹ “*Bu xue (zhi) li, wu yi li (ye)* 不學(知)禮, 無以立(也)” in passages 16.13 and 20.3 should be read in light of 4.13, 4.14, 11.26, and 15.14, but evidently many translators fail to do so; they also fail to take into consideration the fact that the two characters *wei* 位 and *li* 立 were interchangeable in their classical usage (Yang 2006: 40). Legge, for example, translated 不學禮, 無以立 as “If you do not learn the rules of Propriety, your character cannot be established” (Legge 1970: 316). Such translation makes superficial sense, but it lacks textual support and unduly moralizes Confucius’ message.

(*Analects* 4.13, 4.14, 11.26, 12.1, 13.6, 20.3). Confucius himself had the aspiration to bring peace and security to the people. To satisfy his teleological ethical desire, he needed a powerful government position. He did at some point in his life hold a position of considerable authority in his native state of Lu 魯. According to FUNG Yu-lan,

[When Confucius] was nineteen ... he entered upon his official career in Lu.... After passing through many experiences ... he reached his highest position in 501 B.C. by becoming Prime Minister of Lu. So great was his success in this post, that the [neighboring] state of Ch'i [Qi 齊] ... fearing his growing influence, sent a present of female dancers and musicians to the Lu ruler, who thereupon neglected the affairs of state. Full of disappointment, Confucius resigned his position and, accompanied by many of the disciples ... set out in 497 upon wanderings which were to last for thirteen years. (Fung 1952: 43)

During those years, Confucius travelled from court to court in hopes of finding an enlightened ruler who would accept his ideas and appoint him to a high-ranking position for which he was well qualified. Unfortunately, no ruler was willing to offer him the kind of position he had hoped for. He was disappointed, but his disappointment was in part of his own making because of his uncompromising ethical stance. To illustrate, when a ruler asked Confucius about military formation, he replied that he knew something about ritual but had never learned anything about how to conduct warfare (*Analects* 15.1). If his view on happiness is cast in terms of desire satisfaction theory, it may go as follows: satisfying prudential desires makes one happy if it does not go against one's ethical desire; if there is a conflict, the ethical desire always takes precedence over the prudential one. To put it more succinctly, happiness consists in the satisfaction of one's prudential desires constrained by ethical desires.

We may have grand aspirations or lofty goals, but most of our desires are mundane, commonplace, reoccurring ones such as the desire to see, hear, speak, or act. They are natural and spontaneous, but for Confucius, as quoted earlier, their satisfactions should be subject to the constraints of ritual (*Analects* 12.1). Only after a long and arduous process of moral self-cultivation can one become adept at having them satisfied without infractions of ritual. In his autobiographical sketch, Confucius described how at the age of seventy he could freely follow his heart's desires without overstepping the boundaries of ritual (*Analects* 2.4). Confucius' virtuosity in harmonizing the satisfaction of natural desires and that of ethical desire is what Ivanhoe refers to as "cultivated spontaneity" (Ivanhoe 2013: 267). However, not all satisfactions of desires are entirely within one's control. Fulfillment of political ambition, for example, is not. Therefore, while ideally the best life for the virtuous who are politically ambitious is to have both their political aspiration and ethical desire satisfied, in reality that is often not the case. In the eyes of Confucius, the ancient political history consisted of two types of paradigmatic cases—at one extreme, there were illustrious sage kings such as Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹 who embodied the highest ideal of the inner sage and outer king (*nei sheng wai wang* 內聖外王) (Fung 1952: 2), that is, morally they were the most virtuous, and politically the most powerful. At the other extreme, there were King

Jie 桀 and King Zhou 紂, the two most notorious tyrants who indulged to excess in sensual pleasures at the expense of their regal duties (Fung 1952: xv). They were at the zenith of political power but through their unbridled sensual indulgence they plunged themselves to the nadir of moral depravity.¹⁰ Although Confucius would give due weight to a person's social status, he would evaluate someone's life primarily on the basis of that person's moral worth. Thus, even though Confucius failed to achieve his political aspiration in his later years, he was pleased that he found no cause for self-reproach and he was content that his instrumental ethical desire had prevailed. Furthermore, an unfulfilled desire in the form of self-denial would not feel so painful as a desire entirely frustrated by external causes. To some extent, the way Confucius might have felt may be likened to that of a bodhisattva. In Buddhism, a bodhisattva is someone who is well qualified to reach nirvana but intentionally postpones it so that she can help enlighten others. While Confucius was well qualified for a high-ranking government position, he would deny himself the satisfaction of achieving such a goal if he could not secure it through the right means.

So there seems to be no straightforward answer to the question whether Confucius himself was happy. If we adopt the simple idea of DST, we may argue as follows: happiness is desire fulfillment; Confucius' political ambition in his later years was unfulfilled; therefore, he was not happy. But mindful of Confucius' own conception of happiness that emphasizes the decisive role of ethical desire, we may reach a more nuanced verdict: he was not happy *vis-à-vis* his political aspiration, but happy that he maintained his moral integrity. While he did not live the best life possible because for him the best life would mean the attainment of the ideal of the inner sage and outer king, we cannot conclude in light of his own conception of happiness that overall his life was a disappointment or failure. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that the reconstructed Confucian conception of happiness does not exhaust all the values that constitute the good life. It is merely intended to be contrasted with DST. It should not be construed as an attempt to reduce the complexity of Confucius' life to a two-tone oversimplification. Confucius' love of learning, teaching, and music gave him immense joy (*Analects* 1.1, 7.2, 7.14, 7.19). The simple idea of DST that identifies happiness with desire satisfaction turns out to be too simplistic and unable to meet the challenge posed by Confucius' view on happiness and the good life. Until it develops a way to resolve the kind of issues raised by Confucius' idea of the good life, it will find itself lacking in the resources to account for self-imposed restrictions on the satisfaction of prudential desires for ethical reasons. Confucius' contribution to theories of well-being is his emphasis on the supremacy of ethical desires and the crucial role they play in the well-being of the virtuous. If Confucius' life is measured by this conception of well-being, then we may be justified to conclude that Confucius was happy in a qualified sense. As we will see, his ideas were further enriched by his successor Mencius, especially through

¹⁰ Early Confucians, especially Mencius, would evaluate the life of an individual primarily on the basis of that individual's moral quality rather than his social status or political power. In other words, for early Confucians, prudential value (e.g., wealth, social status) matters far less than moral value. This asymmetrical way of evaluation can be seen in what Mencius said about the tyrant King Zhou 紂—he would not even acknowledge that the latter was a king; he called him “an outcast” (*Mencius* 1B8).

his conceptualization of moral innocence (*cheng* 誠), so let us examine what Mencius had to say about happiness.

4 Mencius

To the question whether Mencius was happy, there does not seem to be a simplistic answer either, because the answer hinges on how happiness is understood. A case can be made that Mencius was not happy if we apply the definition of DST, but a different conclusion may be reached if we take into account Mencius' own view on happiness. Like his predecessor Confucius, Mencius had an overarching ambition in life—to find an enlightened ruler who would allow him to implement his ideas of virtuous government. Also like Confucius, Mencius' ambition was unfulfilled during his lifetime. The following passage in the *Mencius* seems to attest to his unhappiness:

Mencius left the state of Qi. While they were on the road, his disciple Chongyu [充虞] asked, “Master, you look somewhat unhappy. I heard from you the other day that a virtuous person blames neither Heaven nor other people.” Mencius replied, “That was one time; this is another. Every five hundred years a sage King should arise, and in the interval there should also arise an illustrious personage [to assist the sage King]. From the founding of the Zhou [周] dynasty, [however], it has been more than seven hundred years. [So] the five-hundred-year mark is passed. The world seems ready for a sage King to emerge [but he has not appeared]. It must be that Heaven has not decided to bring peace and order to the world. If it did, who would be there in the present era except me [to assist a sage King]? Why should I be unhappy?” (*Mencius* 2B13; Lau 1970: 94, modified)

For some, this passage can be somewhat confusing because in the beginning Mencius admitted that he was unhappy, but at the end of the conversation, he asked rhetorically why he should be unhappy, giving the impression that his mood underwent a reversal as he spoke. While a little confusing, it seems to provide direct evidence that Mencius was unhappy because one of his important desires remained unfulfilled. If we apply the simple form of DST to this case, we may get this argument: happiness consists in desire satisfaction, but Mencius' political ambition was not realized. Therefore, he was not happy. However, the matter is not as simple as it appears. To analyze, his ambition involved not just one prudential or ethical desire but an intertwinement of both ethical and prudential desires. On the one hand, Mencius had a teleological ethical desire—he wanted to help bring peace and order to the world. On the other, to reach such a goal, he would need empowerment from a sage-ruler. However, having searched extensively, Mencius could not find a ruler who would allow him to carry out his reformative ideas. Among all the sovereigns of Mencius' era, King Hui of Liang (Liang Hui Wang 梁惠王) came close to what may be considered a decent ruler; but even he could not accept Mencius' teachings because he thought they were too idealistic and

impractical (Fung 1952: 107). In *Mencius* 1A1, there was an interesting exchange between King Hui of Liang and Mencius:

“Sir,” said the King. “You have come all this distance, thinking nothing of a thousand *li*.¹¹ You must surely have some way of profiting my state?” “Your Majesty,” answered Mencius, “what is the point of mentioning the word ‘profit’? All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness.” (*Mencius* 1A1; Lau 1970: 49)

Mencius effectively forbade the king to even utter the word “profit” (*li* 利). In the eyes of the king, Mencius might have come across as arrogant and pedantic. No wonder that the pragmatic rulers with whom Mencius had an audience, such as King Hui of Liang and King Xuan of Qi (Qi Xuan Wang 齊宣王), found his ideas hard to accept (Fung 1952: 107). It appears that Mencius himself was partially responsible for the fact that no ruler was willing to adopt his ideas because he was an uncompromising moral idealist. For Mencius, however, ethical desire is overriding; there is no room for negotiation, hedging, or bargain. In this regard it is like Kant’s notion of moral duty. The difference is that Kant insisted that human desires and inclinations be excluded from the realm of morality. A good defense of Mencius’ emphasis on ethical desire can be found in Bertrand Russell’s Nobel Lecture in which he argued,

All human activity is prompted by desire. There is a wholly fallacious theory advanced by some earnest moralists to the effect that it is possible to resist desire in the interests of duty and moral principle. I say this is fallacious, not because no man ever acts from a sense of duty, but because duty has no hold on him unless he desires to be dutiful. If you wish to know what men will do, you must know not only, or principally, their material circumstances, but rather the whole system of their desires with their relative strengths. (Russell 1950)

The desire to be dutiful is of course an ethical desire, just like the desire to bring peace and security to the people or the desire to use only ethical means to achieve one’s goals. Such a desire in Mencius was so strong that he could not bring himself to cater to the king’s wishes. Suppose instead of gently admonishing the king, Mencius had said the following: “Yes, indeed I came all the way from my hometown to visit Your Majesty because I have an excellent plan that I guarantee will profit Your Majesty and Your State.” The king would have been pleased and might have hired Mengzi as a high-ranking official. For Mencius, however, that would go against his ethical desire and compromise his moral integrity. Having ethical desire means that one is willing to sacrifice one’s self-interest for the sake of morality. The virtuous adhere to their ethical desire even if it means that they have to make self-sacrifice by forgoing the satisfaction of some of their prudential desires. Mencius did have the desire to be a high-ranking official in order to bring peace and order to the world and he was supremely confident about his own qualifications, but he would not resort to any other means to achieve that goal. No prudential desire is stronger than the desire to live, but Mencius firmly believed that life should not be preserved at all costs. He asserted,

¹¹ One *li* 里 is about a quarter of a mile.

Life is what I desire; morality *yi* 義 is also what I desire. If I cannot have both, I would rather take morality than life ... though life is what I desire, there is something I desire more than life. That is why I do not cling to life at all costs ... though death is what I loathe, there is something I loathe more than death. That is why there are troubles I do not avoid. (*Mencius* 6A10; Lau 1970: 166, modified)

This passage provides clear textual evidence that Mencius drew a distinction between prudential desires and ethical desires, and insisted on the supremacy of the latter. In general, they differ in that the former are about procuring something of value—wealth, rank, or continued existence, whereas the latter are about relinquishing something of value—time, resources, satisfaction of some prudential desires, or even one's life.¹² Among prudential desires, some are more important than others, and less important prudential desires may be sacrificed for more important ones. However, if a prudential desire and an ethical desire are in conflict, even the most important prudential desire should yield to the ethical desire. Like Confucius, Mencius tirelessly preached the supremacy of ethicality. The most memorable of Mencius' didactic stories involves a beggar whose seemingly insignificant ethical desire overrides his strongest prudential desire. Mencius wrote,

Here is a basketful of rice and a bowlful of soup. Getting them will mean life; not getting them will mean death. When these are given with abuse, even a homeless person would not accept them; when these are given after being trampled upon, even a beggar would not accept them. (*Mencius* 6A10; Lau 1970: 166)

The simple form of DST cannot make sense of this case because well-being depends on staying alive. A basic sense of well-being is health—that which sustains one's life contributes to one's well-being. For a starving person, getting food will make his or her life go better. What complicates this case is that the dignity of the starving beggar was under attack. He went to a local soup kitchen where a wealthy man offered him a meal, which the beggar would otherwise be eager to accept but took umbrage at the insulting manner in which the meal was offered. Now he was faced with the choice between his dignity and his life, and he decided to reject the meal in order to retain his dignity. It is clear that his desire for dignified existence was stronger than his desire for life, and it is no less clear that Mencius endorsed the beggar's preference. Mencius' point is that even a beggar has a dignified existence and such dignity, as Immanuel Kant puts it, is "above all price" (Kant 1997: 42). While for Kant the basis of human dignity is the capacity for autonomy, Mencius locates the source of human dignity in the goodness of human nature. He is best known for his doctrine that human nature is good (*Mengzi* 6A2). It is good because all human beings have four innate pro-social tendencies or potentials which he calls "the four hearts" (*si xin* 四心): the heart of compassion, the heart of respect, the heart of shame, and the heart of approval and disapproval. He maintained that if one did

¹² One might object that it seems that not all ethical desires are in direct relation to self-denial or self-sacrifice. The desire to possess the virtue of *ren* is about getting rather than giving up something. However, we should not forget that getting *ren* implies giving up one's freedom to do evil (*Analects* 4.4, 12.1).

not have any of the four hearts that intrinsically constitute human nature, one would not be a human being (*Mencius* 2A6). Mencius would undoubtedly concur with Nietzsche that “one should die proudly when it is no longer possible to live proudly” (Nietzsche 2005: 210). Mencius’ example makes a didactic point: if the beggar could reject the food when the alternative was death, it would be inexcusable for anyone else to barter their dignity for material gain. While this case may be controversial, as some may object that the beggar should have accepted the food in order to live to fight another day for human dignity, Mencius’ message is unmistakable—moral considerations are far more important than prudential calculus. What seems an insignificant ethical desire should prevail over the most important prudential desire, namely the desire for life. If he were to construct a theory of happiness, ethicality would certainly occupy pride of place. Mencius’ idea of moral supremacy in his conception of happiness can also be seen in what may be considered his version of objective list theory. According to the argument from the simple form of DST mentioned earlier, Mencius’ life considered as a whole was unhappy because one of his most significant desires—to assist an enlightened ruler in the capacity of a high-ranking official—remained unfulfilled. However, Mencius’ list of three joys (*san le* 三樂) would militate against such reasoning. Mencius said:

The virtuous have three joys, and ruling over the Empire is not among them. Their parents are alive and their siblings are well. This is the first joy. Above, they are not ashamed to face Heaven; below, they are not ashamed to face other people. This is the second joy. They have the good fortune of educating the most talented students under heaven. This is the third joy. (*Mencius* 7A20; Lau 1970: 185, modified)

As the above passage explicitly demonstrates, Mencius did not see the attainment of political power as a source of happiness. If so, the argument from the simple form of DST falters. Let us name the three joys respectively as familial joy, ethical joy, and pedagogical joy. He emphatically ruled out “ruling over the Empire” as conducing to happiness for the virtuous. As we may recall, objective list theory (OLT) identifies happiness with more than one thing. On Mencius’ list there are three items which may be broadly construed as family, morality, and education. The virtuous will be happy if their parents are alive and their siblings are in good health; they will be delighted if upon self-reflection (*nei xing* 內省) they find no reason to be ashamed to face Heaven or other people; they will be joyous if they have the good fortune to teach the most brilliant students in the world. By Mencius’ own criteria, he should have been happy because he had brilliant disciples; he was the embodiment of moral probity. However, based on a paucity of information concerning his life, it seems that he was raised by his widowed mother and had no siblings (Legge 1970: 16–17). Familial joy played little role in Mencius’ happiness. Nevertheless, his remarks should be seen as outlining the typical ingredients of happiness with which a particular individual’s happiness can be compared and evaluated.

The goods on Mencius’ list—family, education, and morality—do not seem to be on an equal footing. Ethical joy is evidently at the heart of Mencius’ conception of

happiness. To see this, consider 7A4 in which Mencius declared, “There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am morally innocent (*cheng* 誠)” (Lau 1970: 183, modified). Ethical joy is not only the most important of the three joys, but also the most reliable source of happiness because it is self-reliant, whereas we have little control over the other two sources—health and longevity of family members, and education of the most brilliant students in the world. Unless one taught at a prestigious school, it would be difficult to enjoy pedagogical pleasure in Mencius’ sense. Since *cheng* 誠 is the source of the greatest happiness for the virtuous, we need to examine it more closely. James Legge rendered it as “sincerity” (Legge 1970: 451); D. C. Lau translated it as “true to myself” (Lau 1970: 182). However, it seems that “moral innocence” more faithfully captures Mencius’ meaning in the context. *Cheng* means one has treated others with respect, compassion, sincerity, and/or loyalty, and as a result, one has a clean conscience. In contrast, one can be sincere, but rude or insensitive to (the feelings of) others. The same can be said about being “true to oneself.”

Although it was Mencius who conceptualized the practice of self-reflection, the practice itself can be traced back to Confucius. For early Confucians, it was perhaps the most important regimen in the daily maintenance of ethical life. Both Confucius himself and his senior disciple Zengzi 曾子 discussed it. Confucius asked, “If, upon self-examination, a man finds nothing to reproach himself for, what worries and fears can he have?” (*Analects* 12.4; Lau 1979: 111). As we can see, the purpose of self-reflection was to make sure that one is morally faultless or innocent. Zengzi stated that he would reflect on his own conduct several times a day, interrogating himself as to whether he had been loyal (*zhong* 忠), trustworthy (*xin* 信), and had practiced what he had learned (*Analects* 1.4). However, it was Mencius who conceptualized the practice and further elaborated on it:

Suppose someone treats a virtuous person in an outrageous manner. Faced with this, the latter will say to himself, “I must be lacking in benevolence and courtesy, or how could such a thing happen to me?” When, looking into himself, he finds that he has been benevolent and courteous, and yet this outrageous treatment continues, then he will say to himself, “I must have failed to be loyal.” When, looking into himself, he finds that he has been loyal, and yet this outrageous treatment continues, then he will say, “This man doesn’t know what he is doing. Such a person is no different from an animal. One cannot expect an animal to know any better.” (*Mencius* 4B28; Lau 1970: 134, modified)

Since the meaning of *cheng* is the opposite of fault or guilt, an apt translation should be something along those lines. That is why I consider “moral innocence” a better rendition. The discovery of moral innocence is a process involving a reflection on one’s behavior and motive. It appears simple, easy, and straightforward, but it is not. Since reflection on one’s behavior relies on memory, but memory is not always reliable, even the virtuous are not infallible when they try to discover if they are morally innocent. The process of discovery is subjective, and therefore prone to error. Suppose I have concluded that I have behaved in a morally innocent manner toward others. What if they disagree with me? Although Mencius sketched a procedure of moral self-

reflection, he did not provide us with sufficient details. A full-fledged procedure needs to be carefully worked out. Nevertheless, a claim of moral innocence, like a claim of innocence in the legal sense, requires a great deal of effort. Paradoxically, ethical pleasure is a serious matter.

To sum up, according to Mencius' objective list theory, happiness comes from three sources: morality, family, and education; of these, morality is the source of the greatest happiness. His conception of happiness is consistent with his view that human nature is good, and is based upon moral self-reflection. There can be many kinds of pleasures, some of which are more significant or meaningful than others, but ethical pleasure is the most important. While Mencius did not identify happiness with one thing, he singled out one thing as the primary source of happiness—moral innocence—on the basis of his conceptualization of Confucius' remarks about moral self-reflection and a life free from guilt, anxiety, and fear (*Analects* 12.4). He would agree with his predecessor that a life free from guilt, worry, and fear constitutes the good life. He would also concur that happiness consists in the satisfaction of prudential desires constrained by ethical desires. A caveat, however, should be made here. Both Confucius and Mencius would not go so far as to say that worry or fear in any shape or form is antithetical to happiness. Certain kinds of worry and fear are morally necessary. Confucius remarked,

That I fail to cultivate Virtue, that I fail to inquire more deeply into that which I have learned, that upon hearing what is right I remain unable to move myself to do it, and that I prove unable to reform when I have done something wrong—such potential failings are a source of constant worry to me. (*Analects* 7.3; Slingerland 2003: 64)

Mencius held that that we should worry that we are not as good as Shun 舜—one of the sage kings in antiquity (*Mencius* 4B28).

5 Conclusion

In this essay, I have examined the teachings of two prominent classical (or early) Confucian thinkers, namely Confucius and Mencius, on the subject of happiness through the lens of three Western theories of well-being: hedonism, desire satisfaction theory, and objective list theory. My preliminary analysis of the two classical Confucian texts—the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子)—reveals that an early Confucian perspective on happiness seems to be constituted by three salient features—ethical pleasure, ethical desire, and moral innocence, which figure centrally in the guidance and assessment of an individual's life. According to these early Confucian thinkers, the good life should not be identified with a life filled with pleasure, but rather with a life rich in ethical pleasure, that is, pleasure in accordance with ritual and virtue; the happy life should not be identified with a life in which all or most of one's desires are fulfilled, but with a life in which ethical desire functions as the overriding constraint on the satisfaction of prudential desires such as the desire for wealth, rank, or continued existence. From the classical Confucian standpoint, the source of the greatest happiness is not the

attainment of the greatest political power, but rather the cognizance of one's moral innocence. In light of their views on happiness and the good life, we may conclude that Confucius and Mencius each lived a good life that exemplified the three salient features of happiness, and to that extent they were happy.

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