

KONGZI AND CONFUCIANISM

*How could I dare to lay claim to either sageliness or Goodness?
What can be said about me is no more than this: I work at it without
growing tired and encourage others without growing weary.*

—Kongzi, *Analects* 7.34



All of later Chinese thought reacts in one way or another to Kongzi.

I. Kongzi's Social Context and Life

According to the philosophy of history that the Zhou used to justify their conquest of the Shang, political power can only be obtained and maintained by Virtue, which accrues to a person who is respectful of his ancestors, kind to the people, and wise in his judgments. However, this view had come to seem increasingly quaint and irrelevant to many rulers and ministers during the Spring and Autumn Period. The Zhou king, who supposedly had the mandate from Heaven to rule, was now a mere figurehead. The rulers of the various states vied for supremacy through warfare and intrigue, each hoping to become Hegemon, de facto ruler of all China. For example, in 529 BCE, when the state of Jin was dominant and the state of Lu attempted to resist its authority, a leading minister of Jin ominously informed a representative of the state of Lu:

Our ruler has here 4,000 chariots of war. Even if he acts contrary to the Way, it is still necessary to fear him; if he, beyond that, is acting in accordance with the Way, who can prove his opponent? If even a small ox were to attack a pig, would you not fear the pig would die? ... If we lead on the multitudes of Jin, using also the forces of the other states ... if we come thus to punish Lu for its offenses ... what can we seek that we shall not get?ⁱ

Consequently, many rulers and ministers preferred power politics and sneered, “Of what use is culture?” (*Analects* 12.8*). The *Art of War* by Sunzi is traditionally dated to this era. While it may actually be a later text, the view of warfare that it espouses would have been endorsed by many Spring and Autumn rulers. It begins, “Warfare is the greatest affair of the state, the basis of life and death, the Way to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analyzed.”ⁱⁱ Thus, for Sunzi, the Way is no longer the Way of Virtue; it is the Way of warfare. And with this Way comes a particular set of values. Sunzi tells us to master the art of deception, to motivate our soldiers with anger toward the enemy and the promise of spoils if they win.

Kongzi (551–479 BCE; better known in the West as Confucius) lived during this era. His attitude toward the reigning philosophy of militarism is captured by the story of his brief visit to the state of Wei. The duke of Wei asked Kongzi for advice about the arrangement of military formations. Kongzi icily replied, “I know something about the *arrangement* of ceremonial stands and dishes for ritual offerings, but I have never learned about the *arrangement* of battalions and divisions.” Kongzi left the very next day (*Analects* 15.1). Instead of looking for a military solution to the problems of society, Kongzi called for putting into government people who were benevolent, wise, and reverent. Kongzi believed that such people would rule skillfully; in addition, the ethical example they set would inspire others to follow them willingly, without the need for force. When an influential official in Kongzi’s home state asked him what he thought about capital punishment, Kongzi replied, “In your governing, Sir, what need is there for

executions? If you desire goodness, then the common people will be good. The Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend” (12.19).

We should, of course, try to understand Kongzi in his own historical context. But, to think of him in today’s terms, consider this: The kind of person who wants to “get tough on crime” and prefers government spending on defense to spending on domestic programs would probably have sided with Sunzi. People who think that a well-fed and well-educated population will also be more law abiding and who believe that war should only be a last resort would probably align themselves with Kongzi.

Kongzi’s family had noble ancestors, but his father died when Kongzi was young, so he and his mother fell on hard times and he had to take many menial jobs in order to survive (9.6). He nonetheless managed to become very well educated and sought to enter government service. However, the times were unreceptive to his message. The duke of Lu, the state in which Kongzi was born, was a mere figurehead. Real power rested with the Three Families—wealthy, powerful clans whose members became the prime ministers of Lu. Kongzi complained that the Three Families taxed the people to pay for warfare and personal luxuries (11.17) and usurped prerogatives and government authority that they were not entitled to (3.1).

The Ji family did appoint Kongzi to office, but they apparently ignored his criticisms. Eventually, the state of Qi sent a group of “dancing girls” to the head of the Ji family, who enjoyed their services in private and did not show up to court for three days, ignoring his official duties. This was the last straw, and Kongzi resigned and left Lu, trying to find a ruler who would put his proposals into effect (18.4*). In light of this, we can perhaps understand the frustration that led Kongzi to sigh, “I have yet to meet a man who loves Virtue as much as he loves sex” (9.18).

For the next few years, Kongzi wandered from state to state, giving advice to rulers and seeking office. His life was difficult. He was almost murdered more than once (7.23, 9.5) and nearly starved to death on another occasion. This led his disciple Zilu to bitterly complain, “Does even the gentleman encounter hardship?” Kongzi replied, “Of course the gentleman encounters hardship. The difference is that the petty man, encountering hardship, is overwhelmed by it” (15.2).

In order to understand this exchange, we must fully grasp what a “gentleman” is. The term we render “gentleman” is “jūnzǐ 君子,” which literally means “son of a ruler.” As such, it has aristocratic connotations (as does “gentleman” in British English). In this sense, it is opposed to the “petty man” (literally, “small person”), meaning those of lower social class. However, Kongzi claimed that being a gentleman is not about social class but about being a good person. In Kongzi’s view, a person of high social class might actually be a “petty man,” because he is cruel, foolish, and arrogant, while a person born into poverty and obscurity might be a real gentleman, because he is benevolent, wise, and reverent. Consequently, when Zilu asked Kongzi if “even the gentleman” must go without food, he was whining. Why should an upper-class person

like myself have to go hungry? Kongzi's reply means, If you are truly a gentleman, you will have the perseverance to endure suffering; if you cannot, then you are a petty man, regardless of how aristocratic your background.

Kongzi never found the opportunity that he sought to take office under a ruler who wished to govern with benevolence and wisdom, and he eventually returned to Lu. For the rest of his life he focused on training disciples. Given his own impoverished upbringing, it is not surprising that Kongzi did not discriminate in accepting disciples based on their wealth or social status. He remarked that all he demanded as tuition was a symbolic gift of "as little as a bundle of silk or bit of cured meat" (7.7; cf 15.39). He hoped that his disciples would take part in public affairs and change the world for the better, and some of them were quite successful. But he did not think of himself as founding a movement, much less one named for him. In fact, the term we render "Confucian" in English is "rú 儒," which is etymologically unrelated to the name "Kǒngzǐ 孔子." Nonetheless, his personal ethical charisma (his Virtue) and the profundity of his teachings (his Way) formed the basis of a multifaceted social and intellectual movement that has inspired both fervent admiration and intense criticism. It remains one of the most challenging and important of the major philosophical and religious traditions in the world today.

So what was the Way of Kongzi? This has been hotly debated over two millennia. Even a complete book could not begin to do justice to the complexities of the discussion. Part of the difficulty is that Kongzi left behind no writings of his own. Traditionally, the authorship of certain works has been attributed to him, but most contemporary scholars would say we are in the same evidential position in regard to Kongzi as we are with Jesus, Socrates, and the Buddha. We know each of these world-historical individuals only through what their followers and critics have said about them. Our primary source of the sayings of Kongzi is the *Analects*, a text divided into twenty "books" (closer to the size of chapters), each of which is subdivided into "chapters" (which range in length from one sentence to a few paragraphs in length). The *Analects* is traditionally said to have been recorded by the disciples of Kongzi soon after his death. However, among contemporary scholars there is considerable debate about how soon after the death of Kongzi each book in the *Analects* was composed, and hence how reliable each is as a guide to Kongzi's own thought. Based on linguistic evidence, Books 16–20 seem to have been written much later than the time of Kongzi, and some scholars believe there is stylistic evidence that Books 3–9 were written the earliest. However one dates individual passages, five themes are clearly central to the thought of Kongzi, and to everything that might plausibly be labeled "Confucianism" over the next twenty-five hundred years: the everyday world, tradition, the family, ritual, and ethical cultivation. In this chapter, we shall explore each of these themes in more detail.

Myth: "Confucius said, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.'"

Fact: No, he didn't. This saying is actually from the Daodejing (a work discussed in Chapter 8). It is common to see inspiring quotations falsely attributed to Confucius. If he were alive today, Confucius might agree with baseball legend Yogi Berra: "I didn't say most of the things I said."

II. Five Themes of Confucianism

1. Happiness in the Everyday World

While Kongzi did not deny that there is an afterlife, he thought that our primary ethical obligations relate to finding happiness for ourselves and others in this world. Thus, when Kongzi's disciple Zilu asked about how to serve ghosts and spirits, Kongzi replied, "You are not yet able to serve people—how could you be able to serve ghosts and spirits?" Zilu persisted, asking about death, but Kongzi just answered, "You do not yet understand life—how could you possibly understand death?" (11.12; cf 6.22) The significance of this emphasis becomes clearer if we contrast it with one major strain of Western thought. According to Plato, there is another world beyond the material realm. This other world is more perfect, more real, and more valuable than this world. It is inhabited by the gods and by the souls of the virtuous. Our actions in this life have value through their relationship to the other world. Thus, Plato says, the true philosopher makes dying his profession. Plato's ideas have influenced many in the West, including Christians such as Simone Weil. She expressed this perspective when she wrote, "There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man's mental universe. ... That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behaviour that is mindful of obligations."ⁱⁱⁱ

As Weil's reference to our obligations makes clear, her Platonistic version of Christianity requires that we act virtuously in this life. But our ultimate goal should be to transcend our bodily desires, as much as we can, so that our souls will be purified and ready to ascend to the higher realm after death. In contrast, for Kongzi and later Confucians, the goal of human existence is to do good in this world and to live well in this world. Thus, when he is asked what his aspirations are, Kongzi mentions values manifested among humans in this world: "To bring comfort to the aged, to inspire trust in my friends, and be cherished by the youth" (5.26; cf 6.30).

2. Revivalistic Traditionalism

The Confucian emphasis on tradition is also related to how it differs from Platonism. Because Plato believed that we have intellectual access to a higher world beyond this

one, he was willing to radically question the beliefs and morality of his society. For example, in the *Republic*, Plato describes a utopian society in which the members of the ruling class will have no families, never even knowing who their own fathers and mothers are. But for Kongzi there is no higher standard of judgment than human civilization at its best. Thus he said of himself, “I transmit rather than innovate. I trust in and love the ancient ways” (7.1). It is possible within a Confucian framework to modify or reject elements of one’s tradition, but this must be done by appealing to other values, beliefs, and practices within that same tradition. For example, when people switched from using linen ceremonial caps to cheaper ones made of silk, Kongzi approved of the change, because it was more frugal, yet maintained the spirit of the ritual (9.3).

Many modern readers will object to this idea, arguing that we must think for ourselves rather than let tradition think for us. There is an irony here, though, in that we are following a tradition (that of the Enlightenment) when we assume that thinking for ourselves and thinking through our tradition are inevitably opposed. A popular bumper sticker says “Question Authority,” but in commanding us to do this, the bumper sticker has itself assumed the role of an authority. This irony reveals a deep philosophical point. Every time we think for ourselves, we must (whether we like it or not) begin from the concepts, beliefs, practices, and values that have been handed down to us from tradition. One must argue that any change is, in reality, a deeper and more consistent expression of the tradition. It is tempting to say that natural science gives us a technique for getting at the truth ahistorically. Although it would be far beyond the scope of this book to illustrate the case in detail, suffice it to say that almost all contemporary philosophers of science would acknowledge that science is a communal and historical enterprise in which progress can only occur via each generation of scientists learning the tradition before they extend it. For example, Einstein revolutionized our understanding of space, time, mass, and energy, but he could only do this by starting from within the Newtonian scientific tradition he learned in school. Similarly, Galileo overturned the medieval physics that preceded him, but this was only possible because of the puzzles identified and discussed within the Aristotelian tradition by the “impetus” theorists of the Middle Ages.

We might say that Kongzi is advocating not traditionalism or conservatism but rather revivalism. Revivalism is a movement to effect positive social change in the present by rediscovering the deep meaning of the texts, practices, and values of the past. Many of the great progressive social movements of history have been revivalistic, including the American civil rights movement. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. called on Americans to actually live up to the principles of freedom, equality, and human dignity central to the Christian tradition and to Western democratic thought rather than merely pay lip service to them:

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a

promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. ... Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. ... [E]ven though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.^{iv}

King realized that the implications of reviving and living up to the deep meaning of tradition would be not conservative but radical. The same was true of Kongzi. He sought to awaken people to the highest values implicit in their own tradition in order to give them alternative ideals to force, violence, and greed. Just as King was motivated by a dream, so Kongzi said that he dreamed of the Duke of Zhou (7.5), whose loyal, wise, and humane government Kongzi admired and wished to restore. Therefore, we should not be quick to dismiss Kongzi's emphasis on tradition. His approach is actually consistent with some of the most sophisticated trends in contemporary philosophy, and it grows out of his desire to effect positive social change through revivalism.

3. The Family and Differentiated Caring

It is not surprising that a philosopher who emphasized the everyday world and tradition would also emphasize the family. The family is important in Confucianism in two related ways. First, it is as part of a family that one initially learns to be a good person. A disciple of Kongzi made this point when he said, "The gentleman applies himself to the roots. 'Once the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.' Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness?" (1.2). To put it in very modern terms, it is by loving and being loved by one's family members that one learns to be kind to others, and it is by respecting the boundaries of others in one's family and having one's own boundaries respected that one develops integrity. This is an insight to which modern Western developmental psychologists are only beginning to catch up.

The second way in which the family is important in Confucianism is "differentiated caring" (also called "graded love"). Differentiated caring is the doctrine that one has stronger moral obligations toward, and should have stronger emotional attachment to, those who are bound to oneself by community, friendship, and especially kinship. For example, the duke of one state bragged to Kongzi that his people were "upright," explaining that one son had turned in his own father for stealing a sheep. Kongzi replied, "Among my people, those whom we consider 'upright' are different from this: fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. 'Uprightness' is to be found in this" (13.18). The Confucian view on this topic has been criticized for encouraging nepotism and favoritism. In China, the Mohists (whom we shall study in Chapter 4)

were particularly harsh critics of Confucianism on this topic. Many Westerners (and modernizers in China) have argued in favor of a morality based on respect for another person simply as a human being, regardless of personal relationships. However, other thinkers, notably feminists who advocate an ethics of care, hold a position similar to that of Confucians on this point.

Confucians would make several points in their own defense. First, we need an ethics that is practical for humans as they actually are rather than one that makes unrealistically impartial demands on us.¹ Second, differentiated caring means greater concern for certain people; it does not entail indifference, much less hostility, toward strangers. One of Kongzi's disciples spoke for millennia of Confucians when he said, "Everyone within the Four Seas is one's brother" (12.5). Third, in ancient China the king and the nobles of individual states were hereditary rulers; therefore government was intertwined with familial relations. Confucians did not see any way this government system could work unless people developed the love and respect that would inhibit political rivalry among family members.

4. Ritual and Functionalism

So far I have been emphasizing themes that are readily understood from our contemporary Western perspective, even if we may disagree with the stance Confucians take on these themes. However, one of the themes most important in Confucianism is much more difficult for many of us to understand and appreciate today: rituals or rites (*lǐ* 禮). The rituals encompass what we would classify today as belonging to fundamentally different kinds of activities. In the most basic sense, rituals are religious activities, such as offering food and ale to the spirits of one's ancestors, using the oracle bones for divination, and performing a funeral. Some rituals were very lively, involving elaborate dances accompanied by music. However, ritual also includes matters of what we would describe as etiquette, such as how to greet or say farewell to a guest, and the appropriate manner in which to address a subordinate ("pleasant and affable"), a superior ("formal and proper"; 10.2), or a person in mourning ("respectful"; 10.25). Finally, Kongzi sometimes speaks as if ritual refers to all of ethics (12.1).

The *Analects* notes, in what is generally taken to be a description of Kongzi acting in accordance with ritual, "He would not sit unless his mat was straight" (10.12). This line has been used for two thousand years to parody Kongzi and Confucians as obsessively observant of the minutiae of etiquette, perhaps to the point of absurdity. But how could Confucianism have captured so many of China's greatest minds, generation after generation, if it were really as shallow as that?

One simpleminded way of thinking about ritual is as a kind of primitive technology. For example, the king becomes ill. One performs a divination to determine what restless ancestral spirit is afflicting him, then offers a sacrifice to appease that ancestor, hoping

to make the illness go away. Certainly, rituals have sometimes been used in this way in China (and in the West). However, philosophical Confucianism at its best has always had a much more sophisticated conception of ritual, one that is broadly functionalist.

Functionalism is a doctrine associated with the great sociologist Émile Durkheim. According to functionalism, the question to ask about a ritual is what social or psychological needs or goals it satisfies. Functionalists see rituals as expressing and reinforcing emotions and dispositions that are necessary for the maintenance of communities. To understand how a ritual could perform such functions, consider the example of a marriage ceremony. Ideally, getting married is an expression of love and commitment to another person. Of course, simply saying “I love you” performs a similar function, but most people would agree that a wedding allows for a fuller and more intense expression of these feelings. In addition, participating in the ceremony typically makes the participants feel more invested in the relationship, thereby strengthening it. Of course wonderful relationships can exist without weddings, and marriage ceremonies sometimes fail to have good effects, but as the existence of commitment ceremonies attests, it is not only the legal benefits of marriage that leads gays and lesbians to seek the legal right to participate fully in this social institution.

The importance of ritual can be seen even in everyday matters of etiquette. Try to imagine navigating your social life without any rituals. Do you ever shake a person’s hand? This is a ritual action. Or are you the sort of person who greets others with a hug? This, too, is a ritual. If you maintain that hugging is just an expression of how you feel, you would be correct. But it is a *ritual* expression of how you feel. If you doubt that this is the case, try hugging someone in a culture without this ritual and see what reaction you get.

It seems to be precisely a functionalist view of ritual that the later Confucian Xunzi is expressing when he writes,

One performs the rain sacrifice and it rains. Why? I say: There is no special reason why. It is the same as when one does not perform the rain sacrifice and it rains anyway. When the sun and moon suffer eclipse, one tries to save them. When Heaven sends drought, one performs the rain sacrifice. One performs divination and only then decides on important affairs. But this is not for the sake of getting what one seeks, but rather to give things proper form. Thus, the gentleman looks upon this as proper form, but the common people look upon it as connecting with spirits. (*Xunzi* 17; *Readings*, p. 272)

In another passage, Xunzi makes clear that “proper form” is connected with the expression and reinforcement of one’s emotions and dispositions: “In every case, ritual begins in that which must be released, reaches full development in giving it proper form, and finishes in providing it satisfaction. And so when ritual is at its most perfect,

the requirements of inner dispositions and proper form are both completely fulfilled” (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, p. 276).

Although our society and Kongzi’s China are different in countless ways, they do have some things in common. Both now and then, many people feel alienated from one another and see no point to anything other than satisfying their own immediate needs. At their best, rituals remind us of how we are connected with and dependent upon other humans. Consequently, rituals can help humans form and maintain genuine communities, in which people care for and respect one another.

Ritual includes a range of activities from elaborate religious ceremonies to matters of everyday etiquette to how to live well in general. What do these activities, which our society categorizes separately, have in common? Kongzi believed that the proper underlying attitude in a religious ceremony is reverence or awe. Because they see not only religious ceremonies but also many other spheres of human life as ritual, Confucians invite us to do everything with the same serious attentiveness. Whether putting flowers on a relative’s grave or studying for a test, giving a speech before Congress or working in the checkout line, Confucians would urge you to focus on what you are doing, take it seriously, and do it to the best of your ability. This does not mean that your life should be somber and joyless. Far from it! Kongzi had a good sense of humor himself, one that was charmingly dry and droll.² The point is that whether you laugh, cry, love, or compete, invest everything you do with importance by doing it with the same intensity that a believer gives to a religious ceremony. Thus, Kongzi’s comment that “If I am not fully present at the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice at all” (3.12) has wider application than it seems at first glance. Be “fully present” in everything that you do—even if it is simply straightening your mat before you sit down on it.

Some of the most famous, and controversial, of the Confucian rituals have to do with funerals and mourning. In the Eastern Zhou, a Confucian funeral was often elaborate, with inner and outer coffins, special garments for the corpse, and other goods buried in the grave. After the funeral, there was a ritual period of mourning, the length of which depended upon how close the relation was. Mourning the death of one of your parents was the longest, and lasted three years (this meant just into the third year, or twenty-five months). During this time, the mourner was to wear plain clothes, eat simple food, maintain a somber demeanor, and curtail practical activities as much as possible. The Mohists, among others, criticized these practices as wasteful. It is interesting to note, though, that Kongzi himself emphasized appropriate feelings over ostentatious display. “When it comes to ritual, it is better to be spare than extravagant. When it comes to mourning, it is better to be excessively sorrowful than fastidious” (3.4). This fits a functionalist interpretation, according to which the real point of the rituals is not the amount one spends or getting every minor detail right.

In another passage, Kongzi's disciple Zai Wo complains that the mourning period for parents is too long and wasteful, and proposes a one-year period. Kongzi asks, "Would you feel comfortable then eating your sweet rice and wearing your brocade gowns?" When the disciple replies that he would, Kongzi states, "Well, if you would feel comfortable doing so, then by all means you should do it." However, after the disciple leaves the room, Kongzi sighs, "This shows how lacking in Goodness this Zai Wo is! A child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life—this is why the three-year mourning period is the common practice throughout the world. Did Zai Wo not receive three years of care from his parents?" (17.21). We see again in this passage that Kongzi emphasized inner feeling over outward form in the rites. But we also see that Kongzi thought there were certain emotions a person ought to have, and that someone could be praised or blamed not only for their actions, and not just for their intentions in acting, but also for how they *feel*.

Immanuel Kant had a very different view. Kant held that while emotions may be conducive to, or an impediment to, moral conduct they are never morally right or wrong in themselves. The reason that we cannot be praised or blamed for our emotions is that we have no control over them. I cannot help whether I hate, love, or am indifferent to you, Kant says. But even if I hate Jane, I am morally responsible for treating her with respect because she is a human being. And my kindness toward John has no *moral* value unless it is given because he is a human being and not because he is my friend.

Kant is a paradigmatic modern thinker, so it would not be surprising to be sympathetic to his view. However, consider someone who hates people based on their race but who manages to force herself to treat everyone the same. Or imagine a man who holds women in contempt but who acts as if he does not, because he thinks that he is morally required to treat them as equals. Can we say that there is *nothing* ethically wrong with racism and misogyny as long as people keep it to themselves? This takes us back to the question of whether it is possible to change our emotions. The Western Stoics thought that emotions and beliefs were always perfectly consistent. If you believe the snake you see is poisonous, then you will be afraid of it. If you recognize that it is a harmless insectivore, you will not be afraid of it. However, this seems inadequate. I might have a phobia of all snakes, even ones that I firmly believe are not dangerous to humans.

5. Ethical Cultivation

The question of how emotions can change leads to the last of our five themes: ethical cultivation. Kongzi hoped to improve society by putting virtuous people into positions of authority, but he was well aware of how rare true Virtue is. Consequently, he pioneered educational techniques for making people not just more skillful or more knowledgeable, but more benevolent, wise, and reverent.³ Kongzi's general philosophy

of education is summed up in a pithy quotation: “If you learn without thinking about what you have learned, you will be lost. If you think without learning, however, you will fall into danger” (2.15). Much of the lively debate among Confucians over the twenty-five hundred years after Kongzi’s death concerned the comparative emphasis one should give to “thinking” and “learning” in ethical cultivation, and what human nature must be like to justify this emphasis.^v

“Learning,” broadly speaking, is internalizing the actions, thoughts, and feelings of those who are virtuous, especially sages. If we are fortunate, these can be people we have actually encountered, but they can also be people we learn about through classic texts. The *Odes* seems to have been the primary classic text for Kongzi. This anthology of poetry was already quite old by Kongzi’s time and is diverse in content, including poems about love, war, farming, major dynastic events, religious ceremonies, and lamentations. We begin to understand its role in ethical cultivation if we consider the very first ode. It is about an impending marriage, and Kongzi praised it on the grounds that it “expresses joy without becoming licentious, and expresses sorrow without falling into excessive pathos” (3.20). When we read the ode, we are drawn into the perspective of the poem and led to see (and to feel about) marriage a certain way. We see it as something happy and sensual but not frivolous or purely sexual. We sympathize with the natural longing of the lovers but not in a way that is self-indulgently lugubrious.

Other odes are more political in nature, such as that of the peasants who complain of over taxation by singing of their ruler, “Big rat, big rat, / Do not gobble our millet! / Three years we have slaved for you, / Yet you take no notice of us.”^{vi} As someone who was raised in poverty, Kongzi no doubt wanted his students to learn to sympathize with the plight of farmers whose produce was the ultimate source of their salaries.

Kongzi summarized his approach to the *Odes* by saying that they “number several hundred, and yet can be judged with a single phrase: ‘Oh, they will not lead you astray’” (2.2). In other words, the *Odes* ultimately are a guide to not swerving from the Way. This passage also illustrates Kongzi’s fondness for seeing multiple layers of meaning in a poem. The phrase “Oh, they will not lead you astray” is a quotation from the *Odes*, and in its original context it refers to a team of stout, reliable horses that will not go off the path. However, Kongzi used it as an ethical metaphor (cf 1.15 and 3.8). Some scholars think this shows that Kongzi did not care about the meaning of the *Odes* themselves, that they were simply a pretext for expressing his own views. However, many ethical traditions believe that the metaphorical sense of the classics is part of their meaning. Augustine, for example, gave an elaborate metaphorical reading of the creation story in Genesis and saw it as part of God’s meaning.

Literature can also teach us to perceive and think about ethical matters in a more profound way. As Iris Murdoch said, “By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil*, which partially

conceals the world. ... It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is.”^{vii} Trained as a philosopher, Murdoch became a novelist because she felt that imaginative literature often does a better job of helping us with this “task.” The later Confucian Mengzi illustrates such a use of literature when one of his disciples cites an ode that says one must inform one’s parents when getting married, and then asks why Sage-King Shun did not follow this injunction (*Mengzi* 5A2). Mengzi explains why Shun’s abusive parents made his failure to inform them of his marriage a legitimate exception to the rule. This simple case shows how the *Odes* and the stories of the sages can help us to think more deeply about complex ethical situations. Examples abound in other traditions as well, including the fervent discussions in the Indian tradition of whether, in the *Ramayana*, King Rama treated Queen Sita fairly in banishing her. This kind of learning is possible because great literature consists not just of entertaining stories, but of narratives about complex people wrestling with difficult issues central to human life. To grapple with these issues is to grapple with our own existence.

Of course, Kongzi was also aware of the practical value of a good education for people who want to take part in public life. Being well read, eloquent in expression, and a careful reader are skills that are immensely useful and highly sought after in every literate society. Confucian learning was, therefore, something like a liberal arts education. It did not train one for any one particular task: as Kongzi put it, “The gentleman is not a vessel,” meaning he is not a specialist good at only one thing (2.12; cf 9.6, 13.4, and 19.7). Rather, the gentleman has general skills that can be applied to a variety of activities. However, in Kongzi’s society, as in our own, some were critical of the value of such a literary education, because it requires a great investment of time without providing training in any particular craft. So we can understand why Kongzi said, “It is not easy to find someone who is able to learn for even the space of three years without a thought given to official salary” (8.12; cf 9.2, 12.8).

We have been examining Kongzi’s view of learning, but *thinking* is necessary for every aspect of learning. Kongzi himself never encouraged rote memorization or mindless repetition. If one learns in this way, one will be “lost” (2.15), knowing only a jumble of confused and undigested bits of trivia. As the later Confucian Xunzi put it, “The learning of the petty person enters through his ears and passes out his mouth. From mouth to ears is only four inches—how could it be enough to improve a whole body much larger than that?” (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings*, p. 259). Kongzi was therefore very demanding of his students:

I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again. (7.8)

At the same time, Kongzi believed that unless thinking works upon what one has already internalized via learning, one will “fall into danger” (2.15). Why? This relates to a point we discussed earlier: Kongzi’s emphasis upon tradition. If our thinking has any content to begin with, it frames that content in terms of the language, concepts, values, and paradigms that we have inherited from our culture. If our understanding of that cultural tradition is shallow, then our thinking will also be shallow. Thus, from an authentic Confucian perspective, the thoughtless conservative and the unrealistic radical are really just the flip sides of the same coin: someone who mouths slogans he does not understand, and rejects positions he does not fully appreciate. The true Confucian gentleman learns deeply, always thinking about what he has learned, and applies it in his life and in trying to change the world for the better.

What are some of the other characteristics of the Confucian gentleman? And how does the emphasis upon producing a morally exemplary person make Confucianism a form of virtue ethics? To these questions we turn in the next chapter.

Review Questions

1. What is the name of the Chinese historical era in which Kongzi lived? Kongzi lived around which of the following years BCE: 1040? 770? 722? 500? 403? 221? (Bonus points if you remember from last chapter what eras the other years begin.)
2. What is the most fundamental difference between the Way of Sunzi and the Way of Kongzi?
3. What was Kongzi’s family situation when he was growing up?
4. Why did Kongzi leave his home state of Lu and visit other states?
5. Why is it ironic that we use the terms “Confucian” and “Confucianism” in English to describe the movement associated with Confucius?
6. What is the *Analects* and how was it composed?
7. What are Kongzi’s two senses of “gentleman”? What are his two senses of “petty man”?
8. Explain the difference for Kongzi between emphasizing the “everyday world” and being “otherworldly.”
9. Why might it be more accurate to describe Kongzi as “revivalistic” than as “conservative”?
10. What are the two aspects of the Confucian emphasis on the family?
11. According to functionalism, how should we understand ritual?
12. What are the two major aspects of Confucian ethical cultivation?
13. What are the *Odes*, and what roles did Kongzi think they played in ethical cultivation?
14. Explain how each of the following passages relates to one of the five themes of Confucianism: 11.12, 7.1, 1.2, 13.18, 3.4, and 25.1. (You will have a solid basic understanding of Confucianism if you can remember these passages.)

1. See the discussion of *Mengzi* 3A5 in Chapter 6.
2. See 5.7*, 9.2, 14.29, 17.4*.
3. See Appendix A for a comparison between Kongzi's virtue-centered view of education and the Platonistic and Baconian positions that are best known in the West.