INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

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For Barbara
Lucy to my Ricky and Lois to my Peter

■ CONTENTS ■

■ PREFACE ■

This book is an introduction, both philosophical and elementary, to ancient Chinese thought. Because my approach is philosophical, I devote a considerable amount of space to explaining the basic vocabulary of contemporary philosophy. My hope is that readers will be inspired to pursue Chinese thought in more depth but will also be able to cross over easily to the study of Western philosophy, should they wish to do so. There are, of course, alternative ways of studying Chinese thought and culture that are equally valuable, but I hope no scholars will begrudge me this methodology simply because it is not their own.

Because this is an elementary introduction, I have greatly simplified many aspects of both Chinese and Western history and culture. Understanding any tradition is daunting. As one Confucian put it, "The more I look up at it the higher it seems; the more I delve into it, the harder it becomes. Catching a glimpse of it before me, I then find it suddenly at my back" (*Analects* 9.11). Consequently, introducing too many nuances and scholarly controversies might overwhelm the beginner. By simplifying some points that are not central to my narrative, I hope to enable the reader to understand and grapple with other complex and profound issues. Cognoscenti should bear this in mind when they notice that I have typically not done justice to the multifaceted nature of the Western philosophers whom I cite as subjects of comparison nor to the complexities and controversies regarding Chinese history and philology.

In order to make this book as readable as possible, bibliographical information is exclusively in the endnotes (which are marked with Roman numerals). There is no need for the student to interrupt the flow of her reading by looking up an endnote unless she needs to know the source of a quotation. I have also tried to keep footnotes (which are marked with Arabic numerals) to a minimum, using them mainly for cross-references.

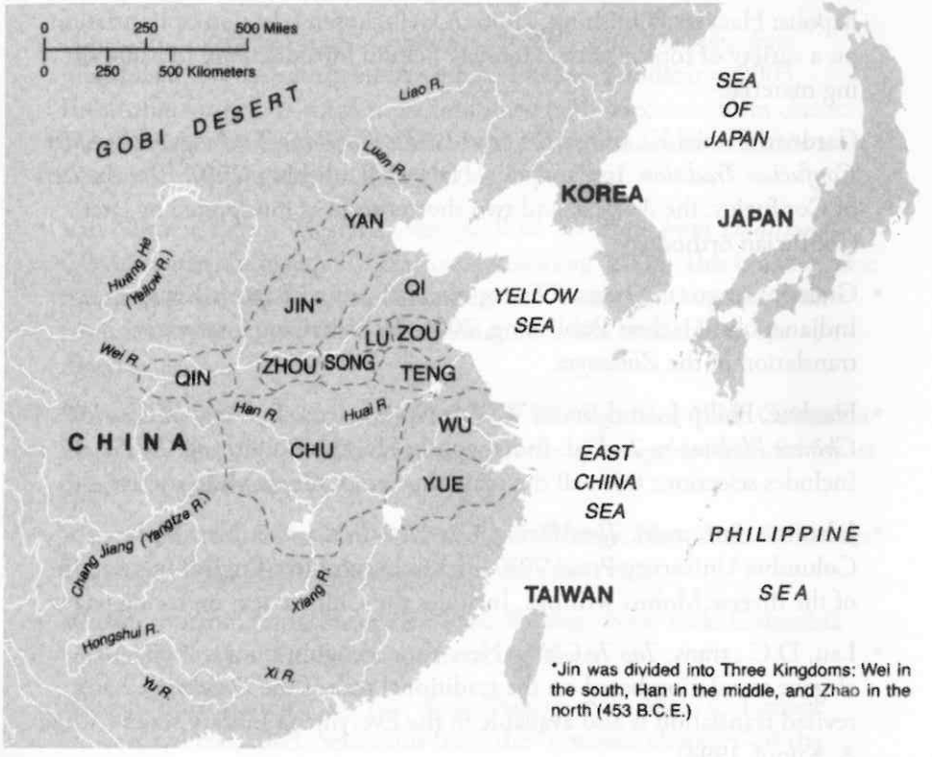
Translations are usually taken from Ivanhoe and Van Norden's *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy,* 2nd ed. An asterisk after a quotation indicates either that the passage is not found in *Readings* or that I have significantly modified the translation in that work. For passages from the *Analects* and *Mengzi* not found in *Readings,* I often quote Edward Slingerland's complete translation-with-commentary *Confucius: Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* or my own *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries.* I do not note if I make a slight change from the translations given in one of these texts.

Following many contemporary academic works, years are identified as either BCE (before the Common Era) or CE (Common Era), meaning the era common to Christianity and the other great world religions. These designations are used in place of BC and AD, not to downplay or denigrate the significance of Christianity, but merely to provide a usage comfortable to those with other beliefs.

My thanks to Paul Goldin, Aaron Stalnaker, Justin Tiwald, and Brad Wilburn, all of whom offered helpful suggestions and advice on earlier versions of this work. I am also grateful to Deborah Wilkes, Senior Editor at Hackett Publishing Company, for her support throughout this project with everything from matters of style to hunting gargoyles; Mary Vasquez, Project Editor at Hackett, for tirelessly answering my queries; and Simone Payment, my copy-editor, for making me sound more articulate than I am. Special thanks to Scott Thomson of Positively Postal, who generously provided images of the Chinese stamps that grace some of our chapter headings. Most of all I wish to thank my students, whose endless enthusiasm for Chinese thought is an inspiration and a challenge.

For those who wish to continue their study of this fascinating topic, the translations and secondary works listed below are just a fraction of the best work available.

Bryan W. Van Norden



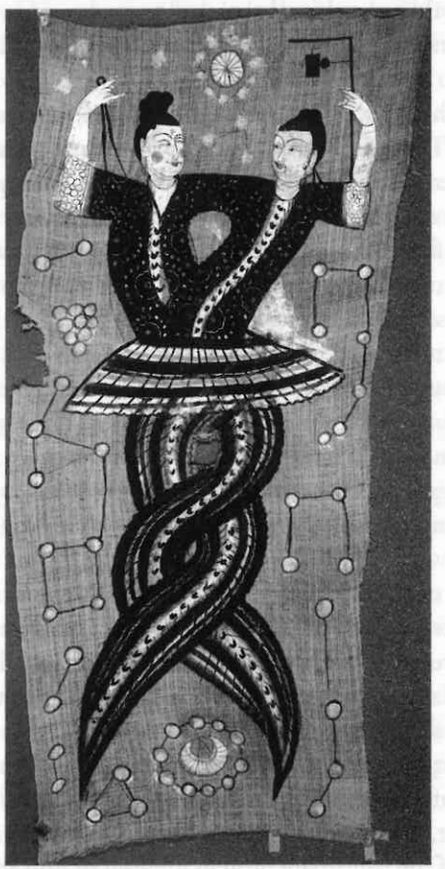
*Jin was divided into Three Kingdoms: Wei in the south, Han in the middle, and Zhao in the north (453 B.C.E.)

■ 1 ■

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

I am not of their age or time and so have not personally heard their voices or seen their faces, but I know this by what is written on bamboo and silk, etched on metal and stone, and inscribed on basins and bowls that have passed down to us through succeeding generations.

—*Mozi,* "Impartial Caring"



In this image, the sages Fu Xi and Nuwa are depicted symbolically as intertwined snakes.

In order to understand early Chinese philosophers, we must understand the context in which they lived. As with every culture, this context consists of historical reality as well as their myths. The distinction is not sharp: myths often contain an element of historical truth, and what passes for historical truth often has mythical elements. In addition, there are different versions of the myths in early Chinese texts. I will present only one account, but we shall see in it many figures and themes that are important in the self-understanding of Chinese culture.[1]

I. Myth

According to Chinese tradition, the earliest people had a precarious existence, living in fear of wild animals, subsisting day to day on whatever they could forage, and sleeping in tree houses or drafty caves. They had no technology, no rituals, and no culture. Human life gradually improved and civilization developed through the actions of a series of sages, the earliest of whom are referred to as the Three Sovereigns and the Five Emperors. The first and second sovereigns were Fu Xi and his wife, Nuwa. Fu Xi taught people to hunt, fish, and trap. He created the institution of marriage and also developed the earliest portions of the *Yijing,* a work of divination that would come to have great significance in later Chinese cosmology. (The *Yijing,* or *Classic of Changes,* had scant influence on philosophy, per se, in the period this book covers, so we will have little to say about it.) Legends say that Nuwa was responsible for even more amazing feats than was her husband, such as keeping the Heavens from collapsing by repairing them when they were damaged. Nuwa thus became a symbol, in later Chinese history, for the power and importance of women. For example, the classic Chinese novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber,* noted for its strong female characters, recounts the legend of Nuwa in its opening.

Nuwa was not only Fu Xi's wife, she was also his sister. This is intriguing, because the highest of the Greek gods, Zeus, was also married to his sister, Hera. Furthermore, in the Bible, God is said to have made Eve from Adam's rib, so she is, in a sense, his twin sister. Because these cultures developed independently, the similarity in their myths may reflect some deep need or tension that humans share. A Freudian, using a hermeneutic of suspicion, might suggest that the myths are a projection of subconscious, incestuous desires. In contrast, using a hermeneutic of faith we might interpret the myths as an expression of the legitimate human longing to find that masculinity and femininity are distinct (symbolized by the fact that Fu Xi and Nuwa are male and female) yet complementary (symbolized by their marriage) and fundamentally unified, rather than dualistic (symbolized by the fact that they have the same parents).[1]

The third sovereign was Shen Nong, whose name means "spiritual farmer." Shen Nong discovered how to plant crops and domesticate animals. He also was a pioneer of Chinese medicine. One day, when he wasn't looking, a leaf fell into his cup of water. Drinking it, he noticed that it tasted different. In this way, he discovered tea. Experimenting by using different leaves for tea, he discovered their medicinal effects; using himself as a test subject, he tried different herbs, and noted what effects they had on his body.

The first of the Five Emperors was the Yellow Emperor, or in Chinese Huang Di. During his era, criminals and invading barbarian tribes terrorized the Chinese people. Although he preferred peace, the Yellow Emperor saw that it was necessary to institute armies and judicial punishments to protect the people. Huang Di's practices led to a decisive military victory over his enemies, a victory that is often considered to be the founding of the Chinese as an ethnic group.

Others in Huang Di's circle also made lasting contributions. The Yellow Emperor's wife, after inspecting a caterpillar infestation in the emperor's mulberry orchard, discovered how to spin and weave silk. Thereafter, weaving silk became a characteristically female task. Another distinctive cultural innovation, Chinese written characters, was supposedly invented by one of the Yellow Emperor's officials, Cang Jie.

So Fu Xi taught the people how to hunt, while Shen Nong taught them to farm. Modern archaeology teaches us that the earliest humans moved from place to place, hunting animals and gathering wild plants. Then, with the agricultural revolution, humans learned to plant crops and domesticate animals. This led to settled human communities. These communities allowed for the development of more complex forms of technology and civilization (including writing), but also created the need to protect one's territory and control crime. Consequently, the stories of Fu Xi, Shen Nong, and the Yellow Emperor, although mythical in their details, may represent a dim memory of the human transition from nomadic hunter-gatherers to farmers, and then to city dwellers.

The next three important emperors were Yao, Shun, and Yu. Yao, in addition to being a humane and wise ruler, is associated with discovering the rudiments of astronomy and the regularity of the seasons, important knowledge for any agricultural civilization. Thus, Kongzi (Confucius) said of him, "It is

1. See Appendix A on the difference between a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of faith.

Heaven that is great, and it was Yao who modeled himself upon it" (*Analects* 8.19). As he approached the end of his life, Yao decided to find a virtuous successor to follow him as ruler. Searching his kingdom, Yao heard about Shun, a simple farmer who was known for his great filial piety.

Shun had what we would describe today as a dysfunctional family. His father, stepmother, and stepbrother repeatedly schemed to murder him and steal his wealth. According to one story, Shun's family asked him to dig a well. They planned to remove the ladder and cover over the well while Shun was still inside. Thinking that they had succeeded in their plot, Shun's brother told his parents that they could have Shun's livestock and his storehouses of grain. "But his spear and shield—mine! His zither—mine! His bow—mine! And his two wives shall service me in my bed!" However, Shun had survived the murder attempt. Despite their plots against him, Shun continued to love and care for his family, until eventually he won them over with his devotion. Impressed by stories of his character and achievements, Yao made Shun his prime minister. He was so successful in this position that when Yao passed away the people made Shun the new emperor.

As ruler, Shun was concerned with the problems of flood control and irrigation. These had long been issues in China. The Yellow River Valley is the heartland of Chinese civilization because of its fertile soil and because the river provides easy transportation and water for crops. However, the Yellow River often floods, leading to devastation. Consequently, some have referred to China as a "hydraulic civilization" because of how important organizing water control is to society. One speculation is that this encouraged a strongly centralized government, with the resources to organize massive irrigation, flood control, and canal-building projects.

It is not surprising that Shun felt the need to appoint an able minister, Yu, to supervise flood control. Yu worked tirelessly, dredging silt out of rivers and building canals. Yu eventually became Shun's prime minister and, in a parallel with the previous succession, his abilities led the people to treat him as the new emperor upon Shun's death.

Yu was a great ruler in his own right, and when he grew old he followed the pattern set by Yao and Shun of choosing the person he found most worthy as his successor. However, this time the people did not accept the emperor's choice. Instead, out of affection and respect for Yu, they treated Yu's son as the emperor. Because of this, Yu became (posthumously) the founder of the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia. It is significant that the people's preference for a ruler was taken to be of greater importance than even the great Yu's decision. Traditional Chinese culture was never democratic but always emphasized the well-being and happiness of the people as the ultimate arbiter of political legitimacy.

The traditional Chinese view is that dynasties follow a cyclic pattern: a sagacious ruler founds a dynasty, bringing prosperity and order to society, but in a way that is noncoercive. The people willingly and joyfully follow him. Over the centuries there is a gradual decline in the quality of the rulers, with a corresponding increase in social disorder, dissatisfaction, and disaffection. The decline is typically not linear: great kings will arise during a period of mediocrity to temporarily restore a dynasty to its greatness. However, eventually a dynasty will reach its nadir, and an evil last king will inspire full-fledged revolt against his atrocities, leading to the arrival of a sage who will found the next dynasty.

Myth: *"The Chinese word for 'crisis' literally means 'danger + opportunity.'"*

Fact: *The Chinese word for "crisis" means, well, crisis. It is composed of two words, which mean "danger" and "crucial point."*

So Yu was the sage who founded the Xia dynasty, which was brought to an end centuries later by the evil Tyrant Jie. The sage-king Tang overthrew Jie and went on to found the Shang dynasty. (The Shang dynasty is sometimes also called the Yin, after the name of the last capital city of the dynasty.)

II. Early History

At some point during the Shang dynasty, written records begin and we emerge from the enchanting mists of myth into the clearer light of actual history. The story of how the Shang dynasty moved from myth to history is intriguing. Near the end of the nineteenth century, "dragon bones" could be bought for their alleged medicinal properties. They were thought to be dragon bones because of their great age and because of the odd markings on them. However, a pair of Chinese scholars who examined the bones realized that the markings were archaic forms of Chinese characters written on ancient "oracle bones." These bones (often the flat bottom shell of a tortoise) were used in a ceremony whereby the Shang king would divine the future and make inquiries of the spirits of his ancestors. A bone was heated until it cracked, while the king made a pair of ritual pronouncements, "Our attack on the barbarians will be successful. Our attack on the barbarians will perhaps not be successful." By interpreting the cracks, the king would divine which pronouncement was correct. What is perhaps most fascinating is that, *after* the ritual was completed, the questions asked were typically inscribed into the oracle bone. If we today are lucky, the answer divined was also inscribed into the bone. And if we are *really* lucky, the actual outcome was inscribed too. These brief and frequently difficult to interpret inscriptions give us a narrow window into Shang civilization.

When the source of the "dragon bones" was excavated, archaeologists found tombs of the Shang kings who ruled in the city of Yin. Here was hard physical evidence for the historicity of the Shang dynasty. (We lack evidence like this for the Xia dynasty, which is why it is still considered mythical.) The earliest surviving oracle bones date from around 1200 BCE, and we may be confident that the dynasty existed at least as far back as the sixteenth century BCE. This was a Bronze Age culture, using the metal for weapons and for ceremonial vessels to make offerings of food and wine to the spirits of the ancestors. The staple crop was millet, a kind of wheat still grown in China today. (Rice doesn't grow well in comparatively dry northern China, so it is not until much later, when Chinese culture spread into the high-rainfall areas of the south, that rice became almost emblematic of China.)

The war chariot was the tank of the era: in it rode a driver, an archer, and a spearman. To see one approaching at full gallop must have been an intimidating sight. The size of a state was often expressed in terms of how many chariots its army could field (e.g., "a state of a thousand chariots"). But the Shang also used infantry, armed with spears, shields, and light body armor.

This Bronze Age culture was patriarchal, but some women held high status through some combination of noble birth and personal excellence. Most notably, Fu Hao was a noblewoman who commanded armies. After her death, ritual sacrifices were made to her, just as to noble male ancestors, and her burial tomb included goods almost equal in grandeur to that of a king.

The traditional view of history requires that the last king of the dynasty be evil: the (supposedly) evil last king of the Shang was Tyrant Zhou. The name of the dynasty that succeeded the Shang is also romanized as "Zhou." In Chinese, you would never confuse the two, because they are written with different characters and pronounced with different tones: *Zhòu* 紂 is the tyrant and *Zhōu* 周 is the dynasty. To keep them straight in English, "Zhou" without qualification will mean the dynasty and "*Tyrant* Zhou" will always be the last ruler of the Shang.

Tyrant Zhou was clever, fearless, and physically powerful. However, he was also ruthless, cruel, and dissolute. The ancient historian Sima Qian reports that "by a pool filled with wine, through meat hanging like a forest, he made naked men and women chase one another and engage in drinking long into the night."[ii] Tyrant Zhou had a loyal minister in his uncle, Bi Gan, who warned him that his actions would eventually turn his subjects against him. Tyrant Zhou replied that sages supposedly have larger hearts than others, and since Bi Gan spoke like a sage, he wished to see whether Bi Gan also had the heart of a sage. With that, he ordered his guards to cut the heart out of Bi Gan's chest.

Tyrant Zhou was overthrown, and a new dynasty was begun by the Zhou people. The Zhou justified their conquest through the theory of dynastic

cycles. I will let them speak for themselves, in documents that date back some three thousand years:

> Examining the men of antiquity, there was the founder of the Xia dynasty [King Yu]. He guided his mind, allowing his descendants to succeed him and protecting them. He acquainted himself with Heaven and was obedient. But in the process of time the mandate in his favor fell to the ground. So also when we examine the case of Shang. Heaven guided its founder [King Tang], so that he corrected their errors and so it protected his descendants. He too acquainted himself with Heaven and was obedient. But now the mandate in favor of him has fallen to the ground.[iii]

> When Heaven rejected and made an end of the mandate in favor of the great state of Shang, there were many of the former intelligent kings of Shang in Heaven. However, the king who had succeeded them [Tyrant Zhou], the last of their line, from the time of his entering into their appointment, proceeded in such a way as at last to keep the wise in obscurity and the vicious in office. The poor people in such a case, carrying their children and leading their wives, made their moan to Heaven. They even fled away, but were apprehended again. Oh, Heaven had compassion on the people of the four quarters. Its favoring mandate lighted on our earnest founders. Let our king feverishly revere Virtue![iv]

> King Wen [of the Zhou people] was able to make bright his Virtue and be careful in the use of punishments. He did not dare to show any contempt to the widower and widows. He appointed those worthy of appointment and revered those worthy of reverence. He was terrible to those who needed to be awed, so getting distinction among the people. It was thus he laid the first beginnings of the sway of our small portion of the empire, and one or two neighboring countries were brought under his improving influence, until throughout our western regions all placed in him their reliance. His fame ascended up to the High Ancestor, who approved of him. Heaven then gave a great charge to King Wen to exterminate the great dynasty of Shang and receive its great mandate, so that the various states belonging to it and their peoples were brought to an orderly condition.[v]

These passages don't just lay out a cyclic view of history, they specify a *philosophy of history* that explains those cycles. The founder of a dynasty is given

a mandate (*mìng* 命) to rule by Heaven (*tiān* 天). Because of this intimate relationship between Heaven and the king, the ruler is often referred to as the "Son of Heaven." "Heaven" can refer to the sky or the place where the spirits of the ancestors dwell, but in the period this book covers it most typically refers to a higher power that is thought of more or less anthropomorphically. The Mohists, a movement we shall examine in Chapter 4, conceived of Heaven as very much like a personal God, while the Confucians increasingly thought of Heaven as a more abstract higher power. Heaven bestows the mandate to rule based on a person's Virtue (*dé* 德). Virtue, here, is a sort of ethical charisma a person has because they possess attributes such as kindness, wisdom, and reverence for Heaven. If this notion of Virtue or ethical charisma seems naive to a modern reader, consider the extent to which the successful leadership of people such as Mahatma Gandhi and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., depended upon their perceived virtues. The mandate bestowed based on Virtue is transmitted to one's descendants, but it will be revoked for viciousness and given to someone more worthy. Even in modern Chinese, the word for "revolution" (as in "Cultural Revolution") is *gémìng* 革命, which is literally "stripping of the mandate."

It is easy to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to the doctrine of the mandate of Heaven. The Zhou people wanted to rationalize their conquest of the Shang and their story that they had a Heaven-given mandate to rule sounds as suspect as Western notions like manifest destiny or the divine right of kings. As the saying goes, "the winners get to write history," and it is possible that Tyrant Zhou was a good ruler who simply had the bad luck to be defeated by ambitious invaders. In general, the doctrine of the mandate of Heaven conveniently justifies the rule of the victors: if they won, it proves they had the mandate, which means that they are ethically superior to those they defeated.

A hermeneutic of faith reveals another side to the doctrine: it implies that a ruler is legitimate only as long as the people are happy. The king may have to use force against the occasional obdurate rebel or bandit, but by and large the people must acquiesce in being ruled. Thus, the king reminds a duke that "Heaven's mandate is not constant." He further warns him, "When you show a great discrimination, subduing men's hearts"—as opposed to coercing them with force—"the people will admonish one another, and strive to be obedient. Deal with evil as if it were a sickness in your person." In other words, do not be harsh in a way that causes unnecessary suffering and harm "and the people will entirely put away their faults. Deal with them like caring for a baby, and the people will be tranquil and orderly."[vi] We now understand what another duke means when he states, "Our king has received the mandate.

Unbounded is the happiness connected with it, but unbounded is the anxiety. Oh, how can he be other than reverent?"[vii]

So the suffering people of Tyrant Zhou "made their moan to Heaven," which stripped him of the mandate and gave the mandate to King Wen, leader of the Zhou people, because he "was able to make bright his Virtue." However, out of loyalty, deference, and love of peace, King Wen restrained himself from rebelling against Tyrant Zhou. It was King Wen's son, King Wu, who finally led the conquest of the Shang. Wen (whose name means "cultured") is praised for his gentle forbearance, while Wu (whose name means "martial") is praised for his righteous use of force. They might be said to reflect two sides of Chinese culture.

King Wu's victory was quick and decisive because Tyrant Zhou's own soldiers turned against him. Tyrant Zhou retreated to his palace and, fearless and haughty to the last, set it afire and immolated himself in the palace rather than allowing himself to be captured.

When did the Zhou conquest of the Shang take place? The traditional date listed in many reference works is 1122 BCE, but current scholars believe this is wrong. We do know that in 1059 BCE there was a conjunction of all five of the planets visible with the unaided eye. As did the people of many ancient civilizations, the Chinese studied the Heavens carefully and believed that unusual celestial events provided portents of the future. Consequently, this conjunction would have led people to expect that a major change was about to take place, and this belief might have emboldened those anxious to rebel against Tyrant Zhou. In fact, the conjunction is mentioned in one ancient Chinese historical text, which states that the founding of the Zhou dynasty occurred twenty years later. This would seem to give us an exact date for the conquest. However, the dates given in this particular text seem to be off due to errors introduced by later scribes. Correcting these dates is a matter of guesswork, but many scholars think that King Wu defeated the Shang and established the Zhou dynasty around 1040 BCE.

King Wu's rule was short-lived; he died of natural causes a few years after the conquest. His son, King Cheng, succeeded him on the throne, but Cheng was only a child. To have a minor on the throne immediately after the founding of a new dynasty, with potentially rebellious subjects to govern, was a precarious situation. King Cheng's regent was his uncle, the Duke of Zhou. It must have been tempting for the Duke of Zhou to seize the throne. He could certainly have made a plausible claim to it: he was the brother of recently deceased King Wu and a son of King Wen. However, the Duke of Zhou supported King Cheng with loyalty and wisdom throughout his life. Because of this, he became a paragon of Virtue among later Confucians.

The strategy the Zhou used to control their newly expanded territory was to divide it into states of various sizes. A noble, typically a duke, governed each state. Many of these dukes were relatives of the Zhou royal family. Each duke had his own army and was responsible for maintaining order and collecting taxes in his state. He answered to the king, and upon a duke's death the king would approve his successor. This system worked well for centuries. However, the dynasty gradually decayed as weak kings lost the respect of the dukes. Perhaps this was inevitable. Imagine that you and your ancestors have ruled a state for generations. Within your state, you levy and collect taxes, make and enforce laws, and command your own personal army. Obeying the so-called king might seem unnecessary and, if the other dukes were ignoring the king, positively foolish.

The dynasty reached a low point under King You. King You's legitimate son by his queen was heir apparent. However, You fell in love with a seductive concubine, who bore him a second son. He decided to replace the legitimate queen and heir with his concubine and his second son. Given that his former queen had powerful relatives, this was immensely imprudent. The former queen's relatives raised an army to depose King You and put his elder son on the throne. While this army was secretly assembling, King You had taken to entertaining his new queen by lighting the beacon fires used to summon the armies of the dukes in case of emergency. Having been fooled by this prank more than once, the dukes decided not to answer the king's next signal. As a result, when the army of the deposed queen and heir attacked and King You lit the beacon fires to summon help, no one came. King You, his concubine-turned-queen, and his second son were all killed. His elder son was installed as king in a new capital city, further to the east. This marks the transition between the Western Zhou dynasty (c.1040–771 BCE) and the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–221 BCE).

III. The Period of the Philosophers

The philosophers we study in this book all lived during the Eastern Zhou dynasty, and it is especially important to understand the context in which they lived, argued, and wrote. The new, eastern capital was deeper in Chinese territory and hence easier to defend against barbarian raids. However, the events surrounding the deposing of King You demonstrated the weakness of the Zhou royal house and its dependence upon the power and support of lesser nobles. This crippled the Zhou dynasty, and the Zhou kings were mere figureheads from this point on. Real power lay in the hands of the dukes and other nobles who ran the various states into which China was divided. In the absence of centralized authority, the states schemed against one another, formed alliances,

broke those alliances, and frequently engaged in interstate warfare. The common people suffered horribly: they were robbed and assaulted by brigands the governments could not control, they were taxed to exhaustion by rulers who wanted to supply their armies and feed their own greed, and the planting and harvesting of their crops was interrupted by invading armies or by forced government labor. In the bitter words of the *Daodejing* (53):

> The court is resplendent,
> Yet the fields are overgrown.
> The granaries are empty,
> Yet some wear elegant clothes.
> Fine swords dangle at their sides;
> They are stuffed with food and drink,
> And possess wealth in gross abundance.
> This is known as taking pride in robbery.
> Far is this from the Way!

As is often the case, a chaotic and desperate situation stimulated philosophical thought as thinkers struggled to find a solution to the problems their society faced.

What these Chinese thinkers were looking for was the *dào* 道, which we render "Way." This crucial philosophical term has five related senses. "*Dao*" can mean a path or road (as in the modern Chinese compound "*dàolù* 道路," roadway). In both Chinese and English, there is a natural metaphorical extension from "way" in the sense of a literal *path* to "way" in the sense of *a way to do something.* Closely related to this is "Way" as *the linguistic account of a way* of doing something. From these senses, "Way" came to refer to *the right way to live one's life and organize society.* Eventually the term also came to mean *the ultimate metaphysical entity* that was responsible for the way the world is and the way that it ought to be (see Chapter 8). Although it can have any of these five senses, the primary meaning of *dao* (for most Eastern Zhou thinkers) is the right way to live and organize society.

Two important eras within the Eastern Zhou are the Spring and Autumn Period (722–481 BCE) and the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE). The former is named after the *Spring and Autumn Annals,* a cryptically terse historical chronicle of the years in question, written from the perspective of Kongzi's home state, Lu.[2] The *Zuo zhuan* is a commentary on the *Spring and*

2. According to tradition, Kongzi himself wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and subtly encoded in its statements his judgments about the events described. However, most scholars today doubt this.

Autumn Annals that provides considerably more narrative detail about the period. Scholars disagree over how reliable it is as a historical account, but we shall have occasion to cite it at several points.

One of the opening stories in the *Zuo zhuan* gives a feel for what the Spring and Autumn Period was like. The ruler of a certain state had two sons. The mother disliked the older son, supposedly because she had a difficult labor with him, and favored the younger son. She asked the duke to declare the younger son his heir and pass over the older son, but the duke refused. When the father died and the older son became the new duke, his mother asked him to give his younger brother command over an important city. Eventually, the duke acceded to his mother's requests. Using the city as his new power base, the younger brother proceeded to usurp the prerogatives of the duke and prepare his soldiers for war. The duke refrained from taking action against his younger brother for as long as he could, despite the entreaties of his advisors. However, when the duke discovered that his mother had agreed to open the gate to his capital for his brother's invading army, the duke sent a force of two hundred war chariots against his brother. Support for the rebellious younger brother crumbled quickly, and he was forced to flee. The duke thereupon put his mother under permanent house arrest, vowing to not see her again "until we meet underground" (i.e., after death). After some time, the duke missed his mother, but felt that he could not break his vow. His dilemma was resolved when a clever servant suggested that the duke have a tunnel dug; there he could meet his mother underground. Thus, the duke and his mother were reconciled.

This inventive solution to the duke's quandary is typical of much Chinese ethical thought. In addition, this story illustrates the complex interrelationship between family and politics in this era. We can see why Confucians might stress the importance of loving and respecting members of one's own family, but we can also see why others (like the Mohists) would seek to minimize the role of familial relations in government.

In the power vacuum created by the impotence of the Zhou king, the institute of the Hegemon developed. The Hegemon (sometimes also called "Lord Protector") was a leader of one of the states who was able, through his individual military strength and judicious alliances, to become de facto ruler of China. The institution of the Hegemon officially existed to "support the king and repel the barbarians" that were raiding the Chinese states. However, the Hegemon actually ruled in the place of the king. The institution was intrinsically unstable, though, because the Hegemon was only one among several powerful rulers, alliances were fluid under even the best of circumstances, and any ruler who was too successful would incite the fear and envy of the others. Perhaps the most famous of the Hegemons were Duke Huan of the state of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin. Duke Huan's success was due in part to his brilliant minister, Guan Zhong. Many rulers and ministers wished to emulate Duke Huan and Guan Zhong, but Confucians typically condemned them for usurping the authority of the Zhou king and ruling by force and guile rather than by Virtue. Nowadays, when the People's Republic of China condemns U.S. hegemony (*bàquán* 霸權) they are using a word derived from the ancient title "Hegemon" (*bà* 霸).

The Warring States is a period of even more intense inter- and intrastate conflict. During this period, rulers of some of the more powerful states were declaring themselves king, usurping the title that was still supposedly the sole prerogative of the Zhou dynasty. In addition, the most wealthy and powerful families in a state were sometimes usurping the power of the hereditary rulers, so that some dukes became mere figureheads, just like the Zhou king.

At the very beginning the Eastern Zhou period, one noble had been particularly distinguished in defending the surviving members of the royal family against attack by barbarian raiders, thereby ensuring the survival of the dynasty. As a reward, the new king made him ruler of a semi-barbarian territory in northwestern China. This became the state of Qin. Ironically, it was a descendant of this same noble who led Qin when, in 256 BCE, it accepted the surrender of the last Zhou king. A few years later, in 221 BCE, Qin succeeded in conquering all the other states and unifying China. This event brings the Warring States Period and the Zhou dynasty to a close. The ruler of Qin thereupon bestowed upon himself the title "First Emperor." The grandiose title "emperor" (*huángdì* 皇帝) was constructed from the titles of the Three Sovereigns ("huang") and the Five Emperors ("di"). The Qin ruler obviously had no lack of confidence in his own abilities, and he predicted that he would be the First Emperor of ten thousand in his dynasty. What actually happened after his death . . . well, to tell you would be getting ahead of our story. For now we are finally ready to consider the first great philosopher of the Chinese tradition, Kongzi.

IV. Timeline

- Yao becomes emperor, and chooses Shun as his prime minister.
- Yao dies. The people choose Shun as the new emperor. Shun puts Yu in charge of flood control. Yu's success in this leads Shun to choose him as his prime minister.
- Shun dies. The people choose Yu as the new emperor.
- Yu dies. The people choose his son as the new emperor, thereby creating the first Chinese dynasty: the Xia.

- Over many generations, the Virtue of the Xia kings declines, culminating in the vicious rule of Tyrant Jie.
- Tyrant Jie is overthrown by the sage Tang, who becomes king of the second Chinese dynasty: the Shang.
- Over many generations, the Virtue of the Shang kings declines, culminating in the vicious rule of Tyrant Zhou.
- King Wen patiently endures Tyrant Zhou, but his Virtue increasingly draws the support of the people and other nobles.
- Circa 1040–771 BCE: Western Zhou dynasty.
    - King Wen's son, King Wu, leads the rebellion that overthrows Tyrant Zhou and founds the third Chinese dynasty: the Zhou.
    - A few years after the conquest, King Wu dies of natural causes, leaving his young son, King Cheng, on the throne. King Cheng's regent is his uncle, the Duke of Zhou, who loyally advises and defends King Cheng, solidifying Zhou rule.
    - Over many generations, the Virtue of the Zhou kings declines.
    - 771 BCE: A group of disaffected nobles and "barbarians" attacks and murders King You.
- 770–221 BCE: Eastern Zhou dynasty.
    - A surviving member of the Zhou royal family is established as king in a new capital to the east, deeper in the Zhou territory.
    - 722–481 BCE: Spring and Autumn Period.
        - 680 BCE: Duke Huan of Qi, with the assistance of his Prime Minister Guan Zhong, becomes the first Hegemon.
        - 551–479 BCE: Lifetime of Kongzi (Confucius).
    - Fifth century BCE: Lifetime of Mozi, anti-Confucian philosopher who advocated "impartial caring."
    - 403–221 BCE: Warring States Period.
        - Fourth century BCE:
            - Birth of Yang Zhu, egoist philosopher.
            - Birth of Mengzi (Mencius), Confucian who argued "human nature is good."
            - Birth of Hui Shi, key figure in the "School of Names."
            - Birth of Zhuangzi, Daoist philosopher who advocated emptying rather than cultivating one's heart.
            - Birth of Xunzi, Confucian who argued "human nature is bad."
        - Third century BCE:
            - Possible date of composition of the *Daodejing,* attributed to Laozi.
            - Birth of Han Feizi, Legalist philosopher.
- 221–207 BCE: The Qin dynasty, founded by the self-proclaimed "First Emperor," unifies China, bringing the Warring States Period to a close.

Review Questions

1. According to the traditional Chinese philosophy of history, what cycle does each dynasty go through? Explain the role of Heaven, the mandate, and Virtue in this philosophy.
2. The figures in this chapter who will be referred to most frequently are Yao, Shun, Yu, Jie, Tang, Tyrant Zhou, Wen, Wu, and the Duke of Zhou. Give at least one sentence identifying something distinctive about each of these individuals.
3. Give the names of the Three Dynasties in the historical order in which they occurred. Name the first ruler of each dynasty and the last ruler of the first and second dynasties.
4. The last of the Three Dynasties is divided into two periods. What are these two periods called, and what event marks this historical division? The second half of this dynasty is divided into what two subperiods?
5. Briefly describe the governmental structure of the last of the Three Dynasties. In particular, what were the responsibilities of the dukes and the king?
6. In what century was the last of the Three Dynasties founded? What year is conventionally taken as the end of this dynasty?
7. What are the five senses of *dao,* "Way"?

■ 2 ■

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.

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."*

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.

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

1. See the discussion of *Mengzi* 3A5 in Chapter 6.

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

2. See 5.7*, 9.2, 14.29, 17.4*.

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 overtaxation 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

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.

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 2.15. (You will have a solid basic understanding of Confucianism if you can remember these passages.)

■ 3 ■

KONGZI AND VIRTUE ETHICS

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

—Kongzi, *Analects* 4.10

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

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

I. Three Normative Theories

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

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

Some objections commonly raised against consequentialism are facile and easily refuted. For example, some people object that we can't know every consequence of any one action. This is true, but we are only responsible for choosing the action most likely to have the best consequences. And our uncertainty about the future doesn't stop us from making all kinds of other choices based on probable outcomes, from choosing whether to try a new flavor of ice cream, to picking an elective course in college, to deciding where to invest our retirement funds.[i]

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

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

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

Anscombe was a deontologist. Broadly speaking, a deontologist claims that sometimes the right action is not the one that produces the most "good" (pleasure, happiness, and so on) overall. Ask yourself if the ends justify the means. If you think that the end does justify the means (as long as the end is good from an impartial perspective), then you are a consequentialist. If you think that the end does not always justify the means (because some means are simply wrong), then you are a deontologist. Many deontologists are (like Anscombe) rule-deontologists. Rule-deontologists claim that we can do what we like as long as we do not violate certain moral imperatives, such as "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not lie," and "Do not assault others." At the other extreme, act-deontologists think that imperatives like those above are, at best, useful rules of thumb to which there will always be exceptions. For example, as a general rule, one should not steal, but what if one steals a loaf of bread from a well-stocked supermarket to feed one's starving family?

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

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

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

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

Many advocates of radical virtue ethics are highly particularistic. In response to the question, "What should I do?" the particularistic virtue ethicist answers, "You should do what a virtuous person would do in your particular situation." There is little to be said at a highly general level beyond this, because no simple rule captures what a virtuous person will do in every situation. She will, however, notice and appropriately respond to all kinds of aspects of situations that most of us will ignore or misinterpret. This is because the virtuous person has more wisdom than most of us. Wisdom is importantly different from intelligence. Intelligence comes in different forms, but we have ways to measure it, including IQ tests, standardized exams like SATs, and tests of skill at activities like mathematics. Wisdom is harder to quantify, but it is an important trait that we recognize and value in others. Think of someone who typically gives good advice about personal predicaments. Consider a

person who is good at running meetings or solving practical problems. Imagine people who are generally happy and relaxed, but who also pay their bills, meet their deadlines, and are successful overall. All of these people are wise. One can just as easily imagine people who are extremely intelligent, but who fail miserably at all of these things, because they are not wise.

Many years ago, I was giving a guest lecture on Confucianism, and during the discussion session a young woman asked me, "What would Kongzi say if your parents didn't approve of the guy you were dating?" I could tell by the tone of her voice and the look on her face that this was not a purely hypothetical question. I began by explaining that Kongzi lived in a very patriarchal and sexist society, so he assumed that women should just marry the men their parents picked for them. However, I went on to say, we don't live in Kongzi's society, so we should focus on how contemporary Confucians would address this issue. They would probably say that it depends on the details of the situation. Do the parents dislike the guy because of his race or religion? If so, one should not follow their advice. Or do the parents dislike the guy because he treats their daughter disrespectfully? Do the young woman's friends agree with her parents' assessment? If her friends disagree among themselves, ask the friend who seems to be the best judge of people's characters. These are the kinds of questions and concerns that a wise person would begin by raising.

II. Confucianism as Virtue Ethics

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

1. Living Well

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

> Zilu, Zengxi, Ran Qiu, and Zihua were seated in attendance. The Master said to them, "I am older than any of you, but do not feel reluctant to speak your minds on that account. You are all in the habit of complaining, 'No one appreciates me.' Well, if someone were to appreciate you, what would you do?"
>
> Zilu spoke up immediately. "If I were given charge of a state of a thousand chariots—even one hemmed in between powerful states, suffering from armed invasions and afflicted by famine—before three years were up I could infuse its people with courage and a sense of what is right."
>
> The Master smiled at him.

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

> Zengxi stopped strumming his zither, and as the last notes faded away he set the instrument aside and rose to his feet. "I would choose to do something quite different from any of the other three."
>
> "What harm is there in that?" the Master said. "We are all just talking about our aspirations."
>
> Zengxi then said, "In the third month of Spring, once the Spring garments have been completed, I should like to assemble a company of five or six young men and six or seven boys to go and bathe in the Yi River and enjoy the breeze upon the Rain Dance Altar, and then return singing to the Master's house."
>
> The Master sighed deeply, saying, "I am with Zengxi!"

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

2. The Virtues

So which virtues does Kongzi think one needs to live such a life? Kongzi's primary virtue term is *rén* 仁, which several fine translations render "Goodness." This reflects the fact that *ren* is, in a way, the highest human excellence for Kongzi. I slightly prefer to translate *ren* as "humaneness," for several reasons. First, "humaneness" suggests that one of the most important aspects of

ren is "caring for others" (12.22). Indeed, for later Confucians this is its primary sense. Second, just as the word "humaneness" has the word "human" in it, so does the character *rén* 仁 have *rén* 人, "person," in it. (The other part of *rén* 仁 is 二, "two," suggesting that this is a virtue manifested in relationships between people.) Ultimately, though, it doesn't make much difference whether one says "Goodness," "humaneness," or something else, as long as one remembers that *ren* is the most important virtue for Kongzi, and it is manifested primarily in caring for others.[1]

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

> The Master replied, "Care for others."
> He then asked about wisdom.
> The Master replied, "Know others."
> Fan Chi still did not understand, so the Master elaborated: "Raise up the straight and apply them to the crooked, and the crooked will be made straight." (12.22; cf 2.19)

"Straight" and "crooked" are metaphors for moral rectitude and corruption, so to "raise up the straight" refers to Kongzi's strategy for reforming government by putting people with good character into positions of authority. Kongzi is implying that two traits are necessary to carry out this policy. One must be Good, which entails caring about the well-being of others, but caring is not enough. One must also be wise, which involves being able to recognize who is upright and who is corrupt. Without Goodness, one lacks the proper motivation; without wisdom, one lacks the skill to achieve one's goal.[2]

An important part of wisdom is being able to judge the character of others. Indeed, much of Book 5 of the *Analects* is taken up with Kongzi's appraisals of other people. For contemporary Western readers, Kongzi's emphasis on judging others may seem off-putting because we live in a society that frowns on people who are judgmental. But there is great irony in this, because to condemn others for being judgmental is to judge them yourself. This is more than an amusing paradox. The fact is, it is impossible to live without sometimes evaluating others. We all condemn certain kinds of people, such as the racist, the misogynist, and the child molester. And if

1. Some of the many passages in the *Analects* that discuss Goodness include 1.2, 1.3, 3.3, 4.1–6, 5.8, 5.19, 6.30, 7.30, 9.1*, 12.1–2, 14.1, 14.4, 15.9, 15.36, 17.6*, and 17.21.

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

we are to be fair to our friends, we need to *evaluate* whether, for example, they are being honest for our own good, blunt but a bit tactless, or simply hurtful when they tell us a truth we do not want to hear. If being judgmental is a vice, it cannot mean simply having opinions about others, because we cannot help having opinions. Rather, to be judgmental is really to make judgments about others in a manner that is not informed and not thoughtful. A person cannot begin to be informed and thoughtful in her opinions as long as she keeps telling herself that she (unlike everyone else in the world) does not make any judgments.

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

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

Those who are familiar with Western ethics might wonder how Confucian wisdom differs from *phronēsis,* or "practical wisdom," in Aristotelian thought. There are some striking similarities. For both Kongzi and Aristotle, wisdom is something very different from theoretical intelligence, and it cannot be fully captured in any set of rules. Whereas some philosophers (such as the Mohists and Western utilitarians) think of ethics as being almost like mathematics, Confucians and Aristotelians conceive of wisdom as more like the learnable but uncodifiable skill of a master craftsperson. Furthermore, for both Confucians and Aristotelians, wisdom requires understanding and being committed to the other virtues. However, there are important differences between the two views as well. For Aristotle, *phronēsis* is the master virtue that subsumes

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

all the others. In contrast, Goodness is the overarching virtue in the thought of Kongzi.

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

Myth: *"Chinese characters are all pictures."*

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

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

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

Kongzi distinguishes being courageous from being rash. Thus, when the always headstrong Zilu expresses a willingness to rush into a dangerous situation, Kongzi dryly remarks, "Zilu's fondness for courage exceeds my own" (5.7*). A person does not lack courage because she is unwilling to expose herself to needless danger. Rather, "to see what is right yet not do it is to lack courage" (2.24*). This is similar to the view of most Western virtue ethicists. However, Aristotle and Plato considered courage an extremely important virtue, whereas Kongzi seldom mentions it, and he seems to spend more time discouraging excessive courage than he does encouraging genuine courage (8.2, 8.10*, 14.4, 14.12, 17.8, 17.23, and 17.24*; but contrast 9.29). This may have something to do with the fact that a paradigm of courage (in both China and the West) is bravery in battle; however, Kongzi wanted to discourage his contemporaries from thinking in militaristic terms as much as possible.

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

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

3. Ethical Cultivation and Human Nature

It is not surprising that a philosopher's conception of human nature and her theory of ethical cultivation are typically closely related: how we should cultivate the human potential to be virtuous depends upon what that potential is. We saw in the previous chapter that Kongzi stresses both thinking and learning in ethical cultivation (2.15). But Kongzi was vague about the relative importance of these two factors and how they relate to human nature. Consequently, this was the subject of intense debate in the later Confucian tradition. Here I shall present an interpretation of Kongzi that is close to that of Xunzi. However, be aware that for the last millennium, most Confucians have believed that Mengzi's position best elaborates what is implicit in Kongzi's thought.[5]

One of the disciples closest to Kongzi remarked that one could not hear him talk about human nature (5.13). Indeed, his only explicit statement on the topic is that "By nature people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice" (17.2). But this is so vague that it is consistent with almost any view; human nature could be good, bad, or morally neutral. Kongzi does seem to have an implicit view of human nature, though. He praises a disciple who compares ethical cultivation to the laborious process of grinding and polishing jade (1.15). Furthermore, in what has been called Kongzi's "spiritual autobiography," he describes how he committed himself to learning at the age of fifteen and only fifty-five years later, at the age of seventy, could he "follow [his] heart's desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety" (2.4). And in a pronouncement to his most talented disciple, Kongzi characterizes Goodness as "restraining yourself and turning to the rites" (12.1). Taken together, these comments suggest that humans are not innately disposed toward the virtues and that human nature is actually very resistant to ethical cultivation.

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

Becoming ethical is a process of re-forming a nature with desires and dispositions that are actively opposed to virtue (such as arrogance, combativeness, inflexibility, greed, and lust). Although thinking is certainly important, what is really crucial in becoming a better person is to reshape oneself through studying classic texts, participating in communal rituals, and modeling oneself on sages and worthies.

It might not be clear at first why the issue of human nature is important, but consider some of the alternatives to Kongzi's view, which we shall explore in later chapters. The Mohists held that human nature is morally neutral and highly malleable, so that humans can easily be led to care for everyone impartially. Yang Zhu claimed that human nature is self-interested, so that trying to force humans to act for the benefit of others is impractical. Mengzi argued that human nature is good, so we innately have compassion for others, but this care is naturally stronger for our relatives and friends than for strangers. Finally, Xunzi stated explicitly that human nature is bad, in the sense that our innate desires are opposed to the Way, so we must arduously cultivate virtues that we do not have at birth.

III. Limitations of Confucianism

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV. Kongzi's Particularism

We noted that moderate virtue ethics is logically subordinate to consequentialism or rule-deontology, while radical virtue ethics takes good character to

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

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

Consider the immense variation in the answers Kongzi gives to the same question. When he is asked about Goodness, he gives five different answers to five different disciples (6.22, 12.1, 12.2, 12.3*, and 17.6*). He is asked how to govern a state on six occasions, and on each he gives a different answer (12.7, 12.11, 12.14*, 12.17, 13.1*, and 13.16). Kongzi's variability apparently puzzled even some of his own disciples. On one occasion, Kongzi's disciple Zilu asked whether one should immediately put into practice a moral teaching one has learned. Kongzi responded in the negative, telling Zilu that one must first seek the advice of one's elders before acting. Later, Ran Qiu asked the very same question: should one immediately put into practice a moral teaching one has heard? Kongzi replied that one should indeed act immediately. A third disciple heard both exchanges, and asked Kongzi why he gave different answers to the same question. Kongzi replied simply, "Ran Qiu is overly cautious, so I wished to urge him on. Zilu, on the other hand, is too impetuous, and so I sought to hold him back" (11.22).

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

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

Review Questions

1. How does consequentialism differ from deontology?
2. How is rule-consequentialism different from act-consequentialism?
3. How is rule-deontology different from act-deontology?
4. Explain the generalism-particularism spectrum.
5. What are the four questions virtue ethics addresses?

6. What is the difference between moderate and radical virtue ethics?
7. What is Goodness for Kongzi?
8. What are the different aspects of wisdom for Kongzi?
9. Explain the four other major virtues that Kongzi discusses.
10. How does Kongzi's implicit view of human nature seem to require him to emphasize learning to a somewhat greater extent than thinking?

■ 6 ■

MENGZI AND HUMAN NATURE

The doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mozi fill the world. If a doctrine does not lean toward Yang, then it leans toward Mo.

—*Mengzi* 3B9

Mengzi is sometimes called the Second Sage (second only to Kongzi) because of his immense influence on Confucianism.

It is the year 319 BCE. We are in Liang, capital city of the state of Wei. King Hui of Liang has invited the wisest scholars from all of China to come and offer their advice on how to govern. The royal court is a raised hall, looking down onto a courtyard. The architecture is intimidating: those going to see the king must cross the courtyard and then ascend the steps under his august gaze. Even the most distinguished dignitary could be forgiven feeling some trepidation.

Today, the Confucian Mengzi has been favored with a royal audience. He ritually bows to the king before ascending the steps to enter the hall. The king addresses Mengzi with the utmost respect as he says, "Venerable sir, you have not regarded hundreds of leagues too far to come, so you must have a means to profit my state."

Immediately, Mengzi shoots back, "Why must Your Majesty speak of profit?! Let there simply be benevolence and righteousness!"

Everyone is shocked, reeling from Mengzi's audacity in rebuking the king. Before they can catch their breath, Mengzi explains,

> If Your Majesty says, "How can I profit my state?" the Chief Counselors will say, "How can I profit my clan?" and the nobles and commoners will say, "How can I profit my self?" Superiors and subordinates will seize profit from each other and the state will be endangered. When the ruler in a state that can field ten thousand chariots is assassinated, it will invariably be by a clan that can field a thousand chariots. When the ruler in a state that can field a thousand chariots is assassinated, it will invariably be by a clan that can field a hundred chariots. A thousand out of ten thousand or a hundred out of a thousand is certainly not a small amount. But if one merely puts righteousness last and profit first, no one will be satisfied without stealing more. Never have the benevolent left their parents behind. Never have the righteous put their ruler last. Let Your Majesty speak only of benevolence and righteousness. Why must one speak of "profit"? (*Mengzi* 1A1)

Mengzi's courageous reply puts the king on notice that, unlike so many other people in the royal court, he is not a sycophantic toady who will tell the king only what he wants to hear. Mengzi's response is also a brilliant philosophical argument. He might seem to be objecting to profit itself. But on what grounds does Mengzi instruct King Hui to avoid emphasizing profit? Emphasizing profit is itself unprofitable. A later Confucian summed up Mengzi's point concisely: "A gentleman never fails to desire profit, but if one is singlemindedly focused on profit, then it leads to harm. If there is only benevolence and righteousness, then one will not seek profit, but one will never fail to profit."[i]

Mengzi is here elaborating in much more detail a position hinted at by Kongzi, who warned, "If in your affairs you abandon yourself to the pursuit of profit, you will arouse much resentment" (4.12), but also remarked "those who are wise follow Goodness because they feel that they will profit from it" (4.2).

Who is this brilliant but brash defender of the Way of Kongzi?

We have few details about Mengzi's life, other than those contained in his eponymous text, the *Mengzi.* He was born in Zou, a small state near Kongzi's home state of Lu, both of which were in what is now Shandong province. His father died when he was young. In his patriarchal society, this must have left him and his mother in precarious circumstances. However, his mother still managed to send him to study in the Confucian school of Zisi, Kongzi's grandson.

There are several famous stories about Mengzi's mother that are charmingly edifying, whether or not they are true. One is that "Meng's mother moved thrice" (*Mèng mǔ sān qiān* 孟母三遷) in order to find a suitable environment in which her son could grow up. After the death of her husband, she first moved with her son next to a cemetery, and the young sage pretended to perform funeral rituals. Thinking this inappropriate for a child, Mengzi's mother moved to a house near a marketplace, but there her son began imitating someone hawking goods. Still dissatisfied, Mengzi's mother moved to a home beside a school. There Mengzi pretended to be a teacher, which finally pleased his mother.

When Mengzi began attending school, his mother would ask him every day what he had learned. One day his answer showed casual indifference toward his studies. In response, "Meng's mother cut the weft" (*Mèng mǔ duàn jī* 孟母斷機) of the fabric that she had been weaving, thereby ruining it. Her weaving was probably one of their few sources of income, so Mengzi was startled that she would waste a piece of fabric. His mother explained that if he wasted a day of learning it was as bad as her wasting a day of work. Thereafter, Mengzi always applied himself fully in his schoolwork.

As an adult, Mengzi traveled from state to state, trying to find a ruler who would put into effect "benevolent government." By this he meant rule by virtuous "gentlemen" who aimed at the well-being of the people as a whole. Mengzi stressed that most people will engage in crime if they are poor and hungry:

> To lack a constant livelihood, yet to have a constant heart—only a scholar is capable of this. As for the people, if they lack a constant livelihood, it follows that they will lack a constant heart. No one who lacks a constant heart will avoid dissipation and evil. When they

> thereupon sink into crime, to go and punish the people is to trap them. When there are benevolent persons in positions of authority, how is it possible for them to trap the people? (1A7; *Readings*, p. 122)

Consequently, it is the obligation of government to ensure that the basic needs of the people are met. Mengzi offered much more specific advice than had Kongzi about how to secure the livelihood of the people, including recommendations about everything from tax rates to farm management to the pay scale for government employees (e.g., 3A3). However, as the references to "a scholar" and "a constant heart" suggest, Mengzi agreed with Kongzi that ethical cultivation is crucial for both individual and social well-being. Thus, Mengzi advocated an educational system that instructs people in how to be a good parent, child, ruler, minister, spouse, and friend (3A4).

We find in Mengzi an emphasis on the five themes that we saw are characteristic of all Confucians: achieving happiness in the everyday world, a revivalistic appropriation of tradition, familial relations as the basis of other ethical obligations and of differentiated caring, ritual as a means of expressing and reinforcing one's ties to others, and the ethically transformative power of education.[1] In addition, Mengzi agreed with Kongzi in regarding war as, at best, a regrettable last resort. In what has become a Chinese proverb, he stated that to try to rule via brute force is as ineffectual as "climbing a tree in search of a fish" (*yuán mù qiú yú* 緣木求魚, 1A7).[2]

However, Mengzi could not simply repeat what Kongzi had said. Confucianism was now under attack by a variety of alternative philosophies. Mengzi saw two positions as the primary competitors to the Way: "the doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mozi fill the world. If a doctrine does not lean toward Yang Zhu, then it leans toward Mozi. Yang Zhu is 'for oneself.' This is to not have a ruler. Mozi is 'impartial caring.' This is to not have a father. To not have a father and to not have a ruler is to be an animal" (3B9; *Readings*, pp. 135–36).

In response to the Mohists, Mengzi argued that the impartiality they demanded was inconsistent with human nature, hence neither practical nor desirable. In this, Mengzi agreed with Yang Zhu. However, Yang Zhu was also wrong, because there is more to human nature than self-interested desires. Rather than being artificial deformations of human nature, benevolence and righteousness are as natural as the fruit that grows from a peach tree. Let's look in more detail at how Mengzi argues for these claims.

1. See Chapter 2 for these themes.

2. For more on Mengzi's views on war, see 4A14*, 6B8*, and 7B1*, 7B2*, 7B3, and 7B4*.

I. The Mohists, Profit, and Impartiality

We have already seen part of Mengzi's argument against Mohism. When Mengzi chides King Hui "Why must one speak of 'profit (*li*)'?" (1A1) he is also implicitly criticizing the Mohists, who state that "the business of a benevolent person is to promote what is beneficial (*li*) to the world and eliminate what is harmful" (68). For example, the Mohists argue against aggressive warfare on the grounds that it is not beneficial, even to the aggressor state. When Mengzi encounters someone who plans to dissuade rulers from fighting a war by arguing that the war would be unprofitable, he objects,

> Your intention, venerable sir, is indeed great. But your slogan is unacceptable. If you persuade the kings of Qin and Chu by means of profit, the kings of Qin and Chu will set aside the three armies because they delight in profit. This is for the officers of the three armies to delight in being set aside because they delight in profit. Those who are ministers will embrace profit in serving their rulers. Those who are children will embrace profit in serving their fathers. Those who are younger brothers will embrace profit in serving their elder brothers. This is for rulers and ministers, fathers and children, elder and younger brothers to end up abandoning benevolence and righteousness. For people to embrace profit in their contact with one another, yet not be destroyed—such a thing has never happened. (*Mengzi* 6B4*)

As he did with King Hui, Mengzi here argues that aiming to maximize profit or benefit is self-defeating. What would really benefit everyone is a society in which people act in accordance with benevolence and righteousness. But if everyone is thinking only in terms of profit, they will end up betraying and harming other people and groups in the name of what they perceive to be beneficial. Mengzi's critique has something in common with that of modern philosophers who say that our society is so obsessed with quantifiable benefits that we ignore considerations of morality in favor of the bottom line.

Mengzi's most fundamental objection to Mohism is that the impartiality it demands is impractical and perverse because it is contrary to human nature. This comes out most directly in his dialogue with the Mohist Yi Zhi (*Mengzi* 3A5). Mengzi points out that Yi Zhi had himself given his parents elaborate funerals. Yi Zhi's natural attachment to his parents was thus so strong that it led him to ignore his abstract commitment to the Mohist principle of frugal burials.

As we saw, a theoretical weakness of early Mohism is that it regards human motivations as almost infinitely malleable. Yi Zhi holds what seems to be a

modified version of Mohism, designed to make it more psychologically plausible. He suggests "love is without distinctions, but it is bestowed beginning with one's parents." Yi Zhi thus seems to be agreeing with the Confucian claim that children first learn to love and have compassion for others in the family (*Analects* 1.2), but argues that this natural compassion should be redirected until it reaches everyone equally, thereby achieving the Mohist goal of "impartial caring."

Mengzi suggests that Yi Zhi's revisionist Mohism still results in a position that is psychologically impractical: "Does Yi Zhi truly hold that one's affection for one's nephew is like one's affection for a neighbor's child?" Mengzi sums up his objection with the aphorism, "Heaven, in producing the things in the world, causes them to have one source, but Yi Zhi gives them two sources." The first source is our innate love for family members (which is naturally stronger for them than for strangers), while the second source is the Mohist doctrine of impartiality. Now, for the Mohists (as much as for the Confucians) the will of Heaven and the Way coincide. So once the Mohists acknowledge that our greater love for family members is part of the nature implanted in us by Heaven, they cannot consistently claim that it is part of the Way to override these motivations in order to achieve impartiality.

In some respects Mengzi's argument against the Mohists is structurally similar to Yang Zhu's. Yang Zhu and Mengzi agree that we should follow our nature, and that the Mohist Way is contrary to that nature. However, Yang Zhu claims that human nature is purely self-interested, while Mengzi argues that human nature is good (6A6). Let's see how.

II. Yang Zhu and Human Nature

In what is perhaps the most famous passage in the *Mengzi,* our philosopher argues for the goodness of human nature with a thought experiment:

> The reason why I say that humans all have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among their neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries. From this we can see that if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human. (*Mengzi* 2A6)

Mengzi's thought experiment specifies that the situation happens "suddenly." This suggests that the reaction is natural, because one has no time to calculate the potential advantages or disadvantages to oneself. Notice also what Mengzi does *not* say here. He does not claim that anyone would actually act to save the child. A person might freeze in the moment or crisis, or might (after a moment of reflection) think of selfish reasons to allow the child to drown. Mengzi only needs us to share his intuition that any human would have at least a momentary twinge of compassion at the sight of a child about to fall into a well; conversely, "if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human."

Mengzi uses a similar thought experiment to argue for the existence of other innate ethical reactions:

> Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness. . . . It is not the case that only the worthy person has this heart. All humans have it. The worthy person simply never loses it.
>
> A basket of food and a bowl of soup—if one gets them then one will live; if one doesn't get them then one will die. But if they're given with contempt, then even a homeless person will not accept them. If they're trampled upon, then even a beggar won't take them. (*Mengzi* 6A10)

The previous passage argued for an innate "heart of compassion," which is the basis of benevolence; this second passage argues that all humans disdain to do certain shameful things that would otherwise benefit them, and this "heart" is the basis of righteousness. So whereas Yang Zhu claimed that human nature consists only of self-interested desires for food, sex, physical comfort, and survival, Mengzi uses these thought experiments to argue that human nature also includes distinctively ethical motivations.

But aren't Mengzi's claims falsified by the simple fact of human wrongdoing? If we are all innately benevolent and righteous, why does anyone ever hurt another person or compromise his integrity? This objection misinterprets Mengzi's position, though. Mengzi does not claim that *humans* are innately good; he claims that *human nature* is innately good. Recall our earlier discussion of the concept of the "nature" of a thing (Chapter 5). It is the nature of a peach tree to bear fruit, but it will fail to realize this nature if denied a healthy environment (with water, sunlight, etc.). It is the nature of a frog to have four legs, but it will never develop them if it is eaten as a tadpole. Mengzi uses a carefully chosen agricultural metaphor to explain how this applies to human nature. He says that the "heart of compassion" (manifested when one sees the child about to fall into a well) is "the *sprout* of benevolence," while the "heart of disdain" (illustrated by the starving beggar who refuses a handout given with contempt) is the "*sprout* of righteousness" (2A6, 6A10). Just as the

sprout of a Chinese Juniper is not yet a tree but does have an active potential to develop into a mature tree, so are the "sprout of benevolence" and "sprout of righteousness" potentials for full benevolence and righteousness. But we must develop this potential in order to become fully virtuous. As Mengzi explains when asked to clarify his position, "As for what they genuinely are, humans can become good. That is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential" (6A6). Until our potential for virtue is fully developed, the reactions of the sprouts will be haphazard and inconsistent. This is why humans can show great kindness and even self-sacrifice in one situation but stunning indifference to the suffering of others in a slightly different situation.

Fact: *Gunpowder, the magnetic compass, and printing with moveable type were all invented in China long before they were used in the West. It has been said that these are the primary technological breakthroughs responsible for the rise of the modern world.*

Consequently, Mengzi's doctrine that human nature is good is perfectly consistent with the fact that humans often fail to do good. But is Mengzi right in claiming that all humans have at least the *sprouts* of benevolence and righteousness? We are all too familiar with the chilling example of the psychopath: a "human" (such as a serial killer) who lacks ordinary compassion or sympathy. Mengzi's metaphor of Ox Mountain is his explanation for the rare cases of people who seem to lack the sprouts of virtue:

> The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because the mountain bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the respite it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, it was not that there were no sprouts or shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep then came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. People seeing it barren, believed that there had never been any timber there. Could this be the nature of the mountain?
>
> When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? That by which they discard their genuine hearts is simply like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? . . . Others see someone who is like an animal, and think that there was never any capacity there. Is this what a human genuinely is? (*Mengzi* 6A8)

Mengzi acknowledges that some people seem to lack the sprouts of virtue. However, this is not "what a human genuinely is" (6A6, 6A8). Mengzi maintains that a bad environment (such as physical deprivation, lack of ethical guidance, or even abusive parenting) destroyed their sprouts.

III. The Virtues

Mengzi agreed with Kongzi that flourishing or living well is something that humans should do while in this world (rather than something to be achieved after death) through life with one's family and friends and participation in communal ritual activities. However, Mengzi gives a much more specific and clear account than does Kongzi of human nature, ethical cultivation, and the virtues. Mengzi identifies four cardinal virtues, each of which is grounded in our innate emotional reactions:

> Humans all have the heart of compassion. Humans all have the heart of disdain. Humans all have the heart of respect. Humans all have the heart of approval and disapproval. The heart of compassion is benevolence. The heart of disdain is righteousness. The heart of respect is propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is wisdom. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them. Hence, it is said, "Seek it and you will get it. Abandon it and you will lose it." (*Mengzi* 6A6)

Benevolence is compassion or sympathy for others. The benevolent person is pained by the suffering of others and takes joy in their happiness. The Mohists also emphasized this term, but for them it is ideally a purely impartial concern for others. For a Confucian like Mengzi, though, compassion should extend to everyone but should be stronger for those tied to one by bonds such as kinship and friendship. Confucian benevolence is thus like the ripples around a stone dropped into a pond, proceeding out from the center but gradually decreasing in strength as they move outward. This is related to the Confucian hypothesis that it is loving and being loved in the family that germinates our capacity for compassion.

Righteousness is the integrity of a person who disdains to demean herself by doing what is base or shameful, even if doing so would reap benefits. So, for example, a righteous person will not accept a gift given with contempt (6A10), beg in order to obtain luxuries (4B33), or cheat at a game (3B1). As with benevolence, the capacity for righteousness is innate, but its growth is first stimulated in the family, where respect for the opinions of one's elders is internalized as an ethical sense of shame. Put in deontological terms, benevolence is a virtue particularly manifested in our *obligations* to help others,

while righteousness involves *prohibitions* against actions that would violate our integrity.

Wisdom has many aspects, each of which is illustrated by the story of the sage Boli Xi (5A9). When the ruler of Yu made foolish concessions to the state of Jin, Boli Xi knew that these policies would result in the destruction of Yu. Recognizing that this ruler was too stubborn to listen to his advice, Boli Xi fled to the state of Qin, whose ruler showed great promise. Boli Xi waited until he was approached respectfully by the ruler of Qin, but then served so ably as his minister that the ruler became illustrious. Boli Xi thus showed great wisdom in judging the characters of the rulers of Yu and Qin. He manifested great skill at instrumental reasoning (i.e., finding the best means to achieve a given end) in the fine advice he gave when he was minister to the ruler of Qin. He revealed his commitment to righteousness by insisting that the ruler of Qin show him respect in requesting an audience. He also demonstrated prudence in fleeing Yu when the situation was hopeless. It may surprise some readers that running away was virtuous in this situation, but keep in mind that a good person does care about her own well-being; she just doesn't care about herself excessively (cf 4B31). Boli Xi thus combines the four parts of wisdom: being a good judge of the character of others, skill at means-end reasoning, an understanding of and commitment to the other virtues, and prudence.

The word rendered "propriety" is the same as the word for "rites" or "rituals." This is appropriate because propriety is the virtue that consists in performing the rites with the proper motivations. In comparison with some other Confucians, Mengzi has relatively little to say about the rites (hence little to say about propriety as a virtue). But one way of conceptualizing propriety is that it is manifested when we express deference or respect to others through ritualized actions (such as bowing, allowing someone else to walk first through a door, etc.).

IV. Ethical Cultivation

Mengzi holds that we are born with only sprouts of the four cardinal virtues. How do we get from the sprouts to the full virtues? As we have already noted, it is the responsibility of a ruler to make sure the people are safe and have the basic necessities of life, because few people will be able to cultivate virtue if subject to hunger, cold, homelessness, and violence. Mengzi also emphasizes two other factors as impediments to the growth of virtue: pernicious doctrines and lack of individual ethical effort.

In Mengzi's era, as in our own, many people either denied that they were capable of virtue or opposed virtue as naive. Mengzi categorizes "those who say 'I myself am unable to dwell in benevolence and follow righteousness'" as "throwing themselves away" and "those whose words are opposed to propriety and righteousness" as "destroying themselves" (4A10). Both attitudes are roadblocks to moral growth. So a significant part of Mengzian moral self-cultivation is simply being aware of and delighting in the manifestations of the sprouts when we do have them. In other words, we reinforce and strengthen our benevolent and righteous motivations when we act out of them with awareness and approval. As Mengzi puts it, "If one delights in them then they grow. If they grow then how can they be stopped? If they cannot be stopped, then without realizing it one's feet begin to step in time to them and one's hands dance according to their rhythms" (4A27).

Mengzi more than once says that people fail to develop morally simply because they do not engage in "reflection" (6A6, 6A15). The Chinese term can also mean "to concentrate upon" or "to long for," as when someone longs for an absent loved one (*Analects* 19.6). As Arthur Waley explains, "reflection" refers to

> a process that is only at a short remove from concrete observation. Never is there any suggestion of a long interior process of cogitation or ratiocination, in which a whole series of thoughts are evolved one out of another, producing on the physical plane a headache and on the intellectual, an abstract theory. We must think of [reflection] rather as a fixing of the attention . . . on an impression recently imbibed from without and destined to be immediately re-exteriorized in action.[ii]

Reflection is thus a mental activity with a focus that is both internal and external. One reflects upon one's own virtuous feelings, but one also reflects upon the aspects of situations that call forth those feelings.

A much-discussed dialogue between Mengzi and King Xuan of Qi illustrates the stages of moral development. Mengzi asks the king about how he had spared an ox being led to slaughter because, as the king put it, "I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground." Mengzi explains to the king that the kindness he showed to the ox is the same feeling he needs to exercise to be a great king. King Xuan is pleased and replies, "I examined myself and sought it out, but did not understand my heart. You spoke, and in my heart there was a feeling of compassion." Mengzi helped the king to *reflect upon* and appreciate his own innate kindness. This is an important first step in stimulating the growth of the king's sprouts of virtue. Then Mengzi challenges the king:

> In the present case your kindness is sufficient to reach birds and beasts, but the benefits do not reach the commoners. Why is this case alone different? Hence, not lifting one feather is due to not using one's strength. Not seeing a wagon of firewood is due to not using one's eyesight. The commoners not receiving care is due to not using one's kindness. Hence, Your Majesty's not being a genuine king is due to not acting; it is not due to not being able. (*Mengzi* 1A7; *Readings,* p. 120)

This dialogue raises many intriguing and complicated questions. Is Mengzi presenting some sort of *argument* to the king about why he ought to care for the commoners? Perhaps Mengzi is effectively saying to the king: you agree that it is right to show compassion on the suffering ox (Case A), but your people are also suffering due to your exorbitant taxes, wars of conquest, corrupt government, and so on (Case B). Case B is similar to Case A in all relevant respects. Therefore, in order to be consistent, you ought to show compassion on your people. Alternatively, perhaps Mengzi merely wishes to convince the king that he is *capable* of ruling with benevolence: you can show compassion for a simple animal, so certainly you can also show compassion for a suffering human.

My own view is that neither analysis is completely correct. I think Mengzi is leading the king to *reflect upon* relevant similarities between the suffering of the ox and the suffering of his subjects. But this is not an argument for simple consistency. After all, Mengzi also makes clear in the passage that slaughtering animals is ethically permissible, even if "gentlemen" are too kind-hearted to do it themselves. So Mengzi is asking the king to treat his subjects better than he treated the ox, not the same. Mengzi does want the king to recognize his own demonstrated capacity for compassion. However, it is not merely the capacity that Mengzi is getting at. He wants to frame the comparison between the ox and the commoners in a way that encourages the king's compassion to flow from one case to the other. For example, Mengzi reminds the king that he spared the ox because of its "frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground." He hopes the king will be led from this to reflect upon, and sympathize with, the suffering of his own innocent subjects. In other words, Mengzi is helping the king to achieve cognitive ethical growth as a means to achieving affective ethical growth.[3]

3. For more on "reflection," see *Mengzi* 4A1*, 4B20*, 6A6, and 6A15 and *Analects* 2.15 and 15.31.

Mengzi describes this process of ethical growth as "extending" or "filling out" the manifestations of the sprouts. In other words, all of us will have righteous or benevolent reactions to certain paradigmatic situations. We feel love for our parents, which is a manifestation of benevolence, or we disdain allowing ourselves to be addressed disrespectfully, which is a manifestation of righteousness. However, there are other situations in which we do not have these reactions, even though they are in the same "category" (3B3). For example, a person who would find it shameful to have an illicit affair might think nothing of lying to his ruler to achieve some political benefit. "Reflection" is the process by which we identify the relevant similarities between those cases in which we already have the appropriate reactions and other cases in which we do not yet react appropriately. This guides our emotions so that we come to feel similarly about the cases. Or, as Mengzi succinctly put it: "People all have things that they will not bear. To extend this reaction to that which they will bear is benevolence. People all have things that they will not do. To extend this reaction to that which they will do is righteousness" (7B31).

Extension is not a matter of learning to apply a set of explicit rules. Mengzi is not, in other words, a rule-deontologist. Mengzi is similar to Kongzi in having a comparatively particularistic conception of wisdom. For example, a rival philosopher once attempted to trap Mengzi with an ethical dilemma. He began by asking, "That men and women should not touch in handing something to one another—is this the ritual?" When Mengzi acknowledged that it is, his interlocutor asked, "If your sister-in-law were drowning, would you pull her out with your hand?" His opponent thinks that he has Mengzi trapped, but Mengzi replies,

> To not pull your sister-in-law out when she is drowning is to be a beast. That men and women should not touch in handing something to one another is the ritual, but if your sister-in-law is drowning to pull her out with your hand is discretion. (*Mengzi* 4A17)

The ritual Mengzi discusses might initially seem quaint or overly strict. But consider the fact that prudent teachers and bosses in our own society know that it is wise to avoid any unnecessary contact with their students or subordinates. But suppose you were standing near a student who was about to fall from a stepladder. Would you let the student fall or use your discretion and grab her?

This particularism is not relativism. Mengzi thinks that there is a best way to respond in any given situation, and it is not a matter of personal or cultural opinion. So after describing how differently sages of the past have acted,

Mengzi insists that if they "had exchanged places, they all would have done as the others did" (4B29; cf 4B1* and 4B31*). In addition, Mengzi does recognize some absolute ethical prohibitions. When asked if there is anything that all sages have in common, he explains that there is: "if any could obtain all under Heaven by performing one unrighteous deed, or killing one innocent person, he would not do it" (2A2). However, there is much more to the Confucian Way than can be captured in any set of rules.

Mengzi thinks that we generally have the capacity to "extend" to what is ethically required of us. Once, when someone gave him excuses for not immediately doing what is right, Mengzi replied,

> Suppose there is a person who every day appropriates one of his neighbor's chickens. Someone tells him, "This is not the Way of a gentleman." He says, "May I reduce it to appropriating one chicken every month, and wait until next year to stop?" If one knows that it is not righteous, then one should quickly stop. (*Mengzi* 3B8*)

However, Mengzi stresses the importance of acting with appropriate feelings and motivations. Thus, Mengzi praises Sage-King Shun by saying that "he acted out of benevolence and righteousness. He did not act out benevolence and righteousness" (4B19). To force oneself to do what one abstractly believes is right is to treat virtue as "external" (6A4–5). This not only fails to be genuinely virtuous, it is ethically damaging. Mengzi illustrates this using another agricultural metaphor, the story of the farmer from Song:

> One must work at it, but do not aim at it directly. Let the heart not forget, but do not "help" it grow. Do not be like the man from Song. Among the people of the state of Song there was one who, concerned lest his grain not grow, pulled on it. Wearily, he returned home, and said to his family, "Today I am worn out. I helped the grain to grow." His son rushed out and looked at it. The grain was withered. Those in the world who do not "help" the grain to grow are few. Those who abandon it, thinking it will not help, are those who do not weed their grain. Those who "help" it grow are those who pull on their grain. Not only does this not actually help, but it even harms it. (*Mengzi* 2A2; *Readings,* p. 127)

To use a modern illustration, I cannot simply decide today that I will be the next Mother Teresa and expect to suddenly have the unwavering compassion to save the world. If I tried to do so, I would fail, and probably end up being a bitter cynic. Instead, I should begin by showing more consistent kindness to my family and friends and gradually grow into a better person.

V. Cosmology

Mengzi situates his philosophical anthropology in a broader worldview: "To fathom one's heart is to understand one's nature. If one understands one's nature, then one understands Heaven" (7A1). For Mengzi, Heaven is not as anthropomorphic as it was for the Mohists (whose Heaven is as personal as the God of the mainstream Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions), but neither is it as naturalized as it was for later Confucians like Xunzi. So, on the one hand, Mengzi sometimes treats Heaven as almost identical with the natural (and amoral) course of events (2B1*, 4A7*). But, on the other hand, Heaven provides a moral standard. Thus, Mengzi approvingly quotes an ode that says: "Heaven gives birth to the teaming people. / If there is a thing, there is a norm" (6A6). We see both the naturalistic and the moral aspects of Heaven in 1B3*, where Mengzi discusses the problem of diplomacy between powerful and weak states: "Those who serve the small with the big delight in Heaven; those who serve the big with the small are in awe of Heaven." In other words, it should be the case (normatively) that the powerful are generous enough to serve the weak. But it is the case (descriptively) that antagonizing powerful states has dangerous consequences.

The complexity of Mengzi's view is also evident in his comments about political justification. He stresses that Heaven is the ultimate source of political legitimacy. However, Heaven primarily manifests itself in the reactions of the common people rather than in any supernatural agency: "Hence, I say that Heaven does not speak but simply reveals the mandate through actions and affairs" (5A5*). Heaven is a causal agent that affects the course of human history: "When no one does it, yet it is done—this is due to Heaven. When no one extends to it yet it is reached—this is fate." (5A6*). Nonetheless, when "gentlemen" find themselves unable to restore order to the world, they must not be "bitter toward Heaven" (2B13). Rather, they must accept Heaven's will while still striving to make the world a better place (7A1).

In order to persevere in the face of adversity without becoming bitter, one must cultivate one's *qì* 氣. This is one of the most intriguing yet difficult-to-understand aspects of Mengzi's thought. *Qi* has been rendered various ways, including "ether," "material force," and "psychophysical stuff." There is really no adequate translation, because this is a concept for which we have no precise analogue. For Mengzi and his contemporaries, *qi* is a kind of fluid, found in the atmosphere and in the human body, closely connected to the kind and

intensity of one's emotional reactions. *Qi* therefore straddles the dualism between mind and body that has become a fixture of post-Cartesian philosophy in the West: *qi* is physically embodied emotion. Here are two examples that give an intuitive understanding of *qi.*

1. You are with a group of people in someone's living room, having a pleasant, casual conversation. Someone tries to make an offhand joke, but it sounds like a cutting personal criticism of another guest. It seems as if the literal atmosphere in the room has suddenly changed, like there is something palpably heavy in the air, making further conversation difficult and awkward. That "something" is a kind of negative *qi,* which is both expression and reinforcement of the feelings of those present.[4]
2. Imagine a beautiful April morning. The sun is already bright when you arise. The air smells crisp and fresh. You feel energized for the day ahead. You laugh off any minor problems and annoyances. Your positive mood is partially a product of absorbing some of the vibrant *qi* that circulates on this spring day.[5]

These examples should not lead us to assume that we are purely passive to the influence of the *qi.* Our hearts can resist the effects of negative *qi,* such as when I refuse to allow my fear to dissuade me from doing what I know is right. Mengzi describes this as "maintaining one's will." However, for success in the long run I cannot continue to force myself to act against the promptings of the *qi.* To do so would be to "injure one's *qi,*" eventually producing a person who is dispirited (whose *qi* is "starved"). Instead, one must cultivate an ethically informed *qi* ("a *qi* that harmonizes with righteousness and the Way"). This *qi* gives one the moral stamina to persevere in the face of dangers, challenges, and setbacks. Among the highly cultivated, this reservoir of fortitude is so deep that it is essentially inexhaustible (or "floodlike," as Mengzi puts it). The way to develop this *qi* is simply through the gradual cultivation of the sprouts of virtue (2A2; *Readings,* pp. 126–27).

VI. Historical Significance

Mengzi claimed that he had developed the "floodlike *qi,*" and it turned out that he needed the fortitude that comes with it; he spent much of his adult life wandering from state to state, hoping to find a ruler who would put the Way into practice, but his efforts failed. He refused to meet with rulers unless they treated him with the ritual propriety due a distinguished advisor. This might seem arrogant, and his disciples encouraged him to bend his principles in order to obtain audiences with more rulers. However, Mengzi said that there was no hope in transforming a ruler who did not demonstrate that he was willing to accept his guidance: "those who bend themselves have never been able to make others upright" (3B1*; 2B10*). Sometimes rulers did meet with him and praised his teachings but did not give him any official position. He did accept a position as high minister in the state of Qi, but he resigned when it became clear that the king was ignoring his advice (2B6–12*; 2B13).

Mengzi eventually retired from public service and, with the help of some of his disciples, edited his collected sayings and dialogues. Like Kongzi, Gandhi, or Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., he was a person actively engaged in the struggle for positive social change. However, he never saw the social transformation he worked for, which saddened him. Toward the end of his life, he moaned, "From Kongzi to the present time is a little more than one hundred years. It is not long from the era of a sage, and we are close to the home of a sage. Yet where is he? Where is he?" (7B38*). Nonetheless, Mengzi assured his disciples that he was not bitter: he had faith that Heaven would, in its own time, raise up a sage to bring peace to the world (2B13).

Ironically, it was not until more than a thousand years after Mengzi's death that he achieved his greatest influence. When the movement known in English as Neo-Confucianism revived Confucianism as an alternative to Buddhism, it praised Mengzi as the Second Sage (after only Kongzi himself). Thinkers such as Han Yu, Zhu Xi, and Wang Yangming, although they disagreed about much else, agreed that Mengzi was the one who truly understood the Way that Kongzi transmitted, and made *explicit* many things that were only *implied* in the sayings of Kongzi. In particular, Mengzi's doctrine that human nature is good was implicit in the teachings of Kongzi.

I am not sure the Neo-Confucians were right that Mengzi simply made explicit what was implicit in Kongzi's thought. Although Kongzi says next to nothing about human nature, his comments about the difficulty of cultivating virtue sound much more like those of Xunzi, the later Confucian critic of Mengzi who claimed "human nature is bad" (Chapter 10). Kongzi approves of the comparison between ethical cultivation and the laborious process of grinding and carving jade (1.15), while Xunzi compares ethical cultivation to steaming and bending wood into a wagon wheel, or grinding a metal blade until it is sharp (*Readings,* pp. 256–57). These are precisely the sort of metaphors for ethical cultivation to which Mengzi objects (6A1). I think that the Neo-Confucians were also guilty of anachronism in attributing to Mengzi

4. Compare this to Mengzi's example in 7A36* of the effect of an august person's *qi* on how one feels in his presence.

5. Compare this to Mengzi's example in 6A8 of the effects of morning and evening *qi* on restoring one's ethical feelings.

certain metaphysical concepts that only developed much later in Chinese thought.[iii]

However, I heartily agree with the Neo-Confucians that Mengzi deserves his place as not only one of the greatest Confucian sages but as one of the greatest philosophers in world history. In particular, he provided a unique and inspiring vision of humans as having innate but incipient dispositions toward virtue that require cultivation in order to reach full maturity.

Review Questions

1. According to tradition, "Meng's mother moved thrice" and "Meng's mother cut the weft." Why did she do these things?
2. What does Mengzi mean by "benevolent government"?
3. According to Mengzi, what activity is like "climbing a tree in search of a fish"?
4. Explain Mengzi's argument that aiming at profit or benefit is self-defeating.
5. What is the position of the Mohist Yi Zhi, and why does Mengzi think that it is incoherent?
6. What does Mengzi mean by the claim that "human nature is good"?
7. Explain the thought experiment of the child at the well. What point do you take Mengzi to be arguing for?
8. Explain the story of Ox Mountain. What claim do you take Mengzi to be illustrating with this metaphor?
9. What are Mengzi's four cardinal virtues? Give an example of how each one manifests itself.
10. Explain the story of King Xuan and the ox. What are at least two interpretations of what Mengzi is trying to achieve in his discussion with Xuan?
11. Explain how extension occurs. What is the role of reflection in this process?
12. Explain the story of the farmer from Song. What claim do you believe Mengzi is illustrating with this metaphor?
13. In what ways does Mengzi conceive of Heaven as like a personal God, and in what ways does he conceive of it as simply the impersonal operations of the universe?
14. Give a concrete example to illustrate what *qi* is. Why does Mengzi think it is important to cultivate one's *qi*? How does one cultivate it?
15. What later movement praised Mengzi as the Second Sage? What did they think was especially important about him?

■ 7 ■

LANGUAGE AND PARADOX IN THE "SCHOOL OF NAMES"

I left for Yue today but arrived yesterday.
—Hui Shi

Thinkers in the "School of Names" argued for paradoxical conclusions like Gongsun Long's claim that "a white horse is not a horse."

6. Tell the story of the butcher carving up the ox. What do you think this story illustrates?
7. What is one significant similarity between the philosophy of the *Daodejing* and that of the *Zhuangzi*? What is one important difference?
8. Why are sages like Master Chariot unafraid of illness and death?
9. Explain the difference between the most radical vision of sagehood and the "wistful Daoist."
10. Tell the story of the butterfly dream. What do you think this story illustrates?
11. Apply your understanding of Zhuangzi to the story of Minnow and Breeze that opens the text. How could you interpret it as suggesting relativism? How could you read the story as skeptical? How might you interpret it as contrasting the perspective of the sage with that of ordinary people?

■ 10 ■

XUNZI'S CONFUCIAN NATURALISM

Since people's nature is bad, they must await teachers and proper models, and only then do they become correct in their behavior.

—Xunzi

Xunzi is one of the most systematic Confucian philosophers.

I. Xunzi's Context

Xunzi lived near the end of the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE) and may have seen the unification of China under the Qin dynasty. Xunzi's extensive and wide-ranging writings discuss ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of language, and psychology, and he is acknowledged today as one of the greatest ancient philosophers. He spent a significant portion of his career at the Jixia Academy, a think tank created by the ruler of Qi to bring together the greatest minds of his era to study, teach, and provide advice to the state.

At the Academy, Xunzi learned much from the views of other philosophers. Like the Mohists, Xunzi employs the expository essay style as a vehicle for philosophy and appeals to a state-of-nature argument to justify government. Like Yang Zhu, Xunzi holds that human nature is ultimately self-centered and that the Confucian Way is artificial. Like Zhuangzi, Xunzi takes the activity of craftspeople as a model for following the Way: Zhuangzi's butcher and Xunzi's sage both gradually learn to act in accordance with the pattern of the world. Above all, though, Xunzi is a Confucian. He brilliantly synthesizes elements from other philosophers into a defense of the Way of Kongzi. For Xunzi, the most important elements of Kongzi's thought are his emphases on ritual, learning, and the arduousness of transforming human motivations, like working jade: "As if cut, as if polished; / As if carved, as if ground" (*Analects* 1.15). However, Xunzi did not hesitate to criticize his fellow Confucian Mengzi, whose claim that human nature is good "does not match the test of experience" (303). The reality, Xunzi claims, is that "people's nature is bad, and their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort" (298).

II. Naturalism and Ritual

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that attempts to answer the question: What are the most fundamental types of things that exist? Naturalism is the metaphysical view that all that exists is ultimately reducible to the entities studied by natural science (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.). If we accept that definition, Xunzi cannot be classified as a naturalist, because he lived before the development of the natural sciences as we now understand them. However, Xunzi does share one of the core commitments distinctive of naturalism. He denies teleology (the view that the universe has some intentional goal): "The activities of Heaven are constant. They do not persist because of Yao. They do not perish because of Jie" (269).

Since nature is not goal directed, we must reject the appeal to omens and spiritual entities to explain phenomena:

> If stars fall or trees cry out, the people of the state are filled with fear and say, "What is this?" I say: It is nothing. These are simply rarely occurring things among the changes in Heaven and earth and the transformations of *yin* and *yang*. To marvel at them is alright, but to fear them is not. Eclipses of the sun and moon, unseasonable winds and rains, unexpected appearances of strange stars—there is no age in which such things do not occur. (*Xunzi* 17; *Readings*, pp. 271–72)

Mengzi did not express any interest in omens, but he did have a teleological view of Heaven. He saw it as guiding history so that, in the long run, those with Virtue will rule, bringing peace and prosperity to the people (*Mengzi* 2B13). Another aspect of Mengzi's teleology was his view that Heaven implants in us our virtuous nature (*Mengzi* 7A1). We'll see that Xunzi challenges this second aspect of Mengzi's thought as well.

Because the universe does not have a teleological structure, rituals cannot be instrumental to achieving their superficial goals. However, they may serve an alternative purpose:

> 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)

We quoted this passage in Chapter 2, where we noted that it suggests functionalism, the position developed millennia later in the West, according to which the best way to understand rituals is in terms of the social and psychological needs that they meet. Xunzi clearly sees one of the functions of ritual as providing a means for giving form to and expressing one's emotions:

> When the feelings that come to him stir him greatly but are deprived of an outlet and stopped, then with regard to the refined expression of remembrance he will feel anguished and unsatisfied, and his practice of

> ritual and proper regulation will be lacking and incomplete. And so, the former kings accordingly established a proper form for it, and thereby was set what is righteous in venerating those esteemed and loving those intimate. Thus I say: The sacrificial rites are the refined expression of remembrance and longing. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings,* p. 284)

Xunzi illustrates this by explaining the expressive purpose behind certain rituals:

> The standard practice of funeral rites is that one changes the appearance of the corpse by gradually adding more ornamentations, one moves the corpse gradually further away, and over a long time one gradually returns to one's regular routine. Thus, the way that death works is that if one does not ornament the dead, then one will come to feel disgust at them, and if one feels disgust, then one will not feel sad. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings,* pp. 279–80)

Rituals do not just provide an outlet for emotions we already have. One of the most important functions of ritual is to reshape our motivations. Xunzi uses a state-of-nature argument to justify the importance of ritual for this purpose:

> From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desires, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they strugle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and the standards of righteousness in order to allot things to people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose. Thus, ritual is a means of nurture. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings,* p. 274)

The Mohists had earlier used state-of-nature arguments, but Xunzi starts from different assumptions and therefore arrives at a different conclusion. The Mohists held that human motivations are highly malleable. For them, conflict in the state of nature results from the fact that in the absence of central authority, humans will have widely varying conceptions of righteousness.[1]

1. *Yi* 義, rendered "norms" in the translation of *Mozi* 11; *Readings,* pp. 65–68.

In contrast, Xunzi held that we share a common human nature and that it is characterized primarily by self-interest:

> As for the way that the eyes like pretty colors, the ears like beautiful sounds, the mouth likes good flavors, the heart likes what is beneficial, and the bones and flesh like what is comfortable—these are produced from people's inborn dispositions and nature. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings,* p. 300)

Because the objects of desire are always limited, each of us seeking to benefit ourselves without restraint will lead to chaos in the state of nature:

> Liking what is beneficial and desiring gain are people's inborn dispositions and nature. Suppose there were brothers who had some property to divide, and that they followed the fondness for benefit and desire for gain in their inborn dispositions and nature. If they were to do so, then the brothers would conflict and contend with each other for it. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings,* p. 301)

In order to address this conflict and save the people from their own natures, the ancient sage-kings

> set up the power of rulers and superiors in order to control them. They made clear ritual and the standards of righteousness in order to transform them. They set up laws and standards in order to manage them. They multiplied punishments and fines in order to restrain them. As a result, they caused all under Heaven to become well ordered and conform to the Way. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings,* p. 302)

Rituals and the standards of righteousness coordinate human desires and material goods in two ways. First, they establish rules for who is entitled to which of the limited material resources available. For example, it is traditional that the eldest brother, not a younger brother, inherits the land that belonged to his father. Similarly, kings are entitled to palaces and regal clothes, while farmers have simple huts and functional work clothes. Elders are served first and get the choicest foods, while youngsters must wait their turn. Consequently, rituals justify differential treatment and privileges. However, everyone is better off with rituals and righteousness than they would be without them, because they allow us to escape the chaotic state of nature.

The rituals do not merely set rules for entitlement, though. They are effective because they reshape human motivations. Xunzi's argument is that because

humans are innately self-interested they have to be transformed via ritual or they will never successfully live in harmony. The Mohist political program will fail, Xunzi suggests, because it ignores our innate motivations and the effort required to transform them. Xunzi illustrates this with the example of music:

> Music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition. So, people cannot be without music; if they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape in movement. . . . So, people cannot be without joy, and their joy cannot be without shape, but if it takes shape and does not accord with the Way, then there will inevitably be chaos. (*Xunzi* 20; *Readings,* p. 285)

As we saw in Chapter 4, the Mohists condemn musical performances as wasteful and suggest eliminating them (see *Mozi* 32; *Readings,* pp. 105–10). They see no difficulty in achieving this because they assume human motivations are highly malleable. Xunzi counters that humans are recalcitrant: we cannot change the fact that humans wish to express emotions in music. But while our motivations are innate, the Way is not. Consequently, we must reshape our dispositions through ritual and particular forms of music so that we can live harmoniously together in society:

> And so, if a person puts even one measure of effort into following ritual and the standards of righteousness, he will get back twice as much. If he puts even one measure of effort into following his nature and inborn dispositions, he will lose twice as much. And so, the Confucians are those who will cause people to gain twice as much, and the Mohists are those who will cause people to lose twice as much. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings,* p. 275)

III. History and Objectivity

If humans need to be reshaped by the rituals and standards of righteousness developed by the sages, how did the sages develop them in the first place? Xunzi frequently draws analogies between the sages and craftspeople. Let's follow out that analogy in more detail. Humans need sharp implements for hunting, butchering, and warfare. In ancient times, a craftsperson surmised that a blade made out of bronze would be superior to the flint ones in use at the time, because the bronze blades could have a larger cutting surface and would be less brittle. The craftsperson smelted the bronze, then used a hammer and anvil to forge it. The result was the beginning of the Bronze Age, which offered superior solutions to human needs.

Similarly, the ancient sages recognized a problem that humans faced: "people were deviant, dangerous, and not correct in their behavior, and they were unruly, chaotic, and not well ordered" (302). As a result of this, "the strong would harm the weak and take from them. The many would tyrannize the few and shout them down" (302). Even those who were momentarily dominant lived in fear, knowing that their position was always unstable. Using their imagination and intelligence, the sages invented a solution to save people from this problem: "They made clear ritual and the standards of righteousness in order to transform them" (302). Just as creating and using bronze blades was a better answer to the human need for a cutting implement, so was creating and using ritual and standards of righteousness a better way to live than the chaotic state of nature.

Neither the craftsperson nor the sage creates according to some innate pattern. (After all, our brain is not hardwired with the knowledge of how to smelt bronze and forge it into blades.) Their products are the result of "deliberate effort":

> Thus, when the potter mixes clay and makes vessels, the vessels are produced from the deliberate efforts of the craftsman; they are not produced from people's nature. Thus, when the craftsman carves wood and makes utensils, the utensils are produced from the deliberate efforts of the craftsman; they are not produced from people's nature. . . . So, ritual and standards of righteousness and proper models and measures are produced from the deliberate efforts of the sage; they are not produced from people's nature. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings,* p. 300)

Does Xunzi want us to view the invention of ritual and the standards of righteousness as something that happened all at once in the distant past, or as something that gradually accumulated over many generations? The craftsperson analogy suggests the latter, since technology develops piecemeal and over time. Just within the few centuries since Kongzi, Xunzi's world had seen the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. There are some passages that indicate Xunzi had a similar view of the Way: "The sages *accumulated* reflections and deliberations and practiced deliberate efforts and reasoned activities in order to produce ritual and standards of righteousness and to establish proper models and measures."[2] This invites us to imagine a gradual accumula-

2. You will find a version of this sentence on p. 300 of *Readings,* but in the translation there the subject of the sentence is singular, "the sage," and the central verbs are in the

tion of rituals and standards of righteousness over time. Perhaps the earliest sages recognized only that everyone would be happier and civilization would be more likely to survive if we adopted a standard of righteousness in warfare: "It is wrong to kill the children of your enemy." Over many generations, sages built upon this, adding more and more rituals and standards of righteousness, until they reached what they considered to be the ideal form.

The craftsperson analogy also adopts ideas taken from Zhuangzi to construct a response to his relativistic and skeptical arguments. Zhuangzi suggests (at least sometimes) that just as "this" and "that" depend upon one's perspective, so is the Way nothing more than a matter of what one "regards as right" or "regards as wrong." However, Zhuangzi also indicates that we can learn "how to care for life" by observing the almost miraculous effectiveness of craftspeople, like the butcher who slaughters an ox. The butcher's skill results from the fact that he is able to "rely on the Heavenly patterns," the natural makeup of the ox's body, as he carves. Because of how the butcher, his blade, and the ox carcass relate to one another, there is a right way (and many wrong ways) for him to carve. And this is not simply a matter of perspective.[3]

Xunzi appeals to the same language of "patterns" to describe how the sage develops the Way: "benevolence, righteousness, lawfulness, and correctness have patterns that can be known and can be practiced" (304). He says of ritual in particular that "[i]n its differentiations of things, it is the utmost in patterning. In its explanations, it is the utmost in keen discernment. Those under Heaven who follow it will have good order. Those who do not follow it will have chaos" (276). So while Xunzi agrees with Zhuangzi and Yang Zhu that the Confucian Way is the result of artifice, he argues that, just as there is a best way for a butcher to carve an ox, so there is a best set of practices and institutions to regulate and transform humans so that they can live harmoniously with each other and their environment. Because he sees ritual as a pattern of such power and scope, Xunzi waxes rhapsodic about it:

> By ritual, Heaven and earth harmoniously combine;
> By ritual, the sun and moon radiantly shine;
> By ritual, the four seasons in progression arise;
> By ritual, the stars move orderly across the skies;
> . . .

present tense, "accumulates" and "practices." Both translations are possible, because Chinese grammar does not mark number or tense. The issue is whether the sentence refers primarily to a process sages in each generation engage in to transform themselves and others, or to a gradual development that occurred over many generations, through the piecemeal accomplishments of the sages.

3. See the discussion of the butcher in Chapter 9.

> By ritual, for love and hate proper measure is made;
> By ritual, on joy and anger fit limits are laid.
> By ritual, compliant subordinates are created,
> By ritual, enlightened leaders are generated. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings,* p. 276)

How does Xunzi reconcile his suggestion that ritual governs the transformations of the four seasons and the motions of the stars with his comparison of ritual to the fabrications of craftspeople? After all, the former image implies that rituals are cosmic principles that humans discover, while the latter suggests that they are invented. There does not need to be a tension between the two views, though. A bronze sword is an invention, a product of the deliberate effort of the craftsperson, but its invention is not arbitrary. It is based on the human purposes it is intended to serve and the characteristics and capacities of bronze. This is why the Bronze Age dawned in multiple civilizations independently, despite the fact that our primate brains are not hard-wired to smelt bronze. Similarly, human rituals are invented, but they are based upon the patterns of Heaven, earth, and humans. Xunzi is explicit that sages bring all three into harmony:

> When the grasses and trees are flowering and abundant, then axes and hatchets are not to enter the mountains and forests, so as not to cut short their life, and not to break off their growth. When the turtles and crocodiles, fish and eels are pregnant and giving birth, then nets and poisons are not to enter the marshes, so as not to cut short their life, and not to break off their growth. Plow in the spring, weed in the summer, harvest in the fall and store in the winter. . . . Cutting and nurturing are not to miss their proper times, and then the mountains and forests will not be barren, and the common people will have surplus materials. (*Xunzi* 9; *Readings,* p. 268)

Thus, we can metaphorically think of larger cosmic phenomena as extensions of the patterns of ritual. The comparison of ritual to the rules governing the motions of the stars suggests that both are eternal and unchangeable. Xunzi does seem to embrace this conclusion: "Is not ritual perfect indeed! It establishes a lofty standard that is the ultimate of its kind, and none under Heaven can add to or subtract from it" (276).

IV. Human Nature and Psychology

Xunzi sketches an account of how the sages invented the Way. But if our innate dispositions are opposed to the Way, how is it possible for anyone to

learn to follow it? Part of Xunzi's answer is that humans do not necessarily follow their own desires. He illustrates this with the example of those who sacrifice their lives for the sake of righteousness:

> Life is what people most desire, and death is what people most despise. However, when people let go of life and bring about their own death, this is not because they do not desire life and instead desire death. Rather, it is because they do not approve of living under these circumstances, but do approve of dying under these circumstances. (*Xunzi* 22; *Readings,* p. 297)

What is the distinction that Xunzi wishes to draw between desire and approval? Paradigmatic desires are our largely innate cravings, especially for the objects of the senses. Approval is a kind of evaluation, so it is based on a conception of the Way.

The passage above seems to be a response to *Mengzi* 6A10, which claims that people choose to die only because they desire righteousness even more than they desire life. The centrality of desire to human motivation is not an ethical problem for Mengzi, though, because he thinks we innately desire righteousness. Our task in self-cultivation is to develop and strengthen these desires so that we act consistently in accordance with them. Xunzi regards our innate desires as self-interested, though, so Mengzi's solution is not open to him. Instead, Xunzi postulates that we are capable of overriding our desires. We do not necessarily follow our desires but instead act out of what our heart approves, which is based on our conception of the Way. Because this attributes an ethical capacity to the heart, it might seem to be equivalent to Mengzi's position. However, for Mengzi, the innate motivations of the heart have specific content: we all sometimes show disdain for shameful behavior; we all sometimes manifest compassion for the suffering of others. Xunzi's position seems to be that the approval of the heart is empty until it is given a specific content. One person might be taught by his culture that possessing wealth is identical with living well, so he will pursue wealth far beyond what is necessary for the satisfaction of his physical desires. Think of the contemporary celebrities who own a dozen mansions around the world, each

Fact: *The English expression "gung ho," meaning "very or overly enthusiastic," is originally Chinese. True, but the story is complicated. In World War II, a U.S. officer hoped to inspire in his soldiers the same team spirit and dedication he saw among his Chinese friends, so he adopted an expression he thought meant "work together in harmony." Unfortunately, the Chinese gōnghé 工合 is actually an abbreviation for Association of Industrial Cooperatives.*

with swimming pools, a garage for a dozen cars, and a score of bedrooms. It seems unlikely that anyone actually has physical desires that can only be satisifed by this level of consumption. Instead, they are motivated by their conception of how they ought to live. "When the desire is lacking but one's action surpasses it, this is because the heart compels it. If what the heart approves misses the proper patterns, then even if the desires are few, how would it stop short of chaos?" (297).

In contrast, another person might long for some fine clothes that he cannot afford to buy. But if he has learned from the Way of the sages to disapprove of stealing, he will not act on this desire. "Thus, when the desire is excessive but one's action does not match it, this is because the heart prevents it. If what the heart approves conforms to the proper patterns, then even if one's desires are many, what harm would they be to good order?" (297).

In Xunzi's terminology, approval is a kind of "deliberation," the heart's choice among desires:

> The feelings of liking and disliking, happiness and anger, and sadness and joy in one's nature are called the "dispositions." When there is a certain disposition and the heart makes a choice on its behalf, this is called "deliberation." When the heart deliberates and one's abilities act on it, this is called "deliberate effort." That which comes into being through accumulated deliberations and training of one's abilities is also called "deliberate effort." (*Xunzi* 22; *Readings,* p. 292)

If I have a desire to eat a second piece of cheesecake for dessert, this is a disposition of my nature. My heart will deliberate on this disposition and may choose to disapprove of it (if I have learned a Way that endorses moderate consumption of sweets). Forgoing the cheesecake is an example of deliberate effort, and it may prove difficult to do at first, but by repeatedly engaging in deliberate effort, I can train myself so that I am no longer tempted to have the second piece of cheesecake.

So, our physical desires are certainly part of our nature. It is not clear whether Xunzi regards the heart's *capacity* to deliberate as also part of our nature. He might acknowledge this. However, given what he says elsewhere, it is clear that the deliberate effort of the heart and its products are not part of one's nature. Through deliberate effort, we transcend our nature and establish social distinctions. Xunzi claims that these distinctions are what sets humans apart from other animals:

> Thus, that by which humans are human is not that they are special in having two legs and no feathers, but that they have distinctions. The

> birds and beasts have fathers and sons but not the intimate relationship of father and son. They have the male sex and the female sex but no differentiation between male and female. And so among human ways, none is without distinctions. Of distinctions, none are greater than social divisions, and of social divisions, none are greater than rituals, and of rituals, none are greater than those of the sage-kings. (*Xunzi* 5; *Readings,* p. 266)

Arguably, social animals like ants and wolves *do* have recognizable social distinctions, so Xunzi may have failed to specify a characteristic unique to humans. However, what is most important is his claim that such distinctions are artificial yet essential to human life.

Xunzi's slogan to describe his position is "human nature is bad," which he formulates as a denial of Mengzi's claim that human nature is good. However, there has been extensive debate about exactly what Xunzi means by this and whether he really disagrees with Mengzi. One thing is clear: Xunzi does not wish to assert that human nature is *evil.* Philosophers like Augustine who claim that human nature is evil hold that people are innately capable of doing evil for the sake of evil. In his *Confessions* Augustine notes that humans sometimes do wrong in order to obtain some good for themselves, like stealing to obtain expensive luxuries. Augustine argues that it is always a mistake to do wrong. Someone who steals obtains a lesser good (like the temporary admiration of one's contemporaries for one's fine clothes) at the expense of a greater good (the health of one's eternal soul). Nonetheless, motivations of greed and lust manifest a sort of limited reasonableness. We know *why* someone is doing wrong. However, Augustine argues, appealing to his own experiences, that humans sometimes do wrong even when it does not benefit them. When he was a teenager, Augustine and some of his friends stole some pears from a nearby orchard even though they were not hungry and had access to better fruit than the ones they took. They simply threw the pears away after they stole them. Thus, Augustine and his friends did not satisfy any sensual desire or benefit themselves in any way by stealing the pears. So why did they do it? They did it because it was forbidden. Augustine is aware that this youthful action was hardly a serious crime. But he is disturbed by what he thinks the action reveals: *humans can do wrong simply because it is wrong.* This is what Augustine means in claiming that human nature is evil.

Xunzi suggests nothing quite as dire as this. Part of what Xunzi means by saying that human nature is bad is that if we follow our innate dispositions, they will lead us to do wrong: if we all try to benefit ourselves and satisfy our sensual desires without any constraints, we will end up in a state of conflict and chaos.

Would Mengzi actually disagree with this? When Mengzi states that human nature is good, he means that we have innate but incipient tendencies toward virtue, but he stresses that we must cultivate these tendencies in order to achieve full virtue: "It is the way of people that if they are full of food, have warm clothes, and live in comfort, but are without instruction, then they come close to being animals" (*Mengzi* 3A4). Perhaps Xunzi misinterpreted Mengzi's stance on human nature. Further support for this hypothesis comes from consideration of the specific arguments that Xunzi directs against Mengzi:

> Mengzi says: When people engage in learning, this manifests the goodness of their nature. I say: This is not so. . . . In every case, the nature of a thing is the accomplishment of Heaven. It cannot be learned. It cannot be worked at. . . . Now people's nature is such that their eyes can see, and their ears can hear. The keenness by which they see does not depart from their eyes, and the acuity by which they hear does not depart from their ears. Their eyes are simply keen, and their ears are simply acute; it is clear that one does not learn these things. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings,* pp. 299–300)

Xunzi argues that human nature cannot be good, because if it were, goodness could not be something that we can get better at through ethical education. If human nature were already good, then "what use would there be for sage-kings? What use for ritual and the standards of righteousness?" (302). Notice, though, that Mengzi means something very different by "human nature." For Mengzi, the nature of a sprout is to grow into a mature plant and produce its own sprouts. It is a *process* for the sprout to realize its nature, requiring a supportive environment, which is not something it possesses automatically. Similarly, when Mengzi states that human nature is good, he means that humans have an active potential to become good, not that they are good already.

So, in the interpretation above, the views of Mengzi and Xunzi do not directly conflict, because they mean different things by "human nature." This is certainly part of the story. But Xunzi would disagree with Mengzi even if he had understood more clearly what he meant. It is not that Xunzi agrees about the existence of the "sprouts" of virtue but simply does not wish to refer to them as "human nature." Xunzi denies that we have even the incipient tendencies toward virtue in our nature. Contrast Mengzi's sprout metaphors with Xunzi's preferred metaphors for ethical cultivation:

> Through steaming and bending, you can make wood straight as a plumb line into a wheel. And after its curve conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun it will not become straight

> again, because the steaming and bending have made it a certain way. Likewise, when wood comes under the ink-line, it becomes straight, and when metal is brought to the whetstone, it becomes sharp. The gentleman learns broadly and examines himself thrice daily, and then his knowledge is clear and his conduct is without fault. (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings,* pp. 256–57)

Xunzi suggests that bringing our nature into conformity with the Way is like the forced bending of a plank of wood into a wheel. This is precisely the model that Mengzi rejects in his debate with Gaozi (*Mengzi* 6A1). Mengzi objects to its unappealing consequence, that to follow the Way we must warp our nature (just as the nature of the wood is warped when we carve it into cups and bowls). But Xunzi embraces this conclusion. Indeed, Xunzi seems to accept Gaozi's basic claim: "The desires for food and sex are nature" (6A4).

The differences between Mengzi and Xunzi are crucial for interpreting the so-called ladder of souls passage:

> Water and fire have *qi* but are without life. Grasses and trees have life but are without awareness. Birds and beasts have awareness but are without standards of righteousness. Humans have *qi* and life and awareness, and moreover they have standards of righteousness. And so they are the most precious thing under Heaven. (*Xunzi* 9; *Readings,* p. 267)

Water and fire represent two complementary kinds of *qi:* water is a paradigm of what is *yin* (dark, passive, cool, flowing downward, etc.), while fire is an exemplar of *yang* (light, active, hot, rising upward, etc.). Plants have *qi,* but are also alive; animals have *qi* and life but also awareness of their surroundings. Humans have *qi,* life, awareness but also standards of righteousness. This last phrase is a translation of the Chinese *yi,* which is usually rendered simply as "righteousness." The translation used in *Readings* reflects the view that Mengzi and Xunzi understand righteousness very differently. For Mengzi, righteousness is an expression of our innate but incipient virtuous inclinations. For Xunzi, righteousness is an artificial construct, invented by the sages to meet the human need for society. After presenting the ladder of souls, Xunzi notes that humans

> are not as strong as oxen or as fast as horses, but oxen and horses are used by them. How is this so? I say: It is because humans are able to form communities while the animals cannot. Why are humans able to form communities? I say: It is because of social divisions. How can social divisions be put into practice? I say: It is because of standards of righteousness. (*Xunzi* 9; *Readings,* p. 267)

This understanding of "righteousness" as referring to *standards* of righteousness fits what Xunzi says in other contexts, especially since he very frequently pairs ritual and righteousness. Ritual is also an external construct of the sages. However, there is an alternative interpretation. Perhaps "righteousness" in the ladder of souls passage refers to a *capacity* to learn a Way, but a *contentless* capacity, in the sense that it does not innately favor any particular Way. Xunzi's comparison of ethical cultivation to language acquisition suggests this interpretation: "The children of the Han, Yue, Yi, and Mo peoples all cry with the same sound at birth, but when grown they have different customs, because teaching makes them be this way" (257). At birth, humans have a capacity to acquire a language, but they are not born knowing a language or even with a disposition to speak any one particular language. Similarly, Xunzi believes, we are born with a capacity to learn ritual and to guide our innate desires with it. But we are not born with a disposition toward any particular set of rituals. Xunzi may use the term "righteousness" to refer to this contentless capacity to learn ritual.

Another puzzling passage for understanding the differences between Mengzi and Xunzi occurs in the latter's discussion of mourning rituals:

> Among all the living things between Heaven and earth, those that have blood and *qi* are sure to have awareness, and of those that have awareness, none does not love its own kind. Now if one of the great birds or beasts loses its group of companions, then after a month or a season has passed, it is sure to retrace its former path and go by its old home. . . . Among creatures that have blood and *qi,* none has greater awareness than man, and so man's feeling for his parents knows no limit until the day they die. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings,* p. 283)

Both in this passage and in *Mengzi* 3A5, the origin of funerals or mourning is the affection of the living for the deceased; both passages suggest that these feelings are nearly universal. Xunzi seems to acknowledge here that there is more to human nature than just self-interested desires for things like food and sex. Humans innately love their parents and thus have an innate need to grieve over their loss in some way.

Is Xunzi really a Mengzian, whether he knows it or not? Xunzi's position seems different from that of Mengzi in at least one important respect. For Mengzi, our feelings of familial affection are intrinsically virtuous: they are our "best capability" and our "best knowledge" (*Mengzi* 7A15). For Xunzi, our feelings are too inchoate and unstructured to be considered virtuous. We

must reshape even emotions like familial love in accordance with ritual. Some people are insufficiently cognizant of the debt that they owe their ancestors: "Those who have died that morning they forget by that evening" (283). Others are excessive in their mourning.

> If one simply acquiesces in this, then mourning would continue without end. Therefore, the former kings and sages accordingly established a middle way and fixed a proper measure for it, such that once mourning is made sufficient to achieve good form and proper order, then one stops it. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings,* p. 283)

Thus, Xunzi has what Mengzi refers to contempuously as a two source view of the Way. In Xunzi's view,

> human nature is the original beginning and the raw material, and deliberate effort is to pattern and order it and make it exalted. If there were no human nature, then there would be nothing for deliberate effort to be applied to. If there were no deliberate effort, then human nature would not be able to beautify itself. . . . For Heaven can give birth to creatures, but it cannot enforce distinctions among creatures. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings,* pp. 281–82)

Mengzi would reply, "Heaven, in producing the things in the world, causes them to have one source" (*Mengzi* 3A5).

V. Ethical Cultivation

The disagreement between Mengzi and Xunzi over human nature is reflected in their views on ethical cultivation. As we noted in Chapter 2, one of the longstanding disagreements among Confucians is over the comparative importance of learning and thinking in ethical cultivation. Because he believes that human nature is good, Mengzi emphasizes thinking: "Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them" (6A6).

In contrast, Xunzi's conception of human nature and the importance of deliberate effort leads him to emphasize learning: "I once spent the whole day pondering, but it wasn't as good as a moment's worth of learning" (257). Xunzi presents an inspiring but challenging image of learning:

> Where does learning begin? Where does learning end? I say: Its order begins with reciting the classics, and ends with studying ritual. Its purpose begins with becoming a noble man, and ends with becoming a sage. If you truly accumulate effort for a long time, then you will advance. Learning proceeds until death and only then does it stop. (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings,* p. 258)

Xunzi's methodology of learning is very teacher centered: "In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person" (259). The "right person" is a teacher who can guide your understanding of the ancient texts and rituals. This is necessary because, as Xunzi acknowledges, they are difficult to interpret and apply to contemporary situations.

Based upon one's level of learning, Xunzi identifies a hierarchy of character types. At the bottom is the person who has no commitment to learning and remains like a "beast" (258). He is "barbaric, obtuse, perverse, vulgar, and unruly" (262). Only slightly better is the "vulgar scholar" (259). This person pursues learning but does not live up to the values embodied in what he studies; he will only "learn for the sake of impressing others." If you become a vulgar scholar, "you will simply be learning haphazard knowledge and focusing your intentions on blindly following the *Odes* and *History.*" Xunzi no doubt has such vulgar scholars in mind when he remarks, "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?" In contrast, the "learning of the gentleman enters through his ears, fastens to his heart, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions. His slightest word, his most subtle movement, all can serve as a model for others" (259).

Xunzi distinguishes among serious learners based on how deeply they have grasped the Way:

> He who likes the right model and carries it out is a man of good breeding. He who focuses his intention upon it and embodies it is a gentleman. He who completely understands it and practices it without tiring is a sage. If a person lacks the proper model, then he will act recklessly [like a beast]. If he has the proper model but does not fix his intentions on its true meaning, then he will act too rigidly [like a vulgar scholar]. If he relies on the proper model and also deeply understands its categories, only then will he act with comfortable mastery of it [like a sage]. (*Xunzi* 2; *Readings,* p. 264)

It is fruitful to compare Xunzi's typology with that found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* where he distinguishes between the bestial person (who has no commitment to virtue), the incontinent person (who knows what is virtuous, but succumbs to temptation), the continent person (who feels temptation

but acts virtuously through strength of will), and the fully virtuous person (who is no longer tempted to do wrong).

Learning is a kind of "deliberate effort" (*wěi* 偽), a term that has a positive connotation for Xunzi. It is the self-conscious activity that humans engage in to transform themselves from their natural state into someone virtuous. This puts Xunzi in sharp contrast with the view of the "Robber Zhi" dialogue (369–75), which repeatedly uses the same word to condemn Kongzi for being "artificial" (*wei*). The *Daodejing* also seems to be at odds with Xunzi, because of its frequent condemnation of self-conscious action: "Everyone knows that when the good strives to be good, it is no good" (*Daodejing* 2). The case of Zhuangzi is more complex. It took the butcher years of what was initially deliberate effort to learn how to skillfully carve oxen. The ultimate goal of the butcher's practice is to act effortlessly, but then so does Xunzi hope to produce a gentleman who effortlessly follows the Way:

> He makes his eyes not want to see what is not right, makes his ears not want to hear what is not right, makes his mouth not want to speak what is not right, and makes his heart not want to deliberate over what is not right. He comes to the point where he loves it, and then his eyes love it more than the five colors, his ears love it more than the five tones, his mouth loves it more than the five flavors, and his heart considers it more profitable than possessing the whole world. (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings,* pp. 260–61)

VI. Historical Significance

Xunzi's quasi-naturalistic Confucianism is ingenious, and many aspects of it are plausible from our contemporary perspective. However, a serious limitation of Xunzi's philosophy seems to be that it claims the sages invented the one right Way to organize society. Surely there are rituals (for funerals, weddings, birth, and other major life events) that are just as good as those of ancient China. Furthermore, we think that some version of democracy is a better form of government than the benevolent paternalism Xunzi envisioned. However, taking Xunzi's craftsperson metaphor seriously may allow us to develop a Xunzian philosophy acceptable for the modern world. The sages developed rituals and standards of righteousness to meet human needs, just like craftspeople developed bronze tools. But as the Bronze Age succeeded the Stone Age, so did the Iron Age succeed the Bronze Age. None of the fundamental commitments of Xunzi's philosophy prevent him from acknowledging that the Way continues to develop in a similar

manner. Interestingly, a much later Confucian, Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), argued explicitly that the Way evolved gradually over time in response to concrete human needs. Zhang did not see himself as following in the steps of Xunzi, but his work provides a detailed account of how we might historicize Confucianism.[1]

Within the Chinese tradition, Xunzi's influence has waxed and waned. His emphasis on learning became the dominant trend in Confucianism for much of its history. Particularly during the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), Confucianism was known for its almost obsessive emphasis on the study of texts and ritual. During this period, the government appointed experts to interpret each of what came to be known as the *Five Classics.* Xunzi would certainly have approved of this policy:

> In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person. Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts. The *Odes* and *History* contain ancient stories but no explanations of their present application. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is terse and cannot be quickly understood. (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings,* p. 259)

The works that Xunzi cites here became three of the *Five Classics.* The other members of the *Five Classics* were the *Changes,* a work whose cosmological speculations only became important during the Han, and the *Record of Rites.*

Xunzi later came in for criticism, though, from the so-called Neo-Confucians of the Tang (618–906 CE) and Song (960–1279 CE) dynasties. Although they were very critical of Buddhism, the Neo-Confucians had been deeply influenced by the view that we all share an underlying virtuous Buddha-nature that is obscured by selfish desires. Against such an intellectual background, Mengzi's doctrine that human nature is good resonated with the Neo-Confucians. As a result, thinkers like Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE) identified Mengzi as the true inheritor of the Way of Kongzi and criticized Xunzi for his doctrine that human nature is bad. Zhu Xi also de-emphasized the *Five Classics* in ethical education, arguing that they encouraged an overly scholastic approach to learning. Some interpreters then tried to defend Xunzi by arguing that he did not really disagree with Mengzi. On this complementarian interpretation, Xunzi is simply stressing the obstacles to ethical cultivation, while Mengzi emphasizes the potential to overcome these obstacles. To use a Western metaphor, Xunzi notes that the glass is half empty, while Mengzi observes that it is half full. We have seen that there are some passages in which Xunzi sounds like Mengzi, and these might be read as support for a complementarian reading, but overall Xunzi seems to be very clear in rejecting Mengzi's view. Still other scholars have suggested that Xunzi did not really write

the essay "Human Nature Is Bad." But this essay reflects ideas found in many passages in the rest of Xunzi's writings.

Ironically, Xunzi also came under criticism because of his most brilliant pupil, Han Feizi. Han Feizi learned much from his teacher but developed a philosophy that was avowedly anti-Confucian. Han Feizi's ideas, in turn, influenced the policies of the state of Qin. He was blamed for the excesses of the Qin government, and Xunzi was faulted for producing such a student. But to know whether the criticism of Han Feizi is accurate, we need to understand the details of his philosophy. To this topic we turn in the next chapter.

Review Questions

1. What is "naturalism"? Why would we say that Xunzi cannot be a naturalist? What is an important commitment that Xunzi shares with naturalism?
2. How does Xunzi's conception of Heaven differ from that of Mengzi?
3. Consider a ritual in which we leave out offerings of food and drink for the spirits of our ancestors. How would Xunzi say a gentleman should understand this ritual?
4. Explain how Xunzi uses a state-of-nature argument to justify rituals and standards of righteousness.
5. How does Xunzi disagree with the Mohist version of the state-of-nature argument? Specifically, how do the two versions make different assumptions about innate human motivations, and how does this lead them to different conclusions?
6. Xunzi compares the actions of the sages to those of craftspeople. How does this comparison suggest that there can be a "right" Way even though it is not part of human nature?
7. Xunzi writes, "By ritual, the stars move orderly across the skies." Why does this seem to conflict with Xunzi's craftperson metaphor? How might we reconcile the two?
8. Explain the difference between desire and approval. Why is approval important in self-cultivation?
9. According to Xunzi, what is it that distinguishes humans from other animals?
10. What is the difference between Xunzi's view that human nature is bad and Augustine's view that human nature is evil?
11. What is the difference between Xunzi's definition of human nature and that assumed by Mengzi? Why might this difference lead us to think that Xunzi and Mengzi do not really disagree? Why might we still think that they do disagree?
12. Use the example of wood to illustrate the difference between Xunzi's conception of ethical cultivation and that of Mengzi.
13. Paraphrase the ladder of souls passage.
14. Xunzi notes that, of creatures "that have awareness, none does not love its kind." Why does this seem to commit Xunzi to a position on human nature much like that of Mengzi? How might the passage be interpreted to preserve the disagreement between them?
15. In the "Robber Zhi" dialogue the term *wei* is translated as "artificial," while in the *Xunzi* it is rendered "deliberate effort." How do these differing translations reflect the different attitudes of the two works toward transforming human nature?