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# The Analects and Moral Theory

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## The *Analects* and Moral Theory

Stephen C. Angle

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Over the last century, scholars both within China and without have considered how the *Analects* relates to modern, Western philosophy. Should we think of the *Analects*—or the early Confucian tradition more broadly—as “philosophy,” and if so, should we seek to analyze its contents in terms of Western philosophical categories? With regard to the ethical teachings in the text, a more specific concern has also been raised: does it make sense to think of the *Analects* as engaging in “moral” theory, or is its framework adequately different from modern Western moral philosophy that a different set of categories are necessary?<sup>1</sup> A central contention of the present chapter is that thinking about the *Analects* in terms of modern moral theory can indeed be constructive (from both interpretive and dialogical standpoints, as I will explain below), but there are also good reasons to take seriously concerns about an unhealthy hegemony of Western philosophical categories. The first section of this chapter will therefore address a variety of methodological issues raised by the prospect of thinking about the *Analects* in terms of moral theory. Subsequent sections will then explore the pros and cons of viewing the *Analects* through the lenses of Kantian deontology, which Sinophone scholarship on the text has tended to stress; virtue

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of this large question in terms that complement those of the present chapter, see [Olberding 2011, esp. ch. 1].

<sup>2</sup> See [Defoort and Ge 2005] and the essays collected in that journal issue (as well as the two following issues).

<sup>3</sup> One example of such an effort to peel away layers of “philosophical” readings—although doing so in part to

ethics, which is more prominent in Anglophone secondary literature; and role ethics, which has emerged as a potential alternative to both deontology and virtue ethics. We will also consider the results of viewing these theories through the lens of the *Analects*. The chapter's overall conclusion is that we are entering an exciting time for open, cross-cultural and trans-linguistic textual interpretation and moral theorizing, much of which is on view in the recent approaches to the *Analects* canvassed here.

## 1. Methodology

Of all the chapters in this volume, the present one engages in the most explicit and sustained use of Western philosophical categories to analyze the *Analects*, and so it seems important to consider some of the methodological issues that such an approach raises. The first question we will consider is whether it makes sense to think of the *Analects* as engaged in "philosophy" at all. Second, assuming it is legitimate to treat the *Analects* as (among other things) a work of philosophy, does the way philosophers—both East and West—have sought to use Western categories to interpret the text result in a troubling privileging of Western categories? Third, even assuming that we can deal with this general question, a more specific version of the challenge may recur: namely, is the ethical thought in the *Analects* concerned with "morality," as that category has been understood in contemporary Western philosophy? The final topic in this section presumes satisfactory answers to all these questions, and looks at various ways in which one might taxonomize "moral theory," as a preparation for the chapter's subsequent sections.

## 1.1 Philosophy

The most basic challenge faced by those who wish to discuss the *Analects* and (philosophical) moral theory is whether the text is properly understood as “philosophical.” From two very different perspectives it might appear that the answer is “no.” On one hand, there are scholars—primarily but not exclusively Chinese—who believe that to view the *Analects* as philosophy is to diminish it, to reduce it to the parameters of a Western academic discourse and thereby miss out on the broader, holistic significance of the text’s teachings.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there are scholars—primarily but not exclusively Western—who believe that to view the *Analects* as philosophy is to misunderstand the social, political, and cultural contexts in which classical Chinese “masters literature” was produced. According to this kind of view, the goals, functions, and style of a text like the *Analects* were so different from those of classical Greek “philosophical” texts that it is a mistake to read “philosophical” concerns or reasoning into the *Analects*.<sup>3</sup> The issues raised by both these groups of scholars are many and complex, and their insights offer us a great deal when it comes to understanding the contexts and objectives that informed the production of the *Analects*. I believe, though, that there are still sufficiently good reasons to engage with the *Analects* as philosophy, if it is done with sensitivity and with a consciousness of the limitations of a philosophical approach.

Consider, for example, the scarcity of eristic rhetoric in the *Analects*. It has plausibly been argued that a range of cultural and institutional differences between Greece and China help to explain the different degrees of, and attitudes toward, explicit argumentation and

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<sup>2</sup> See [Defoort and Ge 2005] and the essays collected in that journal issue (as well as the two following issues).

<sup>3</sup> One example of such an effort to peel away layers of “philosophical” readings—although doing so in part to contribute to a more pluralistic future philosophy—is [Denecke 2010].

reason-giving in the two contexts.<sup>4</sup> With respect to the *Analects* in particular, it is certainly the case that insofar as there is reasoning supporting the text's various claims, it is mostly implicit. One possible response is to conclude that the text is "evocative" rather than "systematic" [Van Norden 2007, 137], even while it helps to it to initiate more explicit articulation of positions and reasons that are seen in later texts. Others might emphasize the possibility that more explicit reasoning was not written down into the text, but could have been part of the practice of the community around the *Analects*. In either case, lack of explicit reasoning does not necessarily mean a lack of reasons; we are not forced to conclude that the text grounds its claims in arbitrary assertions, mysterious sagely insight, or because-we've-always-done-it-this-way traditionalism. One of the values of engaging with the *Analects* philosophically can precisely be to see ways in which its claims may be backed up with reasoning.

It sometimes seems that scholars who worry about thinking of the *Analects* as philosophy mistake contemporary philosophical practice for all of what "philosophy" can and should mean. The story of Greek *philosophia's* evolution (or devolution) through Roman, Christian, Islamic, and eventually modern European and American contexts is fascinating, but there is no reason to assume that the current professionalized, university-based conception of philosophy is the best or final possibility. It is true, in other words, that the practices of those responsible for texts like the *Analects* were very different from those

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<sup>4</sup> I have found Stephen Walker's conference presentations and blog posts on this subject (for example, see <http://warpweftandway.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/zhuangzi-and-the-possibility-of-philosophical-culture/>) to be very stimulating. I accept that there is an overall difference of tone and method between early Chinese and Greek discourses, though of course there is wide variation within each, including many non-eristic Greek texts and many Warring States and later Chinese texts that engage in explicit argument and even pay explicit attention to the methods of argument. See also [Van Norden 2007, 10-15, 59-64] and [Denecke 2010].

of contemporary philosophers, but they had more in common with the Greek and Roman philosophers for whom philosophy was a “way of life” [Hadot 1995]. Furthermore, even though the practice out of which the *Analects* emerged was not identical to that of any period of Western philosophical practice, it makes sense to think that the human concerns in each case are similar enough to make it constructive to view them in light of one another. At least, this is a plausible enough claim that we should be open to seeing what happens when we consider the ideas in the *Analects* and the ideas found in another philosophical tradition in light of one another. This is of course not to say that there are never any problems with viewing the *Analects* as philosophy: We will need to keep our eyes open for issues throughout the following discussions.

## 1.2 Asymmetry

A second major concern that has been raised in recent years is that studies in comparative ethics, no matter whether Anglophone or Sinophone, have tended to exhibit a troubling asymmetry. Kwong-loi Shun has put the point this way:

[T]here is a trend in comparative studies to approach Chinese thought from a Western philosophical perspective, by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Western philosophical discussions.... Conversely, in the contemporary literature, we rarely find attempts to approach Western philosophical thought by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Chinese philosophical discussions. [Shun 2009, 470]

I agree with Professor Shun that there has been such an asymmetry, and furthermore that asymmetry of this kind may well be a problem. If local, idiosyncratic experiences from moments in Greek, Roman, or European history are taken as normative expectations for all of humanity, this should trouble us; if categories that Greeks (and so on) used to understand their experiences are taken as the only categories to be used in understanding

all human experiences, this sounds equally troubling. Of course, the mere fact that a category is first articulated in one particular context does not mean that it cannot be legitimately applied in others. Genuine problems occur only in two kinds of cases. First, differences in global power may lead us to only consider some putatively universal categories—say, those derived from European experience which happen to mesh particularly well with contemporary capitalism—and to ignore others that also make universal claims. Second, it may be that there are categories without universal aspiration whose applicability is limited to cultural contexts in which they are rooted. If so, then the imposition of these categories on other parts of the world might be an even more egregious form of cultural imperialism.

I mention this second kind of case primarily because there are some Chinese scholars today who think of Confucianism (and the *Analects*) principally as a crucial cultural inheritance of the Chinese people, even arguing that without Confucianism, there can be no Chinese.<sup>5</sup> If the *Analects* is only this kind of local knowledge, then an effort to insert it into a global conversation about philosophy or moral theory would indeed be quixotic. In my view, however, efforts to confine Confucianism to local knowledge are seriously mistaken. There are strong indications in the *Analects* and other early Confucian texts that the classical masters took their views to apply to everyone, not just to some narrower group of people (any talk of “Chinese” at this point would be anachronistic).<sup>6</sup> I also reject the idea that Confucianism is somehow intrinsically tied to Chinese culture,

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see [Kang 2005] and [Kang 2011].

<sup>6</sup> For example, in *Analects* 9:14, Confucius says that he wants to dwell among the Yi people outside the Chinese heartland, which leads someone to ask him: “But they are uncouth; how will you manage?” Confucius responds, “If a gentleman were to dwell among them, what uncouthness would there be?” The implication seems to be that Confucian virtue is not limited by borders or culture, but applies and can spread wherever the virtuous gentleman should go. For further discussion, see [Angle 2013].

although pursuing that argument here would take me too far afield.<sup>7</sup> If there is a kind of asymmetry for us to worry about, in other words, it is of the first kind mentioned above, according to which we too readily assume the applicability of one set of universalist categories without giving others their due.

Once things have been put this way, we see that asymmetry itself is not the problem, but only the sign of a possible problem. Depending on the goals of a particular researcher, it may well be possible to rest primary weight on one set of categories without being closed-minded toward other relevant categories; we will see examples of this in the sections to come. In addition, the situation Professor Shun has diagnosed may be changing, or at least it is not the case that the asymmetry is complete. As we will see, some scholars, both East and West, have taken categories from texts like the *Analects* as primary, and analyzed or criticized Western moral philosophy in these Confucian-derived terms. Still, we will also see below some reasons to think that moral thinking in the *Analects* may be too readily assimilated to the categories of Aristotle or Kant. In order to assess when and where things go wrong, it will be helpful to distinguish between two modes in which scholars may ask questions about the *Analects* and moral theory: the interpretive and the dialogical. Categories not derived from the *Analects* itself are relevant to the philosophical *interpretation* of the text only insofar as a case can be made that they contribute to a better understanding of the text than is available without them (or via alternative categories). Philosophical dialogue, on the other hand, may have primary aims that are different from

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<sup>7</sup> See [Zhao 2008, 175] on whether Confucianism can successfully be “universal” instead of “local” knowledge; and also [Bai Tongdong 2010], arguing that we can read early Confucianism as accepting the universal openness of political philosophy, as versus the particularist focus encouraged by Jiang Qing’s viewing Confucianism (that is, *rujiao*) through the lens of religion.



the best understanding of a given source text. One might argue that a reading of the *Analects* in terms of deontological ethical theory suggests issues for modern deontology that had not previously been noticed, or that stressing the virtue-ethical elements in the *Analects* can stimulate the contemporary growth of Confucian moral theory in constructive ways. Even if they are never wholly distinct from one another, we would do well to keep the differences between dialogical and interpretive approaches to the *Analects* in mind as we proceed.

### 1.3 The Terrain of the Moral

We have two, linked tasks remaining before we can turn to the main body of the chapter: first, to consider whether the *Analects* is in fact concerned with morality at all, and second, to examine the various ways in which competing moral theories carve up the domain of morality. Insofar as the theories disagree about the scope of the moral, of course, this must also be taken into account.

In two well-known papers, Henry Rosemont argues that the concept-cluster corresponding to “morality,” as that term is understood in modern Western moral philosophy, has no match within early Confucianism. There are no terms, he says, for a host of ideas key to morality—freedom, liberty, autonomy, individual, utility, principles, rationality, and so on—and so we should conclude that Chinese thinkers were not concerned with morality, but with something else. He suggests that we adopt a broad definition of “ethics,” as the study of “the basic terms employed in the description, analysis, and evaluation of human conduct,” and see that while both Confucians and modern Westerners have varieties of ethics, only the latter have morality [Rosemont 1988, 173].

Rather than morality, the Confucians' way of evaluating human conduct was based in an understanding of persons as constituted by their roles. In a variety of contexts, Rosemont went on to argue that the Confucians' approach was in many ways preferable to "morality," and that we today should seriously consider adopting the Confucian approach to ethics. In the last few years, Rosemont and Roger Ames have explicitly formulated this Confucian alternative to moral theory as "Confucian role ethics."

Before any assessment of Rosemont's claims, it will be helpful to sketch some of the arguments within modern Western moral theory that overlap, both chronologically and conceptually, with Rosemont's ideas. In the mid-twentieth century, moral theory (like the era's psychology) was dominated by questions related to behavior and "right action." The key question was "what should one do?"; the key notions were individual duty, liberty, and so on. In 1958, Elizabeth Anscombe's scathing essay "Modern Moral Philosophy" questioned the foundations of this enterprise, arguing that it was based on an abandoned conception of divine moral law and on an inadequate approach to psychology [Anscombe 1958, 1]. These general lines of critique were reemphasized by Iris Murdoch a decade later when she argued that matters of inner agency—such as motivation and perceptiveness—were at least as important to morality as were our actions [Murdoch 1970]. A good example of mainstream moral philosophy's reaction to these challenges is John Rawls's 1972 *A Theory of Justice*. On the one hand, Rawls gives considerable attention in the later sections of his opus to motivation, moral education, and psychology. On the other hand, such issues only penetrate to a limited degree into his conception of morality. His influential taxonomy of morality is still based on the idea of right action, and is divided into "teleology" (i.e., those theories that determine the morally action through the maximization

of some “end”) and “deontology” (i.e., those theories for which moral rightness is defined independently from the goodness of our ends). This closely matches the slightly earlier dualism proposed by John Silber, according to whom teleological moral theories were “homogeneous” because they derived the moral good from the non-moral good, and deontological moral theories were “heterogeneous” since they viewed moral and non-moral goodness as fundamentally distinct.<sup>8</sup>

Through the 1970s and into the 1980s, the centrality of right action and the exhaustive dichotomy between teleological and deontological theories continued to characterize moral philosophy. The volume of critics’ voices was rising, however. Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential 1981 book *After Virtue* argued that the biggest difference among moral theories was actually between those, like Aristotle’s, that were committed to a substantive end (such as nobility or virtue), and those that were not. On this account, utilitarianism had more in common with deontology than either did with Aristotle, despite the fact that on Rawls’s account, both Aristotelianism and utilitarianism had been versions of teleology.<sup>9</sup> As more and more attention started to be paid to virtuous character as an end, Gary Watson offered another critique of Rawls, arguing in considerable detail for a threefold typology of “teleological/maximizing” or “ethics of outcome”; “teleological/non-consequentialist” or “ethics of virtue”; and “deontological” or “ethics of requirement” [Watson 1990]. Over the last two decades, MacIntyre’s and Watson’s efforts to define the territory of virtue ethics have been complemented by those working to articulate more

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<sup>8</sup> Silber develops this idea in a variety of articles; see, for example, [Silber 1959-60]. Lee Ming-huei notes that a similar distinction is made in German moral discourse between “*Gesinnungsethik*” and “*Erfolgsethik*” [Lee 2013].

<sup>9</sup> Both on this specific point, and more generally concerning the topic of this section, I have found [Wang 2005] to be very helpful.

clearly what “virtue” or “character” is, as well as some attempts to spell out full-fledged systems of virtue ethics.<sup>10</sup> Two of the key developments have been a rapid expansion of the sources on which virtue ethicists are drawing, together with a related expansion of the subtypes of virtue-ethical theories.

The recent expansion of the scope of virtue ethics has by no means led to an end to the controversy over the category of “virtue ethics,” though; a number of theorists have emphasized the degree to which Kantianism and some forms of consequentialism can accommodate a significant role for virtue and inner psychology, and some have argued on this basis that the category of “virtue ethics” is in the end unnecessary or even incoherent. In response, it has become common to distinguish between “virtue theory,” which is the portion of a moral theory dealing with issues like virtue (no matter how peripheral it might be to the overall theory), and “virtue ethics,” which is (at least purportedly) a distinctive category of moral theory itself.<sup>11</sup> For our purposes, one of the more interesting kinds of resistance to the category of virtue ethics comes from Martha Nussbaum, herself often identified as a virtue ethicist. To the contrary, she argues that virtue ethics is a “misleading category” because the ideas really shared by all so-called virtue ethicists are too few to support an independent category, and are in fact also shared by some non-virtue-ethical theories. She argues that it is more perspicuous to divide the purported virtue ethicists into two clusters, those who are pro-reason and anti-utilitarian, and those who are pro-sentiment and anti-Kantian; she places herself in the former group [Nussbaum 1999, 181].

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<sup>10</sup> I mention some of the philosophers involved in these debates in Section 3, below.

<sup>11</sup> See [Driver 1996]. Various other terms are used to mark roughly the same distinction. Van Norden prefers to speak of a spectrum from moderate to “radical” virtue ethics [Van Norden 2007, 34]; Adams refers to “the ethics of character as an important department of ethical theory” [Adams 2006, 4].

The problem with such a taxonomy is that while it might be true to the genealogy of current views, it defines its categories around existing approaches in Western philosophy, and is thus necessarily Eurocentric. It does not even make sense to ask whether Confucius is an anti-Kantian, while the question of whether virtue lies at the theoretical center of moral theory in the *Analects* at least seems well-formed.

Putting the point this way brings us back to Rosemont's argument that there is no "morality" in early Confucianism. Recalling that Rosemont understands "ethics" as the study of "the basic terms employed in the description, analysis, and evaluation of human conduct," an initial point to make here is that his definition is, from the perspective of the virtue ethics movement, still too concerned with conduct, and thus is not a definition of "ethics" that they are likely to accept. Bernard Williams's earlier distinction between morality and ethics might be preferable: his understanding of "morality," centered on "obligation," is close enough to Rosemont, but he offers a broader (and vaguer) sense of the "ethical" as comprising answers to the question of "How should one live?" [Williams 1986]. Williams is explicit that issues of virtue, disposition, and inner psychology all fall within the scope of how we live. A second issue is that according to some of the theorists we will shortly examine, the lack in the *Analects* of explicit terms corresponding to ideas like "freedom" or "autonomy" cannot be taken to show conclusively that theories centered around such notions are not implied by the text. Methodologically, I believe this is correct, though it must be true that if a whole cluster of concepts appears absent, the burden of proof is considerable on those who believe that these concepts and the inferential relations among them are nonetheless implicitly present. In the end, the wisest course seems to be to adopt a broad notion of ethics or morality—I use the two interchangeably here, unless

indicated otherwise—and let evidence in the texts and arguments for stimulating dialogical insights speak for themselves.

## 2. Kantian Deontology

As mentioned at the outset of the chapter, Chinese-language discussions of the *Analects* and moral theory have tended to stress resonances between the *Analects* and Kant, while Kantian deontology has been only a minor strand in the English-language literature. We will look at the reasons behind the dominant Anglophone approach in the next section. Here, it makes sense to open with some historical background on Kant and Confucianism, before turning to current arguments that from both interpretive and dialogical stances, readings of the *Analects* inspired by Kant are to be preferred. The story begins in the early twentieth century, with Liang Qichao (1873-1929)'s 1903-4 essay introducing Kant to Chinese intellectuals.<sup>12</sup> Liang is very appreciative of Kant's philosophy. He emphasizes some of the similarities between Kantian epistemology and metaphysics and Buddhist ideas, especially concerning the free, time-and-space-transcending "true self" [Liang 1989, 194]. Liang finds Kant's distinction between heteronomous (*you suo wei zhe*) and autonomous (*wu suo wei zhe*) laws to be of the first importance, and agrees with Kant that any laws that are concerned with goals (especially profit or interest, *liyì*) are heteronomous and thus "correctly speaking, have no relationship with morality" [Ibid., 197]. Liang explains that according to Kant, moral responsibility is born from the "freedom

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<sup>12</sup> The essay was published serially over several months. For some fascinating background to Liang's essay, including the degree to which he both drew on but also deviated from prior Japanese interpretation and translation of Kant, see [Huang 2004].

of the conscience (*liangxin zhi ziyou*),” and Liang then equates this with Neo-Confucian Wang Yangming (1472-1529)’s idea of “innate good knowing (*liang zhi*)” [Ibid., 198]. This last connection is of course extremely important for our purposes. The idea that some versions of Confucianism, at least, endorsed an “autonomous” morality proved to be attractive to a number of subsequent thinkers. Many Chinese intellectuals in the teens and twenties criticized Confucianism for imposing a rigid set of ritualized rules upon the Chinese; in Kant’s terms, such rules were clearly heteronomous. Kant seemed to suggest a way for Confucianism to shed its restrictive mantle, though. As the important thinker Xiong Shili (1885-1968) said, “Kant conceives of ultimate reality (*benti*) as something that is beyond the reach of [theoretical] reason and can be responded to only through moral practice. His main idea can be reconciled with the spirit of our classical learning.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, Xiong’s student Mou Zongsan (1909-95), probably the most important Confucian philosopher of the twentieth century, developed a deep and sophisticated engagement with Kant over his long career. The details go well beyond our scope; rather than looking at Mou’s specific articulation of a Confucian-cum-Kantian moral theory, we will soon turn to the contemporary development of related ideas in the work of Mou’s student Lee Ming-huei and others. For now, it suffices to say that the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy continues to be central to Mou, as does the idea—hints of which we can already see in Liang and Xiong—that the Confucian’s “moral heartmind (*xin*)” bears an important resemblance to Kant’s noumenal self and free will.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in [Chan 2011, 36-7], slightly modified.

<sup>14</sup> The best source on Mou’s approach to the idea of autonomy is [Billioud 2011]. It is worth noting that the exactly how Kantian Mou really is a subject of controversy; see, for example, [Zheng 2000].

The best example of a philosopher arguing for a Kantian reading of the *Analects* in contemporary Sinophone discourse is Lee Ming-huei. To be sure, some of his key arguments focus on issues raised in *Mencius* or by later Neo-Confucians. Lee acknowledges that Confucius didn't clearly settle all the issues that subsequent Confucians would debate, the resolutions of which are relevant to whether Confucianism in fact endorses an autonomy-based ethics. Still, Lee argues that the *Analects* itself leans in the direction of an autonomous ethics. He begins by citing the following two passages:

[7:30] The Master said, "Is *ren* really far away? If I want *ren*, then *ren* is already there."<sup>15</sup>

[12:1] Yan Yuan asked about *ren*. The Master said, "To overcome the self and turn to propriety is *ren*. If one day he overcomes himself and turns to *ren*, the world will turn to *ren* along with him. To be *ren* comes from the self; does it then come from others?"

Lee says that these two passages imply the idea of moral autonomy, because only if morality is autonomous can it be achievable independently of any external conditions, as these passages seem to suggest. On such an account, morality is based on the "free exercise of one's will" [Lee 1990, 36]. Lee also connects this idea to a famous passage in *Mencius*, part of which reads: "'Seek and you will get it. Abandon it and you will lose it.' In this case, seeking helps in getting, because the seeking is in oneself."<sup>16</sup> From the context, it appears that what is being sought in oneself is one's moral nature; like in the *Analects* passages we just looked at, moral achievement does not seem to depend on external circumstances (or "the decree [*ming*]"). Let us call all of this Lee's *autonomy argument* for a Kantian reading of early Confucian moral theory (and of the *Analects* in particular). I should add that Lee's goal

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<sup>15</sup> Translations from the *Analects* in this chapter are ultimately my responsibility, but I have based my renderings closely on those in [Brooks & Brooks 1994].

<sup>16</sup> *Mencius* 7A:3; translation from [Mengzi 2008, 172].



is not just to show that early Confucianism assumes the idea of moral autonomy, but also to show that autonomy-based morality is a superior conception of morality to a teleological conception based around happiness or *eudaimonia*. Again drawing on Kant, he says that only the former kind of theory, based on free causality (*ziyou di yinguoxing*) rather than natural causality, has room for a genuine concept of moral agency [Lee 1990, 36].

One important challenge that Lee's autonomy argument must face is the evidence that *Analects* recognizes the phenomenon of moral luck. If there are, after all, factors outside of one's control that influence one's moral development, then can morality be fully autonomous? Relatedly, does moral luck actually vitiate genuine moral agency, as Lee claims? These are of course large issues, but we can sketch some of the relevant arguments briefly.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, we could supplement Lee's evidence with further passages that look to deny moral luck a role. Consider Confucius's well-known words in *Analects* 6:11 concerning his favorite student, Yan Hui:

The Master said, "Worthy indeed is this Yan Hui! One dish of food, a dipper of drink, living in a narrow alley: Others could not have borne their sorrow, yet for Hui it has no effect on his joy.

Confucius says much the same about himself in *Analects* 7:15: "Eating coarse food, drinking water, crooking one's arm and pillowing upon it—joy may be found also in these circumstances." A natural way to read these passages is as claiming that wretched circumstances do not matter to proper, even joyous, moral functioning. However, Sean Walsh has pointed out that even if Yan Hui's means are modest, he still has access to food, drink, and shelter. Walsh further argues that there are many ways in which we can see recognition in the *Analects* of luck playing a role: it is important to be fortunate enough to

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<sup>17</sup> The balance of this paragraph draws on material in [Angle 2012, ch. 7].

live in a state with a good ruler, to find a good teacher, and to be surrounded by a community that observes the rituals, among other things, even if no one of these things is absolutely necessary [Walsh unpublished]. If Lee were to reply that we must avoid reading moral luck into the text, because to do so would be to deny genuine moral agency to Confucian agents, a possible rejoinder can be found in the work of Joel Kupperman. He contends that our actions are often the involuntary (i.e., not consciously chosen) results of an interaction between our character and our situation, and that our characters themselves are largely involuntary. By this latter point he means that we cannot change our characters at will, and indeed sometimes even great efforts over extended periods of time will fail. Nonetheless, he holds that often enough, we do have control over circumstances that will gradually reshape our characters, and as a result it is possible for one's character to change dramatically. Kupperman's conclusion is that we have enough control, that is, that "it makes sense to hold people responsible both for their characters and for actions that flow from their characters" [Kupperman 1991, 63]. In short, genuine moral agency is still possible.

With the shape of the argument surrounding autonomy clear—though certainly not settled—let us examine a second argument, which I will refer to as Lee's *heterogeneity argument*. This argument has three premises. First, deontological moral theories distinguish between moral good—for Kant, moral goodness comes from good motives or will—and natural or non-moral goodness, like happiness or pleasure. Goodness, in other words, is heterogeneous. The second premise is that teleological moral theories take goodness to be homogeneous: ultimately, all goodness reduces to one type, as when utilitarians argue that moral rightness ultimately rests on the production of the most (non-

moral) goodness, namely pleasure. Such teleological theories cannot, therefore, make the distinction—central to deontology—between an act "done 'out of duty' (*aus Pflicht*), rather than merely 'conforming to duty' (*pflichtmäßig*)" [Lee unpublished]. Finally, the third premise is that in both the *Analects* and the *Mencius* we find evidence for a heterogeneous conception of the good, which leads Lee to conclude that early Confucianism is deontological.<sup>18</sup> Consider *Analects* 4:16, for example:

The Master said, "The superior person concentrates on right (*yi*); the petty person concentrates on advantage (*li*).

Much hinges on the exact interpretation of the key terms *yi* and *li* here; is the latter, in particular, a broad category of non-moral value, or does it indicate a kind of selfish concern for one's own advantages or profit? Lee reads it in the former way, though it is controversial whether the evidence requires such a reading.<sup>19</sup>

Lee finds more support for his heterogeneity argument in *Analects* 17:21. The passage concerns the three-year mourning period. Confucius's student Zai Wo feels that three years is too long, and offers two reasons: first, that a three-year hiatus from doing all the rituals will lead to the rituals being lost; second, that things in nature cycle back within a year, and so a year-long period should suffice. Confucius, however, simply asks Zai Wo if he would "feel comfortable (*an*)" wearing his finery and eating well prior to the end of three years. Although Zai Wo says that he would indeed feel comfortable, Confucius makes

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<sup>18</sup> In Section 1.3, I noted that Alasdair MacIntyre and Gary Watson have both argued that while virtue ethics is a form of teleological ethics, it is not a maximizing teleology in which moral nobility is reducible to some other form of goodness. They would thus resist Lee's move from "heterogeneous" to "deontological."

<sup>19</sup> See [Lee 2013]. *Analects* 4:12, which also invokes *li* in a negative light, is subject to the same ambiguity. The last line of 4:2, "*zhizhe li ren*," has been interpreted in many different ways; I note that Ames and Rosemont's reading, "wise persons flourish in [*ren*]," offers support for Lee's approach, since it connects *li* to a general notion of flourishing [Confucius 1998, 89]. Perhaps the best support in Book 4 of the *Analects* for the idea of heterogeneous values comes from 4:5, which recognizes that "wealth and honor" have value, but says that if a superior person cannot gain them whilst following the Way, he will not abide them.

it clear that a superior person would not—“if he ate dainties, he would not find them sweet,” for example—and bemoans Zai Wo’s lack of *ren*. As Lee reads this passage, Zai Wo’s reasons are ultimately teleological in nature, while “Confucius establishes the meaning of three-year mourning period on the basis of the agent’s motivation. This...implies a deontological viewpoint” [Lee unpublished]. Strikingly, this very passage can taken up supporters of a virtue-ethical reading of the text to argue for the implausibility of a deontological interpretation, as I will explain below, in Section 3.

Thanks in part to the influence of Mou Zongsan—as well as to Lee’s arguments themselves—deontological readings of the *Analects* are widespread in Chinese-language discussions. Such interpretations are rarer in English-language secondary literature. One example is Heiner Roetz’s 1993 book *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, based on his German-language book of a year earlier. Roetz’s perspective is not explicitly Kantian, but it does share quite a bit with ideas we have already seen. His central thesis is that early Confucianism offers an example of an “axial age” breakthrough from convention-based ethics to universal, “post-conventional,” principled morality. He draws extensively on Laurence Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, which itself is based on a Kantian understanding of morality. According to Kohlberg’s model, moral thinking can advance through increasingly sophisticated stages, the highest of which is Stage 6, “the universal ethical principle orientation.” At this stage, “the right is what is in accordance with abstract, consistent, and universally valid principle. It is based on the autonomous desire of conscience” [Roetz 1993, 27]. Roetz argues that the values of family and state provide the “conventional level” grounding for Confucian ethics, but the key contribution of the *Analects* and subsequent texts is to move beyond these conventions to higher principles. He

surveys several candidate principles like the “way,” friendship, and the “mean,” each of which helps to “compensate for the insufficiencies of mere role morality” [Ibid., 118]. Each of these fall short, though; ultimately, the concept on which he settles as providing the basis for a universal, unifying principle is *ren* (humaneness). Roetz summarizes various reasons for thinking that *ren* is the central value of the *Analects*, and then emphasizes the (indirect) explication of *ren* in the *Analects* via the Golden Rule, as when *shu* or reciprocity is said to consist in “What he himself does not want, let him not do to others.” [15:21] Roetz recognizes various potential problems with the Golden Rule, but concludes that:

...of all the ethical conceptions China has developed, the Golden Rule is the most promising if we search for potentials for further moral evolution. It roots morality for the first time in the formal procedures of role taking, not in traditional virtues, allowing [one] to transcend the horizon of one’s own cultural heritage. [Roetz 1993, 148]

Roetz is concerned to deny Henry Rosemont’s thesis (discussed above in Section 1.3) that Chinese thinking contains only ethics (or, in Roetz’s terms, *Sittlichkeit*); Roetz believes that abstract principles like the Golden Rule show that *Moralität*—with its emphasis on autonomy, decision, and duty—is present as well [Ibid, 47]. As far as I can tell, Roetz’s motivation to view morality in the terms that he does, and thus to search for such a conception within the *Analects*, come from his own philosophical background and not as a result of the Sinophone discourse discussed above, though he does note that contemporary New Confucian Liu Shuxian “assents to Kohlberg’s universalism as well as to the idea of a development toward an autonomous morality” [Ibid., 29].<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For a rebuttal of Roetz’s position from someone in the virtue ethics camp, see P. J. Ivanhoe’s argument in note 32, below.

The approaches that I have considered so far in this section take deontological ethics to be either the core or the culmination of the moral theory we find in the *Analects*. To conclude the section, let me note that a variety of analysts argue for a deontological aspect to the *Analects* without claiming that the text as a whole must be understood through the lens of deontology. For example, Yu Kam Por has suggested that the *Analects*, like other early Confucian texts, adopts a “two-level morality” that combines negative, deontological constraints with positive, teleological injunctions. He calls the former “minimal morality” and the latter “maximal morality”: putting the latter into practice is regarded as a higher achievement, but cannot be fulfilled at the expense of the first [Yu 2010, 46]. He cites two well-known passages as examples of the principle behind each of these aspects of morality, respectively:

[12:2] Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to you.

[6:30] Help others to take a stand insofar as you wish to take your stand, and get others there insofar as you yourself wish to get there.

Yu says that our goal should be to do the right thing (maximal morality), but only insofar as we avoid doing the wrong thing (minimal morality). Kantians will say that Yu’s framework can be completely understood within a Kantian framework: Yu’s two levels correspond to perfect and imperfect duties, respectively. It remains to be seen whether Yu is content with such an interpretation of his ideas, or whether he would push for a more distinctive synthesis of deontology and teleology. It is also possible to wonder whether any putative rules—whether ritual injunctions or more abstract principles like *Analects* 12:2—have the status of unbendable constraints that Yu here ascribes to them.<sup>21</sup> The mere presence of

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<sup>21</sup> See my discussion of whether there are “absolute prohibitions” in *Mencius* [Angle 2010].

rules, after all, does not indicate that one must be dealing with deontology, so long as the status of those rules is not fundamental.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, as discussed above in Section 1.3, takes virtues, character, and more generally the goodness of a moral agent to rest at the center of moral theorizing. I have already mentioned some of the controversies that attend the distinguishing of virtue ethics from other forms of moral theory; but in the present section I will set these matters aside. My goals here are threefold: to sketch the history of virtue-ethical interpretations of the *Analects*; to illustrate the diversity of such readings; and to highlight some of the most important arguments in favor of a virtue-ethical interpretation. It will be helpful to remember that the modern articulation of virtue ethics—whose initial stages include both a critique of mainstream modern moral philosophy and a call to look again at what we can learn from ancient Western ethics—is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Most analysts use Elizabeth Anscombe’s 1958 essay “Modern Moral Philosophy” to mark the beginning of the revival of virtue ethics; other early contributors include Murdoch [1970], Foot [1978], McDowell [1979], MacIntyre [1981], and Nussbaum [1990 (1985)].<sup>23</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* [1999] then marked a new level of confidence on the part of virtue ethicists; in the 2000s, we can say that virtue ethics was increasingly firmly

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<sup>22</sup> See [Hursthouse 1999, 35-9]. For a different view, see [Liu 2004].

<sup>23</sup> This list is by no means exhaustive; other important early contributions include [Wallace 1978] and [Pincoffs 1986]. It is worth noting that, as discussed in Section 1.3 above, Nussbaum explicitly rejects the label “virtue ethics” [Nussbaum 1999].

ensconced in the now-enlarged field of Anglophone moral philosophy.<sup>24</sup> In addition, one of the critical developments in virtue ethics from the 2000s to the present has been its pluralization. Aristotle had been the touchstone for almost all prior writers in the field (Murdoch being a significant exception), but now it is widely accepted that many philosophers in the Western canon can be read as virtue ethicists, including not just Stoics and medievals, but also moderns like Hume and Nietzsche. As we will see below, differing conceptions of the breadth of virtue ethics have important impacts on the plausibility of viewing the *Analects*—or Confucianism more generally—as expressing a version of virtue ethics.

Given the history I have just outlined, it is no surprise that virtue-ethical interpretations of the *Analects* are also a fairly recent phenomenon. The main lesson of the early essay “Aristotle and Confucius” [Hamburger 1956] is that a comparison of the two figures would make sense, even though it had not featured in previous readings of the *Analects*; Hamburger does not engage in any detailed interpretation of one thinker in the other’s terms. In the early 1970s, George Mahood published some sophisticated studies of the moral philosophy in the *Analects* that take the idea of virtue, and the early writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, quite seriously, but one detects little immediate uptake either among Western philosophers or among Anglophone sinologists.<sup>25</sup> The idea of virtue in the *Analects* and, especially, the *Mencius* loomed large in a series of important lectures given by David Nivison at Stanford in the early 1980s, though the lectures were not published until 1996.<sup>26</sup> Another important step was the publication in 1990 of *Mencius and Aquinas* by Nivison’s

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<sup>24</sup> Representative works include [Slote 2001], [Swanton 2003], and [Tessman 2005].

<sup>25</sup> See [Mahood 1971] and [Mahood 1974].

<sup>26</sup> See [Nivison 1996a and 1996b].



colleague at Stanford, Lee Yearley. While it was not directly related to the *Analects* and not engaged in dialogue with contemporary theorists of virtue ethics, Yearley's book shows the fruits that can come from a detailed, sophisticated reflection on the idea of virtue in an early Confucian work.<sup>27</sup> With the nurturance of Nivison and Yearley, Stanford proved fertile ground for virtue-ethical readings of Confucianism. The writings of P. J. Ivanhoe, Stephen Wilson, Edward Slingerland, Bryan Van Norden, and Eric Hutton—all with Ph.D.s from Stanford—over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s increasingly come to make explicit arguments that the *Analects* should be interpreted through the lens of virtue ethics.<sup>28</sup> The year 2007 is a watershed year for Anglophone virtue-ethical readings of the *Analects*, with three books published that defend such a thesis.<sup>29</sup> In the last few years, finally, scholars of Confucianism have begun explicitly engaging with contemporary developments in virtue ethics, though little of this work has focused directly on the *Analects*.<sup>30</sup>

Within the essays and books I have just mentioned one can find three distinct types of argument in favor of the thesis that the *Analects* evinces a form of virtue ethics: best explanation, explicit contradiction, and fruitfulness. First, both Wilson [1995] and Slingerland [2001] argue that a virtue-based interpretation better explains the full range of

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<sup>27</sup> As can be seen from his glowing back-cover endorsement, Alasdair MacIntyre was also clearly aware of the book. This is perhaps an apt moment to mention MacIntyre's fairly extensive engagement with Confucian ethics—as seen in [MacIntyre 1991, 2004a, and 2004b]—although some claims that he makes in his systematic treatments of virtue ethics such as [MacIntyre 1999], in which Confucianism makes no appearance, show that the influence of Confucianism has not gone as deep as one might have hoped.

<sup>28</sup> This is more implicit than explicit in Ivanhoe's dissertation (published as [Ivanhoe 1990]), though it is explicit in that work's revised second edition [Ivanhoe 2002, ix, 2n5, 9]. The theme of virtue is also central to [Ivanhoe 2000] (the first edition of which was published in 1993). See also [Wilson 1995] and [Slingerland 2001], both of which will be discussed further below. The most mature statement of Van Norden's position is [Van Norden 2007], on which see below.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to [Van Norden 2007], two important comparative studies of Aristotle and Confucius were published, [Sim 2007] and [Yu 2007].

<sup>30</sup> Eric Hutton's Stanford Ph.D. thesis is an early instance of this trend [Hutton 2001]. In addition, see many of the recent essays by Huang Yong, of which [Huang 2010] is a good example; [Van Norden 2009]; [Angle 2009]; [Ivanhoe 2011]; and [Slingerland 2011].

positions taken within the text than do alternative interpretive theories. Wilson considers Herbert Fingarette's influential 1972 book *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, and argues that it disregards the individual component of human flourishing. Wilson then turns to David Hall's and Roger Ames's 1987 work *Thinking Through Confucius*, which Wilson says treats the *Analects* one-sidedly in the other direction, over-emphasizing individuality and creativity. In contrast, an understanding of the text that is based around the socially-sanctioned cultivation of virtues, which then come to be valued and developed for their own sake, offers a more balanced understanding of the whole [Wilson 2002 (1995), 95, 104].

Edward Slingerland also pursues a "best explanation" strategy, supplementing Wilson's account with attention to further areas of the *Analects* that alternative theories have trouble explaining [2001, 97].<sup>31</sup> In addition, two other aspects of Slingerland's essay are worth noting. In order to make his notion of "virtue ethics" more concrete, he explicitly draws on MacIntyre's understanding of virtue, which helps to draw his essay into dialogue with Western virtue ethics—making it of interest not just to those with an antecedent concern for understanding the *Analects*. Slingerland also engages in the second type of argument I alluded to above when he charges that the tie between inner, felt state (the virtue of *ren*) and outer behavior that we see lauded in the *Analects* is the opposite of the Kantian demand that one act from duty rather than inclination. In other words, he sees the *Analects* as explicitly contradicting a central tenet of Kantian theory [Slingerland 2001,

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<sup>31</sup> Another version of the best explanation argument can be seen in Ivanhoe's argument that Roetz's Kantian interpretation fails because (1) his insistence that the *Analects* contains universal ethical claims can be accounted for in other ways, and (2) there is no evidence of a relationship between reason and morality in the *Analects* like that insisted on by Kant: "We look in vain for an analysis of moral maxims, autonomy, or freedom" [Ivanhoe 2002, 9].

100-1]. Recall here Lee Ming-huei's discussion of *Analects* 17:21, in which the nature of Zai Wo's motivation is discussed. Lee suggests that when Confucius says that to "feel comfortable (*an*)" is to have the proper kind of motivation, this manifests a deontological-style heteronomy of the good. Following Slingerland's lead, though, one might reply that by emphasizing the aptness of feeling as key to moral motivation, Confucius is stressing something like inclination rather than duty, and thus is more at home with those virtue ethicists who emphasize the importance of emotions to the development of virtuous dispositions. Not that this need be the end of the argument: recent Kantian theory has revived the attention that was already present in some of Kant's own writing on the role of virtue in the moral life. The picture of a stark opposition between duty and inclination that one gets from Kant's *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* is more nuanced in some of his other work.<sup>32</sup> Still, it seems at least clear that *Analects* 17:21 cannot stand as evidence in favor of a deontological reading, as Lee argued.

The third style of argument, concerning fruitfulness, is emphasized by Bryan Van Norden. He believes that Confucianism "counts as a form of virtue ethics," but in his major interpretive work, argues for this claim only indirectly, by seeking to demonstrate that reading the *Analects* as a form of virtue ethics is fruitful: it both has the potential to contribute to on-going philosophical debates, and "illuminates many interesting aspects of [Confucianism] that might otherwise go unnoticed" [Van Norden 2007, 2]. Van Norden's approach to "virtue ethics" itself is loose and pluralistic, including both what we have called

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<sup>32</sup> By now a large literature on this subject has developed; one important source of the discussion is [Sherman 1997].

above “virtue theory” as well as virtue ethics more strictly.<sup>33</sup> Particularly with respect to the *Analects*, which he considers more “evocative” than “systematic” [Ibid., 137], his goal is to see what can be learned about the views in the text by asking questions of it phrased in virtue-related terminology, rather than seeking to elucidate a specific, virtue-ethical moral theory.

So far I have been focusing on discussions of the *Analects* and virtue ethics within Anglophone secondary scholarship. We would do well to also take note of a significant debate on the subject that has taken place in Chinese. Starting in the early 1990s, influenced by their Catholic/Aristotelian training and stimulated by Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, some Taiwanese scholars began arguing against the prevailing deontological reading of early Confucianism. We can take Vincent Shen (Shen Qingsong) as a representative of this movement. He focuses primarily on the *Mencius*, but occasionally cites the *Analects* as well and clearly takes his argument to apply quite broadly. Rejecting what in Section 2 I called Lee Ming-huei’s heterogeneity Argument, Shen argues that *yi* and *li* are not dualistically opposed to one another, but arranged hierarchically. That is, *yi* and *li* are distinct members of the same family of values, rather than being fundamentally heterogeneous. He acknowledges that there are passages (some of which I have cited above, when discussing Lee) that appear to make a stark dichotomy, but Shen argues that other passages are clearly inclusive. In *Mencius* 7A:13 and 7B:10, for example, a ruler’s being concerned with the *li* (benefit) of his people is seen as part-and-parcel with his caring for them [Shen 1992, 184]. More generally, Shen says that we should understand *yi* primarily as a virtue, and thus of a piece with the virtue of *ren*, which is the source of

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<sup>33</sup> He puts this in terms of a continuum from “moderate” to “radical” virtue ethics [Van Norden 2007, 29-36].

concern for the people's *li*. Citing MacIntyre, Shen argues that both in the ancient West and in Confucianism, duties are distinctly secondary and emerge from the framework of cultivating virtue [Ibid., 187]. In both his 1992 essay and more explicitly in later work, Shen maintains that a virtue-ethical framework both fits better with the Confucian texts than does deontology or utilitarianism, and is the most promising approach to revitalize Confucianism in the present day [Shen 2005]. One key to his argument, that is, is a concern that a bare focus on duties and laws will lead to a fundamentally impoverished society. A very similar idea—that Confucian moral theory, as a form of virtue ethics, is fundamentally not “modern” and so might be of use in the critique of modern society—can also be seen in an essay by political philosopher Shi Yuankang from the same decade [Shi 1998, 123].<sup>34</sup>

Aristotle has loomed large in many of the virtue-ethical approaches to the *Analects* that I have reviewed so far, both directly and via MacIntyre's version of contemporary Aristotelianism. As I have just been emphasizing, it is important not to conflate virtue ethics with Aristotle, and in this section's final paragraph, I will look at ways in which current thinkers have examined the *Analects* in light of certain non-Aristotelian approaches to virtue ethics. First, though, it makes sense to look at the most explicitly Aristotelian approaches of all. Two books came out in 2007 arguing for significant similarities between Aristotle and Confucius; according to both authors—Jiyuan Yu and May Sim—we should interpret the *Analects* as a work of virtue ethics.<sup>35</sup> Both books are complex and have occasioned considerable debate; in the context of the present chapter, it is only possible to

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<sup>34</sup> Lee Ming-huei argues rather convincingly that Shen's critique of the contemporary implications of deontological moral theories is based on a mere caricature of Kantianism [Lee 2005, 107].

<sup>35</sup> For example, Sim says, “ethics for both [Confucius and Aristotle] centers on character” [Sim 2007, 134]; for his part, Yu begins his first chapter by saying, “For both ethics of Confucius and Aristotle, the central question is about what the good life is or what kind of person one should be. More strikingly, both ethics answer this central question by focusing on virtue...” [Yu 2007, 24].

touch on certain key themes.<sup>36</sup> In both books, the conclusion that the *Analects* offers a virtue ethics is more the outcome of the larger comparison than a specific theme: they do not argue against alternative (Kantian or other) interpretations, but rather present considerable evidence that key Aristotelian ideas have correlates in Confucius, and vice versa. Both Sim and Yu hold that while Confucius<sup>37</sup> and Aristotle share a great deal, each one also has some insights from which the other can learn, and the juxtaposition reveals certain lacunae in the thought of each. One difference between the two interpretations that will have relevance to subsequent argument in this chapter concerns individualism. For Sim, there is a striking difference between the role of the individual, metaphysical soul in Aristotle's account, and the pure, role-based relationality she finds in Confucius. She suggests that both approaches leave something to be desired: Aristotle lacks the capacity to handle the thick relationality that his ethics in fact requires, while Confucius needs some independent substrate to anchor moral norms that would allow criticism of existing role relationships [Sim 2007, 135]. For his part, Yu sees less difference on this score. He argues that Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and Confucian *dao* are quite analogous to one another, and that Aristotle's understanding of humans as "political animals" is tantamount to Confucius's emphasis on the relational nature of the self [Yu 2007, 108]. I will return to his issue below, because the question of relationality turns out to be crucial to Roger Ames's argument that Confucianism presents a role ethics rather than a virtue ethics.

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<sup>36</sup> For some of the debate, see the book symposia printed in *Dao* 8:3 (2009, on Sim's book) and *Dao* 10:3 (2011, on Yu's book).

<sup>37</sup> The *Analects* is critical to both Sim's and Yu's comparative projects, but both also draw on other early texts to fill out certain issues that are treated sparingly, if at all, in the *Analects* itself.

The large majority of the analyses and arguments that I have canvassed so far in this section take Aristotle, or at least contemporary developments of Aristotelianism, as their point of departure for understanding virtue ethics. It is vital to recognize that virtue ethics need not be tied so tightly to Aristotle's distinctive approach. Some of the most creative developments within Western virtue ethics over the last decade have been distinctly non-Aristotelian. In order to create the most room for a juxtaposition of the *Analects* and virtue ethics to spark insightful interpretation and fruitful dialogue, we would be wise to think broadly about what virtue ethics can encompass. Indeed, there are already signs that the *Analects*—and Confucianism more broadly—may fit better into an expanded understanding of virtue ethics. Among Chinese scholars, Chen Lai and Wong Wai-ying are notable for arguing that Confucian ethics can be constructively viewed as virtue ethics only so long as we recognize the important differences between Confucian ethics and the theories of Aristotle and Hume: Confucian ethics has its own distinctive concepts and emphases, from which Western virtue ethics may well want to learn.<sup>38</sup> For their part, American philosophers have also been looking for broader models. P. J. Ivanhoe has suggested that in Western traditions we see both “virtue ethics of flourishing” and “virtue ethics of sentiments,” and then gone on to argue that representative Confucian thinkers actually cross-cut these two categories, implying that virtue ethics cannot be satisfactorily understood simply in terms of extant Western models.<sup>39</sup> In recent work, Amy Olberding has drawn on yet another emerging strand of Western virtue ethics, the “exemplarism” of Linda Zagzebski, to help us understand the *Analects* in particular [Olberding 2011]. It is evident

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<sup>38</sup> [Chen 2002], [Chen 2010], [Wong 2001], [Wong 2013, 74-79].

<sup>39</sup> [Ivanhoe 2013], and see also [Slote 2009] and [Van Norden 2009].

that no one model is dominant, but this is probably as it should be; in the words of Christine Swanton, virtue ethics is a “genus” [Swanton 2003, 1] that contains many particular species. It makes sense that texts like the *Analects* and traditions like Confucianism should provoke further growth within virtue ethics, even as the frameworks of virtue ethics may be useful in understanding the texts.

#### 4. Role Ethics

The notion of “role ethics,” understood as the question of how one’s particular roles inflect one’s moral responsibilities, has been present in Western philosophy for quite some time. The focus has tended to be on professional roles like doctor, lawyer, or business manager, and two main types of questions have been raised: what are the distinctive norms of the professional role, and how do these norms relate to broader moral norms. In particular, what has been called the “role problem” arises because “the purpose of many institutions such as business, it may be thought, seems not to contain an ethical dimension, and indeed may appear amoral or contra-moral. Yet individuals occupying roles supposedly serving that purpose are expected to behave ethically” [Swanton 2007, 210]. Exactly how role ethics should be developed, and the role problem resolved, depends on the broader moral theory on which one draws: consequentialist, Kantian, and virtue-ethical approaches are all possible. It is relevant to some of my subsequent discussion, in fact, to note that both Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian version of virtue-ethical role ethics are possible; according to the former, the goodness of any role is determined by its place in a comprehensive understanding of the life of a good human being, whereas according to the



latter, there is no set hierarchy of ends and so role virtues are not necessarily subordinated to more abstract goods [Ibid., 208]. In one sense, this discussion of Western role ethics is beside the point, because the role ethics with which we are primarily concerned—“Confucian role ethics,” a term coined by Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont—is presented as *sui generis*, bearing no genealogical or conceptual connection to discussions of role ethics in Western philosophy. It is nonetheless useful to begin with the Western discourse for two reasons. First, noting the existence of this alternative, Western discussion of “role ethics” simply enhances clarity by allowing us to distinguish between the two. Second, we will see that for several intriguing reasons, Rosemont and Ames prefer to emphasize differences with Western moral theories, rather than similarities. Acknowledging the existence of Western discussions of role ethics allows us to understand—and perhaps challenge—this stance more thoroughly.<sup>40</sup>

For Ames and Rosemont, “Confucian role ethics” is simply a name meant to refer to the moral and religious vision that they find in early Confucianism. At the heart of Confucian role ethics is “a specific vision of human beings as relational persons constituted by the roles they live rather than as individual selves” [Ames and Rosemont 2011, 17]. The roles that Ames and Rosemont have in mind are, in the first instance, family-based: son,

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<sup>40</sup> In the Preface to his 2011 book on Confucian role ethics, Ames notes that Rosemont began developing the idea of Confucian role ethics as early as a 1991 essay that drew a contrast between the “rights-bearing individuals” of Western moral theories and the “role-bearing persons” on Confucian ethics [Ames 2011, xv]. As far as I know, though, Ames and Rosemont only began using the term “role ethics” in print in [Rosemont and Ames 2009]. Another parallel approach to using the category of “role ethics” to understand Confucianism emerges in the work of A. T. Nuyen, whose “Confucian Ethics as Role-Based Ethics” was published in 2007. He draws in part on earlier work of Ames and David Hall on the Confucian self [Nuyen 2007, 317], but develops his role-ethical structure quite independently. (Ames also seems unaware of Nuyen’s work on role ethics; it is not cited in [Ames 2011].) I will comment in a moment on one or two differences between Nuyen and Ames and Rosemont, but reserve discussion of the biggest difference—namely, that Nuyen sees considerable similarity between the structure of Confucian role ethics and certain Western ethics theories that he labels “social ethics”—for the essay’s concluding section.

daughter, mother, older sibling, grandfather, and so on. Traditional Confucian roles of ruler, subject, husband, wife, minister, and friend fill out the picture. Their point is not that these roles themselves are distinctively Confucian, but rather that the idea of human as fundamentally constituted by our on-going living in roles ramifies throughout Confucian thinking in a way that renders it dramatically different from Greek or contemporary Western alternatives. Their argument in favor of a role-ethical interpretation of the *Analects* thus depends on two important premises. The first is a wide-ranging interpretation of early Confucian thinking that emphasizes its anti-foundational, anti-essentialist, and processural character; part of the argument for this reading can be found in their individual and collective writings on Confucian role ethics, but much of the background has been laid in earlier scholarship, going back to Ames's seminal work on the *Analects* with David Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius*. Insofar as this general interpretation of the *Analects* is questioned—and indeed we have seen some challenges mentioned already, in the work of Wilson and Slingerland—then the argument for Confucian Role Ethics correspondingly comes into question as well. The second premise is that even though Confucian role ethics comes closer to virtue ethics than to Kantianism or consequentialism, relying on virtue-ethical vocabulary to understand the *Analects* “forces the Master and his followers more into the mold of Western philosophical discourse than they ought to be placed...and hence makes it difficult to see the Confucian vision as a genuine *alternative* to those with which we are most familiar” [Ibid.]. Therefore the best interpretation of Confucian ethics is as role ethics.

I will elaborate on some key aspects of the first premise in a moment; focus now on the second premise. This second premise is important because Ames and Rosemont are not

claiming that Confucian role ethics is incommensurable with Western moral theories: it is both similar and different, and they are choosing to emphasize the differences. This is a strategic choice, reflecting not just the degree of difference but also our contemporary situation in which differences with dominant Western frameworks tend to be downplayed. They are concerned with the phenomenon of “asymmetry” between Western and Chinese discourses that I discussed above. Ames and Rosemont note several instances in which, in the course of their comparisons of Aristotle and Confucius, Sim and Yu stress what seems to be lacking, missing, absent, or ignored in Confucian ethics, when seen in the light of Aristotle [Ibid., 18]. To be fair, both Sim and Yu announce that their projects are to see what each of their subjects can learn from the other, and both Sim and Yu note problems for Aristotle, including that his “insistent individualism...fails to account for the thick relations his own theory requires” [Sim 2007, 164], and his overly strong distinction between virtue and activity “inappropriately reduces the value of having virtue” [Yu 2007, 194]. I will not try to settle here whether Sim or Yu in fact give us asymmetrical comparisons, but the fact surely remains that comparative philosophy overall has been characterized by an asymmetry, and it is with this in mind that Ames and Rosemont “want to resist tailoring what we take to be a distinctively Confucian role ethics into a familiar category of Western ethical theory” [Ames and Rosemont 2011, 18].

This concern about asymmetry explains why Ames and Rosemont want to resist conflating Confucian role ethics with virtue ethics. But what is it that makes Confucian ethics so distinct in the first place? Here we return to what I called Ames and Rosemont’s first premise. The most basic difference they see between role ethics and all the standard Western ethical theories is that the latter rely on the idea of an independent principle or

cause, while Confucianism does not. According to the Confucian project, Ames writes, “without appeal to some independent principle, meaning arises *pari passu* from a network of meaningful relationships” [Ames 2011, 91]. It is easy enough to see how Kantian and Utilitarian ethics rely on an independent principle; Ames argues that Aristotelian virtue ethics, too, depends on an independent, essentialist, reified notion of human nature, as compared to corresponding Confucian notions which are “collateral, transactional, and reflexive” [Ibid., 90]. A related contrast is that between abstraction and universalism in the Western theories, and concreteness and particularity in Confucianism. As Ames says, “the personal model of Confucius that is remembered in the *Analects* does not purport to lay out some generic formula by which everyone should live their lives” [Ibid., 95]. While one might be tempted to reply that particularism and a lack of “codifiability” are generally taken to be features of Aristotelian virtue ethics, Ames would respond that Aristotle still sees virtues as reified, individual capacities, as versus the relational and transactional idea of “virtuosity” that he finds in Confucianism [Ibid., 159, 180]. Finally, Ames suggests that the very idea of a moral “theory” matches poorly with the ethical-religious “vision” of Confucianism. Theory-construction, with its emphasis on reason, analysis, definitions, and so on, is at least a somewhat different enterprise from the Confucian project of offering historical models and exhortations to fire one’s moral imagination and inspire one’s relational moral growth [Ibid., 121-2, 163].

Explicating and evaluating the evidence on which Ames and Rosemont rely to back up these claims would take me too far afield. Instead, I suggest that we consider a potentially damaging objection to role ethics, and see whether Confucian Role Ethics has the resources to respond. The *Analects* clearly sees the need for critical evaluation of the

ways that roles are inhabited by particular people. Does “Confucian role ethics” provide adequate critical purchase for such assessment? Suppose for a moment that all there is to role ethics is that with respect to any role one occupies, one should be like others in that role. Let us call this “simple role ethics.” As a parent, one should model on other parents; as a child, one should be like other children. An obvious problem with this is that in a society in which most parents are bad, one will tend to model on bad parents, and become worse oneself. A defender of simple role ethics might say that a society with bad parents will not flourish, so that in the long run only comparatively good societies, and parents, will be encouraged. This response fails to convince, though, both because our moral practice manifestly seems to make distinctions between good and bad parents (indeed, the coherence of the objection and response require this), and because the long-term existence of patriarchal practices, to choose one example, undermines the idea that good role-occupiers will ultimately be favored through some process of social evolution. If we need to be able to talk about good parents and bad, though, the question then becomes in what terms we judge or articulate such goodness.

Certainly Ames and Rosemont cannot call on widely applicable principles (“good parents are those who respect their children’s autonomy,” perhaps) or general, role-independent virtues (like “anyone with a well-rounded character will be a good parent”). However, it is also clear that they do not promote simple role ethics. Their writings are replete with references to normative categories that seem aimed at evaluating specific role performance. For example, Ames writes: “Each person stands as a unique perspective on family, community, polity, and cosmos, and through a dedication to deliberate growth and articulation, everyone has the possibility of bringing the resolution of the relationships that

locate and constitute them within the family and community into clearer and more meaningful focus" [Ibid., 93]. In addition to "focus," "growth," and "meaningful," other terms play similar roles in Ames's discourse of Confucian role ethics, including "harmony" [Ibid., 96, 112], "coherence" [Ibid., 103], "productive" [Ibid., 161, 181], "efficacious" [Ibid., 166], "vibrant" [Ibid., 181], and so on. Two things about this list are striking. First, most of these evaluative terms explicitly depend on the relations among multiple entities. Second, none of them are readily capturable as single, general-purpose principles. Take "efficacious," for example. As Ames explains this, it is clear that he has something quite different from an economist's "efficiency" in mind: he envisions an imaginative response to a morally challenging situation that manages to simultaneously make positive differences for each of the multiple values at stake, achieving something like harmony. Since harmony does not mean arriving at a precise arithmetic balance, "Be efficacious!" is a largely empty principle, unlike (for example) the utilitarian's "Maximize pleasure!"<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that "Be Efficacious!" does us no good; it bids us to attend to the variety of values that we see (and feel) are relevant to a given case, and to strive to keep them all in focus. That is, it calls attention to aspects of our situation that we already find valuable, and seeks to further articulate or inflect the ways in which we enhance these values. To return to our original question, it seems that Confucian role ethics does indeed have some critical purchase, vis-à-vis existing role behaviors, but only so long as we are normatively committed to a general vision of interdependence and relationality. It is this web of relations—and not just a single

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<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere I have noted an important difference between virtuous perceptions of Coherence in Neo-Confucian virtue ethics and virtuous reactions within Francis Hutcheson's sentimentalist virtue ethics. Since Hutcheson believed that virtue leads one to judge "that action is best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers" [Hutcheson 2006, 74], subsequent thinkers were able to set aside the perceptual aspect of his theory and attempt directly to calculate the greatest happiness. "Be efficacious" is like "Follow Coherence" in not being amenable to such re-casting as an independent principle. See [Angle 2009, 58-9].

dyadic relationship—that makes it possible for one to improve one’s parenting by striving for greater overall “focus” or “harmony.”<sup>42</sup>

It is an open question, I believe, whether Ames and Rosemont offer an adequate way of understanding the needed normative commitment to interdependence—something that goes beyond any seemingly factual observations about relationality. I will return to this issue in my concluding section, where we will also consider whether the strategic choice that Ames and Rosemont have made to emphasize difference rather than similarity is ultimately the most fruitful approach. As we have seen in earlier sections, the choice of which moral theory to juxtapose with the *Analects*, through which both text and theory can mutually interpret one another, is rarely a simple matter.

## 5. Conclusion

We have considered the relations between the *Analects* and three kinds of moral theory. Comparisons with other theories might be possible, but the fact that they have not yet been significantly developed in the scholarly literature suggests that there are significant obstacles to such interpretations of the *Analects*, so I will set these options

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<sup>42</sup> In A. T. Nuyen’s version of role ethics (see note 40, above), the distinction between a good and bad occupier of a role is determined by how well a given individual fulfills the obligations associated with the given role. He writes that “to be in a role is to be under a set of obligations” [Nuyen 2007, 317]. These obligations are determined by social expectations, which for key roles are “encoded in the rites, *li*.” As Nuyen recognizes, this approach raises serious concerns about relativism, but he seeks to deflate these by endorsing a “soft relativism” according to which both societal morality (in this case, the Confucian combination of virtues and “strict moral rules”) and the social context on which it is based (primarily, the *li* or rituals) are able to “evolve together in a kind of Rawlsian ‘reflective equilibrium’” [Ibid., 328].

aside.<sup>43</sup> Reviewing what we have seen, scholars have deployed four distinct kinds of argument to buttress their favored approach to the *Analects*. Most common are *best explanation* arguments: these aim to show that a given theoretical lens provides the best explanation of the moral theory that is implicit in the text, often because it allows one to account for a specific feature (or a specific range of features) of the text that other theories cannot explain as well. A second kind of argument seeks to show an *explicit contradiction* between the text and a rival theoretical approach. Producing a clear counterexample to one or another approach would indeed help to simplify the conceptual landscape, but as we have seen, these arguments tend to overreach. Once the evidence is viewed in a balanced fashion, we tend to fall back into competing claims of best explanation. The third approach is *interpretive fruitfulness*: viewing the text through a given theoretical lens helps us to see things about the *Analects* that we would not otherwise. It is worth noting that while these arguments can indeed bolster the appeal of a particular interpretive approach, it does not follow that the theoretical approach in question must be our exclusive lens onto the *Analects*. More than one modern theory may prove fruitful in this sense. Finally, there are arguments that depend on *dialogical fruitfulness*. These arguments can be assessed in multiple ways, since they often depend on the production of constructive stimulæ to both contemporary Confucianism and contemporary Western moral theory.

It is this last category of arguments that most directly addresses concerns about a potential asymmetry between the treatment of Chinese and Western philosophy. Let us

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<sup>43</sup> Two interpretive options that have been explored with respect to *Mencius* are consequentialism (see [Im 1999] and [Im 2011], and the argument against a consequentialist reading in [Wang 2005]) and moral sense theory (see [Huang 1994] and the rebuttal in [Lee 1990, 37-8 and *passim*] and [Lee 2013], as well as [Liu 2003]). Another important approach that has received some attention is care ethics; see [Li 1994] and [Tao 2000].



take first the case of Kantian deontology: most of what we have seen here have been interpretive arguments about the value of reading the *Analects* as deontology, but is deontology also challenged or enhanced when viewed through the lens of the *Analects*? Lee's arguments do not generally pursue this line of thinking, but perhaps Yu Kam-por's two-level approach to morality, mentioned at the end of Section 2, might offer an example. More generally, the deontological reading of Confucianism as a whole that was developed by Mou Zongsan (and is continued by Lee) certainly does offer significant challenges to Kant's views on key subjects, most famously on whether humans can engage in "intellectual intuition."<sup>44</sup> Mou's reading does not rely very heavily on the *Analects*, but it is intended to include that text among others, and so can count as at least an indirect case. Turn next to virtue ethics: does it give us evidence of a symmetrical engagement in both directions? As with deontology, some of the clearest cases of such engagement take other Confucian texts as their primary points of departure.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned above, in their comparisons with Aristotle, both Sim and Yu endeavor to show ways that Aristotle, and by implication contemporary neo-Aristotelians, need to learn from Confucius, even if their efforts still strike some (like Ames and Rosemont) as biased in Aristotle's favor. In addition, insofar as it is plausible to understand the *Analects* as putting forward a form of virtue ethics that is distinct from Aristotle's—as might be concluded from a synthetic reading of the evidence canvassed above—then we can see the *Analects* as helping to press contemporary virtue ethicists to further enlarge their tent: not only should it encompass Humean and

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<sup>44</sup> See [Billioud 2011] and [Bunnin 2008].

<sup>45</sup> Van Norden's reflections on Mengzian virtue ethics are an excellent example [Van Norden 2007, 337-59], and see generally [Angle 2009], which engages in sustained dialogue between Neo-Confucians and various contemporary virtue ethicists.

Nietzschean varieties, but one or more Confucian versions as well. This both complicates and yet makes more interesting the task of those seeking to generate a synthetic, inclusive theory of virtue ethics.

Given that one of the explicit motivations of Confucian role ethics is to resist asymmetry, it is no surprise that it offers dialogic challenges to contemporary moral theories. In fact, there are two ways that it can do so. Ames's and Rosemont's intended approach is to challenge modern Western moral theories *en bloc*: all of them, according to Ames and Rosemont, suffer from individualism, essentialism, over-abstraction, and so on. As a result, Ames and Rosemont charge that modern moral theories are actually non-starters: they write that so long as it is further developed, Confucian role ethics can be a "viable candidate as a vision of a global and yet culturally specific moral life appropriate to the twenty-first century...in a way that the ethics of Aristotle, Kant, or Bentham and Mill cannot" [Ames and Rosemont 2011, 35]. This means that Confucian role ethics is not envisioned as entering into productive, mutually-edifying dialogue with deontology, consequentialism, or virtue ethics: rather, it is being proposed as a full-scale replacement.<sup>46</sup> One possible response to this might be to accept that the gulf between Confucian role ethics and the three theory-types just mentioned is indeed as vast as Ames and Rosemont believe, but to suggest that there is still room for dialogue with other types of Western moral

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<sup>46</sup> In general, Ames and Rosemont do not write about ways that they have learned from, much less hope to contribute to, Aristotelian theory. The following sentence is a partial exception: "In fact, it is Aristotle's sustained and often unsuccessful struggle to balance and coordinate the conflicting demands of partiality and impartiality, of first philosophy and particular context, that serves as an object lesson and *shows a way forward* for us" [Ames and Rosemont 2011, 34, emphasis added]. The primary idea here seems to be that Aristotle is a negative example, showing why his approach is to be avoided.

theory: feminist care ethics, perhaps, or Deweyan moral theory, or “social ethics.”<sup>47</sup> Still, even with this caveat, there are non-negligible costs to Ames’s and Rosemont’s approach. Practically speaking, if successful they would cut Confucianism (or at least the *Analects*) off both from the dominant contemporary ways of construing its moral thinking in Sinophone and Anglophone discourse, respectively, and from the vast majority of non-Confucian moral philosophers today (no matter what their language). They thereby would seem to minimize any chance that contemporary Confucianism can learn from the insights, whatever they might be, to be found in these other bodies of theory.

An alternative approach is to recast the ideas and values driving Confucian role ethics as a version of virtue ethics. (I believe that a *rapprochement* between deontology and Confucian role ethics is unlikely.) The idea would not be to conflate Aristotelian ethics and Confucian ethics, but to ask whether there is a way of construing virtue ethics that is broad enough to include an ethic with the relational, transactional grounding on which Ames and Rosemont put so much emphasis. One possible source of insight is discussion of the relation between virtue ethics and care ethics; some have claimed that the latter is distinct from virtue ethics because it takes the *relation* of caring as primary, while others have sought to combine the two. More generally, it is significant that the modern revival of virtue ethics over the last half-century has been spurred by a reaction against many of the same

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<sup>47</sup> For some initial suggestions about how care ethics and Confucian ethics might be able to learn from one another, see the references cited in note 45. In [Tan 2004], Sor-hoon Tan masterfully shows ways in which Confucian and Deweyan political theories can inform and enhance one another; with this as a point of departure, it is plausible to think that similar results might emerge from a dialogue in the area of morality. A. T. Nuyen argues that his version of role ethics (see notes 41 and 43 above) bears considerable similarity to a trend in Western ethical thinking that he labels “social ethics,” including such figures as Charles Taylor, Dorothy Emmet, P. F. Strawson, Marion Smiley, and Larry May. I agree that there are various overlaps between Nuyen’s theory and those of these Western figures, although his discussion is too brief to be more than suggestive. For references, see [Nuyen 2007, 322-5].

features of deontology and consequentialism that Ames and Rosemont also critique, and also that virtue ethics has been quite dynamic in stretching beyond its initial source of inspiration in Aristotle. Ames and Rosemont say that contemporary version of virtue ethics maintain “the foundational role of the *individual* and of *rationality*,” but it is not clear to me that this is so, or at least problematically so.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, it is striking that when Ames comes to discuss *de* (which is often translated as “virtue”; he renders it “excelling morally”), he says:

Each of these [terms that make up the vocabulary of Confucian role ethics] is a perspective on the same event, and functions to highlight a particular phase or dimension in achieving the consummate life. There is a sense in which *de* is used as the more general term for expressing the cumulative outcome of coordinating the shared experience effectively—both the achieved quality of the conduct of the particular person and the achieved *ethos* of the collective culture. Hence, the other terms we have explored above are all implicated in excelling morally (*de*). [Ames 2011, 207].

Ames makes it clear elsewhere that his concern with the term “virtue” is with its implication that virtues are reified, metaphysically independent things, rather than as aspects of our complex, socially articulated experience. Instead, he insists that “whatever we call virtue...is nothing more or less than a vibrant, situated, practical, and productive virtuosity” [Ibid., 181]. Seen in this light—and also in the light of my argument from the end of Section 4 concerning the need, within Ames’s and Rosemont’s theory, for a normative commitment to interdependence—I wonder whether their ideas are really, at bottom, about roles. When we foreground virtuosity and interdependent flourishing instead, it starts to sound like such a “virtuosity ethics” has things to teach to, and things to

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<sup>48</sup> On the role of emotion for many of the philosophers sympathetic to virtue ethics, see [Nussbaum 1999]. Rosemont and Ames note in passing that Lawrence Blum has argued for a stronger role for communities and relations in the production and practice of moral virtues [Rosemont and Ames 2011, 37n24].

learn from, virtue ethics—and indeed, that they may ultimately be two species of the same genus.

This chapter has been composed at any exciting moment in the developing conversations about the *Analects* and moral theory. Sinophone and Anglophone philosophers are starting to engage one another, which is helping to spur the related (though not identical) process of dialogue between Western and Chinese philosophical traditions. Concerns about asymmetry are by no means a thing of the past, but we are beginning to see glimpses of a future that is pluralistic, open, and global. There is good reason to hope that future discussions of the interpretive and dialogical relations between the *Analects* and moral theory will be even more productive than those reviewed in this chapter have been. Lest my optimism get the better of me, though, allow me to end on a cautionary note. There are many hazards on the way to meaningful comparisons between ancient texts and modern theories. The one I would like to highlight lies in moving too quickly from the fact that a given passage in the text appears to be consistent with a particular, well-worked-out contemporary view, to the conclusion that the text must therefore share all the features of the modern theory. That would be to forget that the text has a complex social, conceptual, and historical context of its own, as well as to privilege modern theory as offering the only theoretical options. A more humble attitude is needed. Such humility does not rule out the possibility that the Chinese masters were mistaken or misguided; indeed, it seems likely that all moral theory, ancient or modern, can stand to be improved. Humility does suggest, though, that an open and piecemeal approach to comparative encounters is more likely to lead to constructive results.

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