
Essays

THE WAY, THE RIGHT, AND THE GOOD

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Kongzi's religious ethics suggests an alternative way of understanding the relationship between the right and the good, in which neither takes clear precedence in terms of being more foundational for ethics. The religious underpinnings of Kongzi's understanding of the Way are examined, including the close relationship between *tian* ("Heaven") and the Way. It is shown that following the Way is defined primarily by the extent to which one's actions express certain virtues, and not whether one's actions are conducive to the best overall outcome or whether they are inherently right irrespective of consequences. It is then argued that the Way is seen as constitutive of both the right and the good, and that this understanding of the right and the good has important implications for contemporary virtue ethics, religious ethics, and political philosophy.

KEY WORDS: *Kongzi, Confucianism, Analects, dao, tian, right, good*

1. Introduction

In recent years, a number of studies in comparative ethics have focused on various aspects of the early Confucian tradition and modern Western liberalism.¹ Despite the wide range of questions and arguments that are pursued in this body of literature, a number of scholars have agreed that the Confucian tradition understands the good as prior to the right, and have noted that this marks a critical difference between modern Western liberal philosophers such as John Rawls and early Confucian thinkers such as Kongzi.² In this article, I argue that Kongzi's religious ethics suggests an alternative way of understanding the relationship between the right and the good, in which one or the other can take priority depending on context, and while the distinction between them is understood, the issue of which takes priority is not

¹ For but a few examples, see Fan 2003; Hall and Ames 1999; Peerenboom 1990; Rosemont 1988, 1991, and 2004.

² See, for example, Fan 2003; Chinn 2007 (in Littlejohn and Chandler 2007). I am not claiming that these scholars think Kongzi or Confucians generally are consequentialists, only that they understand the good and the right to be related in a certain way in Confucian thought, and they understand this as representing a direct contrast to views such as Rawls's.

important.³ Thus, the article aims to show that Kongzi's view goes some way toward staking out a new position on the right and the good where neither takes clear precedence in terms of being more foundational for ethics. I begin in the first part of the article by examining the religious underpinnings of Kongzi's understanding of the Way, seen in the close relationship between *tian* 天 ("Heaven") and *dao* 道 ("the Way"). I go on to argue in the second part of the paper that in the *Analects*, following the Way is largely defined by the development and expression of a set of virtues, and the primary way of evaluating whether actions are right or wrong, and whether lives are good or bad is through an assessment of human character. I argue that on this view, the distinction between the priority of the right and the priority of the good is not pressing, because following the Way is defined primarily by the extent to which one's actions express certain virtues, and not whether one's actions are conducive to the best overall outcome or whether they are inherently right irrespective of consequences. In the third part of the article, I argue that the Way is seen as constitutive of both the right and the good, and that the goods specified by the Way are intrinsic goods defined specifically in relation to Heaven. I go on to show how this understanding of the right and the good has important implications for contemporary virtue ethics, religious ethics, and political philosophy.⁴

³ W. D. Ross was the first to systematically frame the distinction between the right and the good in this way (Ross 1930). For examples of the ongoing concern with the right and the good among contemporary Western philosophers, see Larmore 1990; Freeman 1994.

⁴ Kongzi (551–479 BCE) is known to many Westerners as "Confucius," which is the latinization of a man whose surname was Kong. I will refer to him as Kongzi because that is how he is known in China and throughout East Asia today. Almost all contemporary scholars of the *Analects* agree that this text serves as the most influential record of Kongzi's thought, and so I will use "Kongzi" to refer to the author of the *Analects*, even though he is not the source of all the ideas found in it. It has been well established that the *Analects* was composed by several different authors from different time periods. As a result, there are some scholars who question the degree of consistency in the text, but in general I believe the received text of the *Analects* exhibits a high degree of unity and consistency in the themes and ideas it advocates. Here, I am in agreement with the commentarial tradition and with the Chinese who have read the *Analects* as a coherent whole for thousands of years. It is important to remember that the existence of distinct and even competing views on certain topics does not preclude the existence of unified themes and ideas, and studying the *Analects* as an important philosophical text requires attention both to the textual history *and* to the philosophical content of the text, which requires us to work to see how various ideas might have been understood in relation to the larger vision of society that was defended by the early Confucians. All quotations from the *Analects* follow the numbering found in the Chinese University of Hong Kong Institute of Chinese Studies Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series (Lau and He 1995). Translations from the *Analects* follow Slingerland 2003 except where I have specified that the translation is my own.

2. Kongzi's Religious Ethics

At the forefront of the religious ideas found in the *Analects* is the concept of *tian* ("Heaven"), which was understood and developed in diverse and interesting ways throughout the history of Chinese philosophy.⁵ In its earliest known uses, *tian* referred both to spirits associated with the sky and to the sky itself, which is how it came to carry the sense of "the heavens" or "Heaven," although it was never used to refer to a paradise associated with an afterlife. Later in the Zhou dynasty, some thinkers understood Heaven as a kind of agent or impersonal force dedicated to human well-being. On Kongzi's view, Heaven seems to exhibit concern for humans, and has a plan for humans to flourish in the world. In the *Analects*, Heaven is repeatedly connected to the concept of *dao* ("the Way"). In 3.24, we learn of an encounter between Kongzi's students and a border official shortly after Kongzi has lost his official position. Upon seeing the concern of Kongzi's students over this state of affairs, the official tells them not to worry, for "The world has been without the Way for a long time now, and Heaven intends to use your Master like the wooden clapper for a bell" (3.24).⁶ This passage is particularly helpful for understanding the religious dimension of ethics in the *Analects* because it indicates that the Way is something Heaven wishes for humans to have, which is why it intends to use Kongzi "like the clapper for a bell." He will be a herald and teacher of the Way, helping people to follow it once again, but his religious mission differs significantly from at least some roles of major religious figures in the West. He is not a savior and, perhaps more importantly, he is not a prophet. Kongzi is not privy to special revelation or knowledge that others cannot access.⁷

Throughout the *Analects*, the fact that the Way is a religious idea becomes clearer as it is repeatedly and consistently tied to Heaven. In 7.23, Kongzi says that Heaven has endowed him with *de* 德 ("virtuous power"), which supports what Philip J. Ivanhoe has argued: that Kongzi has been called to preserve, codify, and propagate the Way, which will enable humans to achieve the good ends that Heaven

⁵ For a helpful study of this idea in early Confucianism, see Ivanhoe 2007b.

⁶ Some commentators point out that border officials hold low positions in society, and that the official in question may have left a more significant official position in accordance with the view that when the Way is not being practiced by the state, people should withdraw (see *Analects* 5.2, 5.21, 8.13, 11.24, 14.1, 14.3, 15.7). This would seem to indicate that the man is familiar with Confucian teachings and acting in accordance with them.

⁷ For an interesting comparison of this set of issues in the early Confucians and Kierkegaard, see Yearley 1985. For a discussion of Kierkegaard's view of special revelation in relation to religious ethics, see Evans 2004, 156–70.

intends for them (2007b). Kongzi's claim that Heaven has endowed him with *de* is significant not only because it contributes to our understanding of his relationship with Heaven, but also because *de* is presented as a mark of those who understand the Way. The concept of *de*, which played a special role in both the classical Confucian and Daoist understandings of virtue, refers to a kind of psychological power that virtuous individuals develop and that causes them to attract others and have a profound moral influence on their surroundings.⁸ Interestingly, *de* is not only tied to Heaven but to the Way in the *Analects*. In 12.19, Ji Kangzi asks Kongzi whether he should execute those who lack the Way in order to advance those who possess the Way. Kongzi responds by saying that "the cultivated person's *de* is like the wind, and the petty person's *de* is like the grass—when the wind blows across the grass, the grass is sure to bend" (12.19).⁹ This passage indicates that the Way is advanced through the conduct of cultivated persons, whose *de* has an influence on others and leads them to cultivate themselves. It is also significant that Kongzi ties the Way to his distinctive understanding of the cultivated person or *junzi* 君子.¹⁰ In 5.16, he refers to "the Way of the *junzi*" 君子之道, indicating that the Way is the path of cultivating the particular set of virtues that the *junzi* embodies.

These passages show that being a herald and teacher of the Way involves more than just announcing and propagating it. Kongzi is and must be a kind of charismatic and inspiring leader. There are a number of passages in the *Analects* that highlight this dimension of Kongzi's character. Kongzi says his mission is tied to encouraging others in their own quest to follow the Way, but he explicitly denies that he has special knowledge of it. In 7.34, he asks, "How could I dare to lay claim to either sageliness or *Ren* 仁? What can be said about me is no more than this: I work at it without growing tired and encourage others without growing weary."¹¹ Kongzi says his aspiration is "to bring comfort to the aged, to inspire trust in my friends, and to be cherished by the youth" (5.26). Whenever Kongzi speaks of his life's work, it is tied to his relationships with others and his ability to inspire and encourage

⁸ For studies of the role of *de* in Confucian ethics, see Nivison 1996, 17–57; Ivanhoe 2000a, ix–xvii; 1999, 240–42.

⁹ The translation is my own.

¹⁰ *Junzi* refers to those who are most highly cultivated in the Confucian virtues and who serve as moral exemplars. It has been variously translated as "cultivated person," "exemplary person," and "gentleman."

¹¹ Translation slightly modified. See also 7.2. In the *Analects*, Kongzi primarily uses *Ren* 仁 to refer to the sum total of virtuous qualities. Accordingly, a person who lays claim to *Ren* exhibits complete mastery of all of the virtues. For later thinkers like *Mengzi*, and in some places in the *Analects*, *Ren* is understood as the virtue of benevolence.

them. He does not, on the other hand, discuss the need or desire to build a personal relationship with Heaven, even though he sees himself as helping to carry out Heaven's plan for human beings by advocating the Way.

Given that Kongzi serves as an important and inspiring model of what it means to follow the Way, perhaps it is not surprising that he does not expound on the Way by describing the rightness of individual actions or the value of the consequences of actions. Rather, his description of the Way is offered with reference to moral exemplars, primarily through his account of the *junzi* and those who possess *de*. Kongzi also describes the Way with reference to his predecessors, who previously helped the Way to be realized in the world. In 8.19 and 9.5, Kongzi ties Heaven and the Way to the legendary sage king Yao, and to King Wen of the Western Zhou. These passages are particularly significant for developing an understanding of the relationship between Heaven and the Way because Kongzi believes that the Way was realized in the world during the time of Sage-king Yao and King Wen, and he understands them as having modeled themselves on Heaven: "How great was Yao as a ruler! So majestic! It is Heaven that is great, and it was Yao who modeled himself upon it. So vast! Among the common people there were none who were able to find words to describe him. How majestic in his accomplishments, and glorious in cultural splendor!" (8.19). Here Kongzi credits Heaven for Yao's greatness, indicating once again that the Way stems from Heaven, for the former sage kings who brought the Way into the world modeled themselves on Heaven in doing so.

Kongzi's remarks about King Wen make it clear that he understands his own task as a continuation of the work of these former sages: "Now that King Wen 文 is gone, is not culture (*wen* 文) now invested here in me? If Heaven intended this culture to perish, it would not have given it to those of us who live after King Wen's death" (9.5). This passage reinforces what we learned from Kongzi's claim that Heaven had endowed him with *de*, only this passage extends his claim to the *culture* of the Zhou. Heaven has given him a special mission to preserve, explain, and propagate the culture of the Zhou, which complements Kongzi's remarks about how the cultivated person's virtues partly constitute the Way. All of this helps to show what Kongzi means when he says, "Human beings can fill out [that is, fulfill] the Way. The Way can not fill out human beings" (15.29).¹² Here Kongzi tells us that humans are able to *hong* 弘 "fill out," "extend," or "broaden" the Way, emphasizing that although the Way exists independently of humans who follow it, it can only be filled out—fulfilled or realized—in

¹² As translated in Ivanhoe 2003, 229.

human lives (Ivanhoe 2003, 29). Kongzi's remarks here help to explain why he describes such a close relationship between the Way and a particular set of human practices and states of character, including the culture of the Zhou (*wen*), the *junzi*'s virtues, and *de*, the special power that accrues to virtuous individuals. For Kongzi, it is only within the context of human lives that the Way has meaning and value.

Together, the passages we have examined tell us that the Way is made up of the culture of the Zhou and defined by the virtues and rituals that are a part of this distinctive account of what humans should be. Indeed, it seems clear from the passages we have examined that the Way is a normative concept, designating the manner in which human beings ought to conduct themselves in the world. This view is consistent with the standard etymology of the term *dao* and its root meaning of a path or way that can be followed, which eventually came to be understood metaphorically, as a way of doing things.¹³ When Kongzi uses *dao* to refer to the Way of the former sages or the Way of the *junzi*, he uses this term to designate the best way for humans to live and conduct themselves in the world, namely the way that Heaven has instituted for them. We can see, then, how Kongzi's vision of human society is grounded in a religious ethic which rests on Heaven's plan for human beings.

3. The Priority of the Way

We have seen that the Way is the ethical path that Heaven intends for humans to follow in order to achieve a humane, harmonious, and flourishing society, but the Way is not strictly an instrumental idea. That is, it is not simply the right means of achieving the ends that Heaven wants to bring about in human lives. In a number of places, Kongzi makes it clear that the Way includes *both* the right way of doing things *and* the good that is achieved by doing things in the right way. Put another way, the Way is both something to be followed and a goal to be achieved, and this is why Kongzi talks about following the Way *and* realizing the Way in the world. It is important for our purposes to recognize that although both of these things are a part of the Way, they are not seen as distinct in the *Analects*. For Kongzi, having everyone follow the Way is what it means to realize the Way in the world. Further, the Way is not just the path to human well-being; it is the path Heaven wants us to take. When humans do their part, these two things cohere and are coextensive, but when humans fail, Heaven can work in ways that are mysterious—even to a sage—in order to bring forth the Way. In such cases, the right seems prior to, but

¹³ For a discussion of these features of the term *dao*, see Eno 1996, 129–30.

always aimed at, the good. Accordingly, in the *Analects*, the good and the right are never pried apart in dramatic ways. However, in order to delve deeper into questions concerning Kongzi's view of the right and the good, we will need to explore his primary way of understanding why certain actions are right or wrong, and why certain lives are good or bad.

In 15.32, Kongzi contrasts the pursuit of the Way with the pursuit of material things, saying, "The *junzi* devotes his thoughts to attaining the Way, not to obtaining food. In the pursuit of agriculture, there is the possibility of starvation; in the pursuit of learning, there is the possibility of a salary. The *junzi* is concerned about the Way and not about poverty."¹⁴ In this passage, Kongzi acknowledges that material losses or gains are associated with failure or success in various activities. If one's agricultural pursuits fail, then there may not be enough food and the threat of starvation might become a reality. If one's pursuits in learning succeed, then one might be able to get an official position and earn a salary, but Kongzi stresses that these material ends—money and food—are not the main concerns of the *junzi*. Instead of pursuing material ends, Kongzi tells us that the *junzi* pursues the Way. Here, the Way is presented as an end worth having, and it is contrasted with other ends, namely the acquisition of material goods. Accordingly, the *junzi* pursues those things that are a part of the Way, such as learning, because they are part of the Way, which for Kongzi seems to mean that Heaven has instituted them because they are good for us.

In 4.5, we see once again Kongzi's concern to contrast the Way with material goods. However, in this passage, Kongzi presents the Way not simply as an end worth having but as the right way of doing things. He says, "Wealth and honors are things that all people desire, but unless they are acquired by following the Way they are not worth having. Poverty and disgrace are things that all people hate, and yet unless they are avoided by following the Way they are not worth avoiding."¹⁵ In this passage, Kongzi indicates that conducting oneself in accordance with the Way, that is, conducting oneself in the right way, takes priority over the achievement of both material goods (for example, wealth) and non-material goods (for example, prestige). It is worth noting that Kongzi's first remarks in this passage are purely descriptive: he simply acknowledges that all humans desire wealth and honors, and that they all hate poverty and disgrace. However, his additional remarks concerning these things are normative. He says

¹⁴ Translation slightly modified.

¹⁵ The translation is my own. The last part of this line, which appears twice in this passage, is 不以其道得之.

that good ends must be achieved in accordance with the Way or he will not abide them, and bad ends must be avoided in accordance with the Way or he will not despise them. The Way is not just about achieving good ends; it is also about doing the right thing, and Kongzi refuses to celebrate good ends that were achieved in the wrong way. Therefore, if someone is able to avoid poverty or disgrace, but does so by being dishonest or wrongly taking from others, Kongzi does not regard this as any kind of success. He affirms this view in the closing remarks of the passage: "If the *junzi* abandons *Ren*, how can he merit the name? The *junzi* does not go against *Ren* even for the amount of time required to finish a meal. Even in times of urgency or distress, he necessarily accords with it" (4.5).¹⁶ Here we see clearly that cultivated persons do not go against what is right in order to achieve certain goods, for Kongzi indicates that cultivated persons adhere to the standard of *Ren* even in extenuating circumstances when there seem to be good reasons to go against it.¹⁷

In these passages, Kongzi clearly says that putting an end to things like starvation and poverty is not the main priority of the *junzi*. Instead, he tells us that the *junzi* remains focused on following the Way. Indeed, in 4.5, Kongzi indicates that he does not despise poverty so much that he thinks it is ever worth deviating from the Way in order to avoid it. On an initial reading, these passages might seem to exhibit a lack of appreciation for the desperate straits that often define what it means to live in poverty. In other words, Kongzi seems not to fully appreciate what times of urgency or distress may involve. There are, though, some other passages in the *Analects* that can help to clarify Kongzi's overall position. In 16.1, Kongzi says that good rulers are not focused on the problems of poverty, scarcity, and instability, but rather on avoiding those things *in the right way*: through equal distribution, creating harmony in the state or house, and making the people content. Interestingly, Kongzi offers the latter not as ends, but rather as *the right way of achieving certain ends*. Unlike the previous passages we have examined, Kongzi indicates here that good rulers *do* work to eliminate poverty, which confirms that he thinks it is an end worth having, but he emphasizes that good rulers work to achieve this end *in the right way*. This passage resonates well with others such as 6.4, where Kongzi says that the *junzi* cares for the poor but does not help the rich to become richer.

These passages undermine the view that Kongzi thinks the good is prior to the right, at least if the good is understood in the way that

¹⁶ Translation slightly modified.

¹⁷ In this passage, the notion of the right seems to function more as a boundary defining illegitimate courses of action than as a guide to doing what is right.

most consequentialists have understood it in the history of Western philosophy. On such a view, right actions are those that are most conducive to the best overall outcome (Scheffler 1988, 1). Additionally, consequentialists tend to advocate doing what yields the best results now or in the short term. However, in all of the passages we have examined so far, Kongzi does not understand following the Way as seeking the best overall outcome, and when he does consider good outcomes, his primary concern is the long term. Kongzi clearly thinks that following the Way is sometimes to the detriment of achieving a good outcome in the short term, and he maintains that one should follow the Way even when it will result in such losses. On this view, following the Way means doing the right thing and going about things in the right way. One takes a series of steps that build upon and reinforce one another, keeping the long term in mind and believing that one is doing the right thing according to Heaven's plan. Only this will allow one to achieve and maintain the true aim.

In addition to seeing the Way in relation to goods that can only be achieved in the long term, Kongzi appears to understand following the Way with reference to specific *kinds* of goods. Instead of defining the best overall outcome primarily or exclusively with reference to the maximization of goods such as a lack of poverty, he regards the development and expression of complete forms of a full range of virtues as the best overall outcome or the good. In order to further investigate what this might mean for his view of the right and the good, I would like to examine a passage that has been widely read as supporting the view that for Kongzi, the good is prior to the right. I have selected this passage not only because it is so often associated with claims about the right and the good in the *Analects*, but also because it involves both material goods and the goods associated with human character, and so it may prove helpful in sorting out Kongzi's view on these matters.

In 13.18, the Duke of She says to Kongzi, "Among my people there is one we call 直躬 'Upright Gong.' When his father stole a sheep, he reported him to the authorities." Kongzi replies, "Among my people, those who we consider 'upright' are different from this: fathers cover for their sons, and sons cover for their fathers. 'Uprightness' is to be found in this."¹⁸ A common way of reading this passage is to interpret Kongzi as making a claim about the priority of the good, namely that one ought to respond by putting the good of one's father first rather than doing what is right according to the law. Kongzi certainly seems to

¹⁸ Translation slightly modified. Arthur Waley notes that the term for "Upright Gong" (*zhi gong* 直躬) refers to "a legendary paragon of honesty" (1999, 267 n. 17). Indeed, *gong* 躬 is both a term meaning "person" and a name, and so it might also be translated as "Upright One."

advocate circumventing the legal system by “covering” for one’s father, regardless of his wrongdoing. However, I think a closer look at the text reveals that more is going on in this passage than first meets the eye. To begin, in his response to the Duke of She, Kongzi does not refer to the value of the consequences of Upright Gong’s actions. He does not say, for example, that reporting one’s father does not promote the best overall outcome (that is, keeping one’s father out of jail or worse), nor does he say that the terrible consequences of reporting one’s father outweigh the importance of doing what is right according to the law, which is the sort of claim we would expect if Kongzi was clearly advocating the priority of the good.¹⁹

Instead, Kongzi responds to the Duke of She by describing what he believes an upright person would do if his father stole a sheep. It seems, then, that Kongzi is more interested in the virtue of uprightness and the conduct of an upright person than in the rightness of individual actions or the value of the consequences of those actions. While the Duke of She maintains that upright sons would report their fathers, Kongzi maintains that upright sons would cover for their fathers. They each have a clear view of what constitutes the right action in this case, but they disagree on what that action is and on what makes it right. Here we see a foundational disagreement over how to understand uprightness. The Duke of She’s account of uprightness is based solely on the rightness of actions according to the law. On his view, an upright person is one who feels accountable first and foremost to the rule of law and who strictly enforces it in all situations.²⁰ Kongzi’s account of uprightness is based on a particular understanding of moral responsibilities, according to which the responsibilities between parents and

¹⁹ In fact, this is precisely what the first-century BCE Stoic thinker Hecaton argued. He claimed that filial piety is decisive for many minor offenses (though not in cases like treason or blasphemy) because the consequences of citizens standing by their parents outweighed the consequences of children turning their parents in. For a discussion of this point in relation to the virtue of filial piety, see Ivanhoe 2007a, 309 n. 29.

²⁰ The Duke of She’s position reflects aspects of Legalism, and his disagreement with Kongzi illustrates some of the sharp disagreements between Confucians and Legalist thinkers like Han Feizi. Indeed, a version of the story of Upright Gong is recounted in chapter 49 of the *Han Feizi* (“The Five Vermin”). For a translation, see Sahleen 2003, 238. According to this version of the story, Upright Gong was put to death by the apparently Confucian officials in his state for being “upright in regard to his lord but crooked in regard to his father.” The purpose of the story, then, is to highlight the tragic consequences of valuing filial piety over strict adherence to the law. On the view presented in the *Han Feizi*, Upright Gong is put to death by his backward culture when in fact he did the right thing by acting in accordance with the law. On the view presented in the *Analects*, Upright Gong is praised by his backward culture when in fact he did the wrong thing by failing to be filial. For an examination of Legalist critiques of Confucianism, which also takes into account their significance for virtue ethics, see Hutton 2008.

children have a special status. It is important to notice that Kongzi does not deny that stealing is wrong nor does he indicate that the law should be disregarded.²¹ It is just that an upright person, on his view, is one whose moral responsibilities are prioritized in a certain way. For Kongzi, and for many of us, our responsibilities to our parents and children are different from—and greater than—our responsibilities to our friends, colleagues, or political leaders, and as a result our responses to situations involving our parents and children are more complex and typically demand more of us. An upright person recognizes this and acts upon his filial responsibilities, and also steps up and takes responsibility when he has failed to fulfill them.

This last point is of utmost importance in understanding the Upright Gong passage, and the commentarial tradition can be of assistance in helping us to see why this aspect of filial piety is in play here. Zhu Xi points out that the term used for “stealing” (*rang* 攘) in the case of Upright Gong’s father is not the term for habitual thievery, but rather a term that is used when someone takes something under duress or out of need (1985, 178).²² It seems, then, that there may have been extenuating circumstances in the case of Upright Gong’s father. He may have stolen because he needed food or as a result of dementia, in which case the main point of the passage is to underscore the importance of filial piety. A son in Upright Gong’s situation would have been seen as at least partly, if not fully, responsible for what occurred because he neglected his father’s needs. Whether this neglect resulted from a lack of awareness of his father’s situation or from intentionally ignoring it, the point remains the same: he failed to fulfill his responsibilities as a son. What makes matters worse in the case of Upright Gong, though, is that instead of stepping up and taking responsibility for rectifying the situation, he does just the opposite, reporting his father as though he has no special relationship to him at all. Therefore, not only does Upright Gong completely turn his back on his father; he fails to understand that if he had taken better care of his father in the first place, the entire situation might have been avoided.²³

²¹ He does not, for example, indicate that restitution should not be paid to the owner of the sheep. Although Kongzi does not specify what is involved in “covering” for one’s father, nothing in the passage indicates that Kongzi thinks a son who “covers” for his father should not make things right with the owner of the sheep. In this case, “covering” for one’s father might even entail taking responsibility for the crime.

²² The term for habitual thievery (*dao* 盜) is used in passages like 12.18, where Ji Kangzi asks about the prevalence of thieves in the state of Lu. See also *Analects* 17.12, 17.23.

²³ There is much more to be said about the story of Upright Gong, but I will confine my remarks in this article to those dimensions of the story that directly pertain to how the good and the right seem to relate in the *Analects*.

Now, it is not especially surprising that Kongzi's response to the Duke of She focuses on the virtues of uprightness and filial piety. We already have examined Kongzi's emphasis on moral exemplars who have cultivated a set of virtues, and most passages in the *Analects* share a general concern with these virtues. The question, though, is what role the virtues play in Kongzi's ethics. As Julia Driver has pointed out, there is an important difference between virtue theories, which offer an account of what virtues are, and virtue ethics, which bases ethics on virtue evaluation (1998, 111).²⁴ This distinction is important for our purposes because in order to determine how Kongzi understands the right and the good, we must determine what he bases ethics on, that is, what makes something ethical for Kongzi. The Upright Gong passage contributes to our understanding of Kongzi's ethical view because it highlights Kongzi's understanding of *why* certain actions are ethical. On Kongzi's view, Upright Gong should have covered for his father primarily because it is the upright and filial thing to do, and because these virtues are both part of the Way. Covering for one's father because it is upright or filial means being motivated to do it out of love, respect, and reverence for one's father (see 2.7). Here we can see clearly that following the Way requires us not only to do the right thing, but also to be motivated by the right kinds of feelings.

We have seen that Kongzi's remarks about Upright Gong are concerned with what uprightness is and what an upright person would do, as opposed to what is conducive to the best overall outcome or the inherent rightness of certain actions irrespective of consequences. These remarks are consistent with Kongzi's remarks about the Way, which we examined earlier in this section. His view is here clearly distinguishable from consequentialist and deontological views and the strict prioritization of the right and the good that is associated with them.²⁵ Instead, on Kongzi's view, either the right or the good might take priority depending on the context of a particular situation, and while there appears to be an understanding of the distinction between them in the *Analects*, the issue of which takes priority is not important. If this interpretation is correct, then it is neither the case that Kongzi

²⁴ For studies that employ and defend a virtue ethical interpretation of Chinese ethics, see Hutton 2001, 2002; Ivanhoe 2000a, 2002; Kline 1998, 2000; Kupperman 1999; Slingerland 2001; Van Norden 1997, 2003, 2007; Wong 1998; and Yearley 1990.

²⁵ That is not to say that Kongzi is wholly unconcerned with good outcomes or the rightness of certain actions. He clearly indicates in the *Analects* that there are filial duties, that is, things that it is right for filial children to do regardless of the consequences or situation (see, for example, 4.18–20). He also maintains that many different kinds of goods are achieved when children are filial (see, for example, 1.2). All of these things are a part of his understanding of why filial piety is valuable and important.

missed the important distinction between the right and the good, nor is it the case that he thinks neither of them *can* be said to be prior to the other. Instead, Kongzi simply has no clear view on the matter of priority concerning the right and the good, and so approaching his ethical philosophy with this view as one's analytical lens only distorts the true nature of his position.

How, then, might we describe Kongzi's position? His view seems to be an example of what David Solomon has in mind when he describes virtue ethical views as seeing the assessment of human character as "in some suitably strong sense, more fundamental than either the assessment of the rightness of action or the assessment of the value of the consequences of action" (1988, 429). For Kongzi, what makes covering for one's father the right thing to do is neither the good outcome that results nor that it is an absolute moral duty, but rather that it is an expression of the virtues that are specified by the Way, and as a result, when a son covers for his father out of his love, reverence, and respect for him, the Way is being fulfilled. We turn our attention to an analysis of how we might understand this sort of view in the next section.

4. Intrinsic Goods and the Way

We have seen that for Kongzi, what makes actions right and what makes lives good is that they contribute to the fulfillment and realization of the Way. An action is right if it expresses the virtues and is in accordance with the rites and culture of the Zhou, all of which together help to fulfill the Way. We have also seen that in the *Analects*, the good is not understood primarily as the achievement of goods like wealth or fame, but rather as the achievement of the goods associated with human character. These goods represent an important part of the Way. What is especially interesting about this view is that the right and the good are wholly united in the concept of the Way: right actions and good actions are both defined primarily as actions that fulfill the Way. According to the view presented in the *Analects*, whenever we follow the Way, we are doing what is right *and* advancing the good, simultaneously.

It is important to recognize what a contrast this understanding of ethics is to views that are based on the priority of the right or the good. Those who defend such views speak in terms of *priority* because they maintain that there are cases in which we must choose between doing what is right and doing what brings about a good outcome. Accordingly, we must *prioritize* the right or the good, deciding which one takes priority over the other when they conflict. For Kongzi, however, we are never required to choose between the right and the good, for whenever

we follow the Way and do what is right, we advance the good in the long term. An important feature of Kongzi's view here is his denial that the good is defined either exclusively or primarily with reference to immediate, short-term, or material goods. Instead, the good is defined by the possession of virtues like filial piety, as well as by the rites and the culture of the Zhou. In the *Analects*, these things are seen as intrinsic goods because they are the way that Heaven wants the world to be, and so they are good in themselves and not for the sake of any other end.²⁶ On such a view, daughters and sons should be filial because it is an intrinsically good way to be, as are all of the virtues that partly constitute the Way.

We can go a step further in our understanding of Kongzi's view of the right and the good if we relate it to his religious view. As a careful study of religious ethics in the *Analects* shows, when humans follow the Way, Heaven's plan for them can be realized. Accordingly, what we find in Kongzi's view is a moral order that has been instituted by Heaven for our own welfare or good, and which we can achieve by bringing our actions into accord with the Way. Here, we see the metaphysics of morals that is implicit in the *Analects*. The right and the good are mediated by a view about virtue, and this view includes at least three points. (1) When we act in the proper way, we are in one sense following the right by obeying Heaven and following the Way. (2) Proper behavior, though, also tends to be good for us and others and leads toward the greater end of a harmonious society. (3) Heaven has no other goal than promoting human flourishing. This last point is very significant because it cuts off the possibility that Heaven could require us to do things that do not in some way conduce toward the good of human beings (overall and in the long run). On such a view, you cannot have an Abraham or a Job in Confucianism.²⁷

Now it is important to remember that for Kongzi, Heaven is not an agent with a distinct personality, and as a result, we should not understand Heaven as *commanding* humans to behave in a certain

²⁶ Clearly, much depends here on what is meant by intrinsic goods, what makes something an intrinsic good, and how we should understand the relationship between intrinsic goods like filial piety and human welfare. There is much to say about this set of issues, and I want to note that I will not attempt to settle any of these general questions in my essay. Accordingly, I am bracketing certain dimensions of the questions surrounding intrinsic goods in order to create space for an account of how the good and the right seem to relate in Kongzi's ethics.

²⁷ A related point is made by Ivanhoe in response to Nel Noddings's claim that no woman could have written either Genesis or *Fear and Trembling*: "One could imagine a traditional Confucian thinker, particularly one of the Mencian persuasion, making a similar claim that no true Confucian could have written or even conceived of either text" (Ivanhoe 2000b, 61).

way. Rather, the Way calls us to follow certain patterns and processes that have been laid down with our own best interests at heart.²⁸ Since Heaven does not issue explicit commands and the Way is not a set of explicit rules, we cannot follow Heaven or the Way directly. We can, though, work to develop and express virtues which are the only means to realize Heaven's plan and follow the Way. They are the only means to these ends because Heaven intends for us to be this way and because only virtuous people can discern how to move things forward toward the greater end of a harmonious society. So the only way to do what is right is to work for the good (by being virtuous), and the only way to work for the good is to accord with what is right (by being virtuous).

An additional feature of this type of view is that when one acts for the right, the good sometimes is something that will only be realized with the fullness of time. As we have seen, cultivated persons follow the Way even when it seems like certain goods, such as the elimination of poverty, could be achieved by deviating from it. There are a couple of things worth noting here. First, the Way is partly constituted by doing things in the right way, which helps to show once more that the right and the good do not stand in a means–end relation, nor are they strictly prioritized, because the right is partly constitutive of the good. The good cannot be achieved without acting in certain ways. Second, the good ends Heaven intends for humans are not simply material goods, nor are they always immediate or short-term goods, for according to Heaven's plan, there are constraints on what constitutes the good. The good ends that are achieved by following the Way are primarily intrinsic goods associated with human character, which are seen most clearly in the lives of cultivated persons. This understanding of the Way helps to explain why Kongzi refers to “the Way of the *junzi*,” telling us that we can fulfill the Way by cultivating the *junzi*'s virtues and following the rites, cultural practices, and values of the Zhou.

Here we can see once again how Kongzi's view resonates with certain kinds of virtue ethical views. An important feature of most consequentialist views is that the good refers to outcomes that can be seen and appreciated right away, and not primarily to states of character or virtues. However, when virtue ethicists maintain that the good is prior to the right *and* that the good partly constitutes the right, the claim that the good is prior to the right takes on a very different

²⁸ Such a view explains why Heaven itself was conceived of as a kind of parent within both the early Confucian and Daoist traditions. While parents sometimes lay down the law for their children, if they are good parents they always act with the child's best interests at heart. They are not free in a radical sense, and Heaven does not seem to be, either.

meaning.²⁹ This marks a deep and important difference between consequentialists and virtue ethicists, who claim that the good is prior to the right.

In the history of Western philosophy, the distinction between the right and the good, and the idea that one must be prior to the other in all accounts of morality, emerged with the ascendance of deontological and utilitarian ethics and the eclipse of virtue ethics during much of the modern era, and it is a dichotomy that in many ways excludes the insights of virtue ethics. Accordingly, it is strongly associated with the view that there are two basic kinds of ethical theories, and it is a distinctive historical fixture in the development of Western ethics. This is one of the reasons why we should be cautious about attributing the priority of either the right or the good to classical Confucian ethics. One of the things that a careful study of these issues in the early Confucian tradition shows is that the sharp distinction between the right and the good and the view that one must be prior to the other is not the inevitable outcome of ethical theorizing, nor is it necessarily a helpful theoretical apparatus for understanding all ethical views. Given the history of the Chinese philosophical tradition, in which virtue ethical concerns were central from the very beginning, it would not be surprising to find that investigating things in terms of the priority of the right or the good does not improve our understanding of Kongzi's view.

One of the contributions of virtue ethics has been to help philosophers realize that certain approaches and dichotomies that were previously viewed as central to ethical inquiry are not, in fact, necessary or even helpful. Given that virtue ethical approaches are now widely recognized as representing a third kind of approach to ethics, perhaps it is appropriate to see them as also representing a third way of thinking about the right and the good. There are a number of reasons why the early Confucian tradition can serve as an especially helpful resource to those seeking to develop and improve virtue ethical understandings of the right and the good. First, because the idea that the right and the good must be prioritized was not central to the Confucian tradition, Confucian virtue ethics can help to remind us that these categories are the product of a particular historical tradition. Kongzi's view serves as a model of what ethics might look like without the assumption that all ethical views must be understood in relation to the categories of the right and the good, strictly separated and prioritized. Additionally, Confucian forms of virtue ethics are quite distinctive in a number of respects. For example, Confucian virtue ethics has always

²⁹ For a discussion of contemporary virtue ethical accounts of right action, see Swanton 2001.

been strongly focused on the good of groups such as families, communities, and societies, and less focused on—though not neglecting—the welfare of individuals. This may help to explain why working for the good is more easily seen as contributing to the right in early Confucian thinkers.

Indeed, in the *Analects*, not only are the right and the good not seen in terms of a strict priority relationship, but we find an alternative way of framing the unified relationship between the right and the good—one that stems from a particular understanding of the relationship between Heaven and the Way. For this reason, Kongzi's view also has the potential to contribute to our understanding of the possibilities in religious ethics by enriching contemporary debates about ways in which one can conceive of the ground of ethics, and of the divine and its role in our lives. The interpretation of Kongzi's view that I have argued for sees the Way as describing a set of intrinsic goods—things that are good because they are the way that Heaven wants the world to be. Certain aspects of this view bear a resemblance to divine command ethics and to understandings of natural law in Western religious ethics, but Kongzi's view differs in some important ways from Western versions of these views, for Heaven does not *command* humans to behave in certain ways; rather, the Way specifies patterns and processes that have been laid down with our own best interests at heart, and although there is some notion of a divine order or entity that grounds ethics, it does not seem to be a personal, theistic one. These features help to show that there may be a wider range of theories that ground ethics in a religious understanding than those that have been explored in the history of religious ethics and philosophy of religion in the West. Accordingly, further study of this aspect of Kongzi's view may help us to better understand both the limits and possibilities of religious ethics.³⁰

In this section, I have examined some of the ways in which the Confucian tradition can potentially contribute to ongoing dialogues in ethics and philosophy of religion. However, this is only likely to occur if comparativists exercise care when applying Western theoretical frameworks to the Chinese tradition. To be sure, not all Western frameworks are an imposition; to the contrary, some may help us to improve our understanding of certain ideas or virtues in the Chinese

³⁰ It is worth noting here that although the relationship between Heaven and the Way informs Kongzi's understanding of the right and the good, it does not seem to be the case that someone would necessarily have to accept Kongzi's religious view in order to accept his unified understanding of the right and the good. In other words, it does seem possible to separate certain aspects of Kongzi's ethics from its religious grounds. The understanding of the right and the good that has been presented here at the very least has the potential to be compatible with a range of different religious or comprehensive views.

tradition, and this is one of several ways in which comparative ethics can contribute to philosophical study. We should not assume, though, that the benefits of comparative work will always work in the same way, for Chinese perspectives and approaches can be just as illuminating with regard to Western perspectives and approaches as Western perspectives and approaches sometimes are in relation to the Chinese tradition. In any case, one of the things that this study has shown is that it can be important to exercise a healthy degree of caution when we use distinctions and categories that are the distinctive products of particular traditions.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that a careful study of the religious underpinnings of the *Analects* can help us to appreciate that Kongzi's ethical view does not easily accommodate the priority of the right or the good, for although the distinction between the right and the good is understood, the issue of which takes priority is not important. I began by highlighting the close relationship between Heaven and the Way, according to which the Way enables humans to flourish in the way that Heaven intends. Next, I discussed a number of passages in which Kongzi makes it clear that the Way includes both the right way of doing things and the good ends that are achieved by doing things in the right way. While Kongzi maintains that cultivated persons never deviate from the Way, even when the consequences of doing so would be good, he also maintains that certain kinds of goods are achieved by following the Way, namely the goods associated with human character. Heaven's aim is the welfare of human beings, and so when humans act in accordance with the Way, they do what is right *and* work toward the good that Heaven intends for them. Finally, I examined the way in which the right and the good are unified in the concept of the Way, and the insights that Kongzi's view of the Way, the right, and the good might have for virtue ethics and religious ethics.

I began this article by noting one context in which claims about the right and the good in Confucian ethics have emerged, namely discussions of comparative political philosophy. Although the arguments and concerns found in the body of literature vary, there has been a tendency to move in one of two directions. According to the first and more prominent view, we find a stark contrast: while modern liberal Western theories are focused on rights, justice, equality, and freedom, Chinese Confucians are largely unconcerned with these topics.³¹ As evidence for this view, some have argued that there are not even terms for ideas

³¹ For examples, see Hall and Ames 1999; Rosemont 1988, 1991, and 2004.

like “rights” or “justice” in classical Chinese, concluding that these concepts are wholly absent from the Confucian tradition. On the second view, there is at least one similarity between Western political philosophy and texts like the *Analects*: the early Confucians offer theories of justice, too.³² Those who defend this position maintain that the early Confucians offer *alternative* theories of justice—theories that differ substantially in content from those we are familiar with, but that are, nonetheless, theories of justice. Despite these differences, scholars who subscribe to both views tend to understand the Confucian tradition as one in which the good is prior to the right.

An understanding of the relationship between the Way, the right, and the good is especially important in studies of comparative political philosophy because the sharp division between the right and the good, and the claim that one must be prior to the other, marks the critical distinction between two of the most influential theories in the field of political philosophy over the last century: utilitarian and Rawlsian theories of justice.³³ If traditions like Confucianism are to contribute constructively to ongoing conversations in political philosophy, it will be important to recognize that although the prioritization of the right and the good has been central in contemporary Western political philosophy, these categories are not easily applied to a thinker like Kongzi.³⁴ In different passages, we find the right or the good taking priority in the *Analects*, which could lead scholars to defend competing views based on competing textual evidence. However, I have argued that these issues can be resolved by paying close attention to Kongzi’s religious ethics, and to the possibility that certain Western categories may not be appropriate for describing all ethical views.

All of this is important for an understanding of Kongzi’s view of ethics and political philosophy because if we simply accept the view that Kongzi sees the good as prior to the right, then we will neglect certain aspects of his view that are important. As the passages examined in this article show, Kongzi makes a number of remarks concerning governing and questions that are related to social justice, such as how to address the problems of poverty and fair distribution. Although Kongzi does not offer a systematic account of these matters, we can certainly learn something about his general view from these remarks.

³² For examples, see Fan 2003; Fox 1995; and Peerenboom 1990.

³³ This distinction is at the heart of Rawls’s critique of utilitarian views of justice. On Rawls’s alternative theory of justice (justice as fairness), “Justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others” (1999, 25, §6). As Rawls goes on to explain, “We can express this by saying that in justice as fairness the concept of right is prior to that of the good” (1999, 28, §6).

³⁴ For discussion of the potential for constructive engagement between Confucianism and Rawls, see Cline 2007a, 2007b.

For example, Kongzi's contention that some ways of addressing poverty are always wrong, regardless of how effective they are, shows the extent to which his view does not align with utilitarian views of justice. As a result of Kongzi's understanding of the Way, there are certain deontological constraints on the good. However, it would be misleading to claim that the right is prior to the good in the *Analects*, for Kongzi does not base his account strictly on the rightness of specific actions defined independently of the good. Indeed, the goods associated with human character, for Kongzi, are at the heart of the Way.

Although I am skeptical of the relevance of the priority of the right or the good for understanding Kongzi's thought, it is important to see that Kongzi *does* have an understanding of what we call the right and the good. It is just that the way in which these things relate differs significantly from the way in which they have been understood in the history of Western ethics. This is precisely why we stand to benefit from examining Kongzi's view of these matters. In the *Analects*, we find an alternative way of approaching these questions, one that might prove to be fruitful in the study of ethics more generally.³⁵

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