VIRTUE ETHICS, THE *ANALECTS,* AND THE PROBLEM OF COMMENSURABILITY

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ABSTRACT

In support of the thesis that virtue ethics allows for a more comprehensive and consistent interpretation of the *Analects* than other possible models, the author uses a structural outline of a virtue ethic (derived from Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the Aristotelian tradition) to organize a discussion of the text. The resulting interpretation focuses attention on the religious aspects of Confucianism and accounts for aspects of the text that are otherwise difficult to explain. In addition, the author argues that the structural similarities between the Aristotelian and Confucian conceptions of self-cultivation indicate a dimension of commensurability between the two traditions, despite very real variations in specific content. Finally, the author suggests how crosscultural commensurability, in general, can be understood on a theoretical level.

KEY WORDS: *Chinese philosophy, comparative ethics, Confucianism, Confucius, virtue ethics*

IN RECENT YEARS, VARIOUS WESTERN ETHICAL MODELS have been brought to bear upon the *Analects,* traditionally considered to be the record of the teachings of Confucius and his disciples.[1] These models have included Kantian deontology (Roetz 1993; Lau 1979, esp. 50), something resembling Sartrean existentialism (Hall and Ames 1987), and the kind of performative act theory developed by Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin (Fingarette 1972). While each of these models has its own strengths and serves to illuminate important aspects of the text, each arguably leaves certain important aspects of the text unexplained. In a 1995 article in

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[1] The *Analects* (*Lunyu;* lit., "Classified Sayings") was probably put together after the death of the historical Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). Our present version is a somewhat heterogeneous collection of material from different time periods, although scholars differ in their identification of the different strata, as well as in the significance they attribute to these differences. Bruce and Taeko Brooks have recently argued for a quite extreme view of the text, seeing each individual chapter as representing a discrete stratum, identifying vast numbers of "later interpolations" within each stratum, and claiming that the work was composed over a much longer period of time than has been generally accepted—the later strata being put together as late as the third century before the common era (Brooks and Brooks 1998). While this is not the place for a thorough discussion of their arguments

this journal, Steven Wilson considered the interpretations both of Herbert Fingarette and of David Hall and Roger Ames in some detail. He quite cogently argued that their interpretations overly emphasize, respectively, the communal or individualistic aspects of Confucian self-cultivation, whereas virtue ethics represents a "middle way" between these two extremes. I intend to supplement his account in several ways.

First, regarding the deontological interpretations of the *Analects,* Wilson simply noted that deontology is not necessary to explain the text. I would like to make the stronger claim that deontology is *incompatible* with salient aspects of the text.[2]

Second (and this I take to be more crucial), although Wilson argues for the superiority of an interpretation of the *Analects* based upon virtue ethics, the category of "virtue ethics" itself is left rather loosely defined. I think it is important to clarify our understanding of this conceptual category, especially because the practice of interpreting the *Analects* in terms of Western virtue theory is becoming more common. A number of articles have been published that suggest parallels between, for instance, Aristotle and Confucius, and several of these articles take it for granted that Confucius is a "virtue ethicist" (Hamburger 1956; Mahood 1974; Chong 1998; Yu 1998). An issue that is not explored in detail, however, is the problem of specifying precisely what one *means* in labeling a way of thought "virtue ethics." For one thing, there is considerable disagreement among contemporary Western advocates of virtue ethics concerning the nature of virtue or the various roles of rationality, community, and tradition in such an ethics. To avoid this problem, my discussion will be primarily based upon the most influential model in the current revival of virtue ethics in the West, Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the Aristotelian tradition (although MacIntyre's framework will be supplemented by, and at times contrasted with, the views of others whose treatments of ethics have a similar focus).

Perhaps more problematic, though, is the fact that thinkers as various as Aristotle, Aquinas, Mencius, and Xunzi—all of whom could arguably be characterized as virtue ethicists—possess widely differing

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(see Slingerland 2000), I will say that I find their position to be extremely speculative. Though the various strata no doubt represent different time periods and somewhat different concerns, they display enough consistency in terminological use and philosophical and religious conceptualization to allow us to treat the text as a genuine representation of the state of the "School of Confucius" before the innovations of Mencius and Xunzi. The probable later date of last chapters in the *Analects* (esp. chaps. 15–20) should be kept in mind throughout the discussion that follows, but this should not affect the substance of the arguments made.

[2] This point is also explored by Chong Kim Chong in his criticism of D. C. Lau (Chong 1998).

secondary theories and even practical theories,[3] and because of this MacIntyre himself has questioned the degree to which these histori-cally and culturally diverse visions are in any way commensurable (MacIntyre 1991). This certainly calls into question attempts to treat Confucius as a virtue ethicist by focusing on specific *content*—especially those attempts that present us with a laundry list of virtues that are then compared to the Aristotelian virtues.[4] While I agree that such approaches are flawed, I also question MacIntyre's conclusion that the Confucian and Aristotelian traditions are ultimately incommensurable. Instead, I would like to suggest that, despite the quite different *content* of the respective visions of human flourishing found in the two tradi-tions, there is a *structural* similarity with regard to the means by which these specific visions are thought to be realized. Although they do not share a set of specific virtues, there is a commonality concerning the manner in which human excellences, their acquisition, and their cul-tural transmission are conceptualized. This commonality is a candidate for being the sort of Confucian-Aristotelian "shared structure" that MacIntyre found lacking (MacIntyre 1991, 110).[5]

I will endeavor to support this latter claim by organizing a discussion of the *Analects* around a list of structural characteristics culled primar-ily from MacIntrye's *After Virtue.* Accordingly, each of the sections that follow will begin with a brief discussion of a specific characteristic of MacIntyre's virtue ethics; the remainder of each section will be devoted to exploring parallels in the *Analects.* My hope is that this will not only help to illuminate the *Analects* but will also suggest a dimension of structural commensurability between the Aristotelian and Confucian traditions that can serve as a historically and culturally responsible starting point for comparative work.

[3] The distinction between "primary" theories (fairly universal across cultures and con-cerned mostly with physical features of the natural world) and "secondary" theories (cul-turally specific metaphysical and theoretical explanations built up from primary theories) was originated by Robin Horton. Lee Yearley takes up this distinction and supplements it with the idea of "practical" theories, which combine elements of both primary and second-ary theories and are thus most relevant to concerns about human action and flourishing. For an explanation of the relevance of these categories for comparative work, see Yearley 1990, esp. chap. 5.

[4] This is the approach of George Mahood, the one Confucian-Aristotelian comparativist MacIntyre discusses in his 1991 essay.

[5] I suspect that MacIntyre's perception of incommensurability arises, at least in part, from his reliance on Hall and Ames's "aesthetic" interpretation of the *Analects.*

1. Shaping Dispositions through Practice

A "virtue" is defined by MacIntyre as "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods" (MacIntyre 1981, 178, emphasis omitted). For MacIntyre, virtues cannot be understood except in the context of socially constituted, cooperative practices that contain their own internal goods and standards of excellence. The virtues themselves are acquired through systematic training in these practices, which produces in individuals stable dispositions to act and to perceive the world in certain ways.

These dispositions have been compared to a kind of know-how, or skill, and as such go beyond anything that can be adequately characterized by rules. The deontological reliance upon rules is therefore the aspect most criticized by advocates of virtue ethics. Conceiving of the moral project in terms of following rules also involves subscribing to a false picture of human beings as purely rational, algorithm-following agents; furthermore, it overlooks the ethical importance of situation-specific judgment. Good judgment, it is claimed, is confined by deontologists such as Immanuel Kant to the aesthetic realm—to the private realm of matters of taste—and can no longer serve its proper function in the public realm of ethics.

To be fair to the Kantian tradition, we can observe, along with J. B. Schneewind, that what is attacked by virtue ethicists is often a caricature that ignores the role of practical reason in Kant's thought (Schneewind 1990). Kant recognized the need for pragmatic, situation-specific judgment in applying universal principles to specific situations, and his defenders therefore argue that the gulf between a sophisticated Kantianism and virtue ethics is not as large as it might at first seem.[6] Even so, there remains a crucial point of difference with respect to the role of *emotions* and inclinations in practical judgment. For Kant, emotions and nonrational inclinations are essentially heteronomous. They thus have no role to play in truly moral action, which must spring from a sense of duty *(aus Pflicht),* rather than from inclination *(aus Neigung)* (Kant 1964, 66; 1786, 10). For a virtue ethicist, however, emotions possess a crucial cognitive function and thus play a necessary role in the development of virtuous dispositions. The purpose of virtue training is to engender an independent, emotional-intellectual disposition to realize excellence. From its very beginning, then, training in a practice requires a certain degree of *emotional* engagement as well as intellectual reflection, and this requirement only increases with time.

[6] For this point, I am indebted to an anonymous JRE referee.

The Confucian project of self-cultivation, aimed at producing an individual (the "gentleman" or "sage") endowed with the virtue of *ren*[a],[7] involves a strict regimen of training in which the individual subordinates himself to traditional standards of practice and judgment. This training advances along two main fronts: ritual practice *(li*[b]*)* and study *(xue*[c]*).* After extended training in these practices, the emotions are ultimately harnessed to produce moral behavior, which springs spontaneously from personal inclination. That the inner state of the actor be harmonized with outer behavior was crucial for Confucius. Not only was there no place for Kantian duty, but any such duty-bound behavior would have been considered by a Confucian to be forced and inauthentic. Thus, for example, the praise of the later Confucian Mencius for the sage-king Shun was quite anti-Kantian: "[H]is actions flowed from *ren*[a] and *yi*[d] ['rightness']; he did not merely put them into practice" *(Mencius* 4:B:19).[8] Shun was considered virtuous precisely *because* he acted *aus Neigung* rather than *aus Pflicht*. The need to harness the emotions for moral ends was also indicated by the emphasis Confucius placed upon the role of music in self-cultivation. Music was considered by the early Confucians to be one of the most powerful tools for shaping the emotions, and the metaphor of musical perfection also served for Confucius as a metaphor for the perfected spiritual state.[9]

Because the goal is to harness the emotions to produce an autonomous disposition, the process of self-cultivation requires (at least after the preliminary stage) the active participation of the student.[10] Confucian study, for instance, involves more than merely passive absorption of knowledge: study (what one hears from teachers and reads in the classics) and thinking (how one processes and integrates this knowledge)

[7] The supreme Confucian virtue of *ren*[a] is often translated as "benevolence," "human-heartedness," or (most literally) "humaneness" or "humanity." Since it is cognate with the word for person (the two characters are homophonous and graphically related), perhaps *ren* is best rendered as the virtue of being "truly human." For discussions of this term and its evolution, see Shun 1993 and the works referenced therein. It will be left untranslated throughout.

Superscript letters attached to transliterations refer the reader to an appendix of Chinese characters at the end of the article.

[8] The famous Song commentator Zhu Xi explained: "*Ren* and *yi* were already rooted in his heart, and all of his actions sprang from there; it is not the case that he merely valued *ren* and *yi* and therefore forced himself to put them into practice" (Zhu Xi 1987, 112).

[9] See Cook 1995 for an excellent discussion of this theme. It is very telling that the utilitarian Mozi rejected Confucian music, failing to see the moral value of music because the cultivation of emotions and dispositions played no role in his extremely voluntaristic ethical scheme.

[10] It is clear that the Confucian process of education (like most initiations into a practice) required a great deal of rote learning in the beginning stages.

must be properly balanced (*Analects* 2.15).[11] Indeed, the ideal student is the one who comes to the project possessed by an inchoate need for what study is able to provide. While Confucius certainly saw the role of traditional knowledge as being much more important than Socrates did, there was nonetheless a similar maieutic quality to his method: "The Master said, 'I will not enlighten a heart that is not already struggling to understand, nor will I provide the proper words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again'" (*Analects* 7.8; cf. 1.16, 5.27, 15.16). Similarly, the rites were not understood to be merely rigid forms of behavior to be performed in a mechanical fashion; rather, they were understood to require an emotional commitment on the part of the practitioner. "If I am not fully present at the sacrifice," Confucius observed in 3.12, "it is as if I did not sacrifice at all" (cf. 3.26, 19.1).[12] The goal in ritual performance was to achieve the proper balance between *zhi*[e] ("native substance," that is, raw emotions and feelings) and *wen*[f] ("acquired refinement"), to avoid being either an uncouth brute or an affected pedant: "The Master said, 'When native substance overwhelms cultural refinement, the result is a crude rustic. When cultural refinement overwhelms native substance, the result is a foppish pedant. Only when culture and native substance are perfectly mixed and balanced do you have a gentleman'" (6.18). The practice of becoming a "gentleman" and of successfully cultivating *ren*[a] thus involves striking the proper balance between social forms (the rites, the objects of study) and individual participation (the emotions, intellectual curiosity).

2. Autonomy, Spontaneity, and Virtue

Although the training through which virtues are acquired proceeds according to a general set of rules or principles, the actual decisions made by a person with fully virtuous dispositions are both more flexible and more authoritative than the rules themselves. Thus, once a practice has been mastered, in the sense that the requisite virtues have been fully developed, this mastery brings with it a certain independence from the rules that constitute the practice: the master is able to reflect upon

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[11] All quotations from the *Analects* are my own unless otherwise noted and follow Lau's 1979 section numbering. Subsequent parenthetical citations of the *Analects* will give only the relevant section number. For all other references, the author-date style of documentation will be used.

[12] Indeed, one of Confucius's great concerns was that, in his decadent age, the rites *had* degenerated into mere formal patterns of behavior and were no longer accompanied by the appropriate feelings (2.7, 17.11).

the rules and may even choose to transgress or revise them if, in her best judgment, this is what is required to realize the good or goods specific to that practice. Practice mastery thus brings with it a type of *transcendence:* the freedom to evaluate, criticize and seek to reform the practice tradition itself.

The harmony that is achieved between inner emotional states and the dictates of morality allows the Confucian sage to act in accordance with the principles and rules by which ethical practices are constituted, while at the same time displaying a level of autonomy and flexibility impossible for one who is merely "going by the book." Indeed, one cannot be said to have properly mastered a set of principles until one knows how to apply them skillfully and in a context-sensitive manner. As Confucius noted in 13.5, "Imagine a person who can recite the three hundred Odes by heart but, when delegated a governmental task, is unable to carry it out or, when sent out into the field as a diplomat, is unable to use his own initiative—no matter how many Odes he might have memorized, what good are they to him?" The goal was to develop a *sense* for the practice, and not to be overly constrained by its formal rules. Clinging too rigidly to codes of moral conduct would cause one to lose sight of morality itself; it would be better to hold fast to a developed sense for what is right *(yi^d)* and respond with flexibility to the situations that present themselves. "Acting in the world, the gentleman has no predispositions for or against anything," Confucius explained in 4.10. "He merely seeks to be on the side of what is right *(yi^d)*" (cf. 15.37). This sort of situation-centered reasoning resembles Aristotelian *phronesis,* and ultimately "what is right" in the ethical realm corresponds to what the gentleman (that is, the good person) would do.

Indeed, the entirety of book 10 of the *Analects*—an extended account of Confucius's ritual behavior—can be seen as a model of how the true sage flexibly adapts the principles of ritual to concrete situations. Although this book is often skipped over in embarrassment by Western scholars sympathetic to Confucianism but nonetheless appalled by the seemingly pointless detail and apparent rigidity of behavior,[13] this discomfort is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding. While the scope and detail of Confucian ritual certainly (and quite rightly) seems alien to a modern Westerner, it is important to understand that what is being emphasized in this chapter is the ease and grace with which the Master embodied the spirit of the rites in every aspect of his life (no matter how trivial) and accorded with this spirit in adapting the rites to new and necessarily unforeseeable circumstances. For instance, 10.23 reads:

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[13] Section 10.6 is fairly representative: "Under a black jacket, he wore lambskin; under an undyed jacket, he wore fawnskin; under a yellow jacket, he wore fox fur. His informal fur coat was long but with a short right sleeve" (Lau's translation).

"When receiving a gift from a friend—even something as valuable as a cart or a horse—he did not bow unless it was a gift of sacrificial meat." There was, of course, no specific clause in the rites that dictated this specific response to this particular situation; rather, Confucius, by virtue of his sensitivity to the ritual value of sacrificial meat relative to a sumptuous but nonceremonial gift, simply *knew* how to respond properly. That Confucius's flexibility in applying the rite is the theme of book 10 is made clear in the last passage, 10.27: "Startled by their arrival, the bird arose and circled several times before alighting upon a branch. [The Master] said, 'This pheasant upon the mountain bridge—how timely it is! How timely it is!' Zilu bowed to the bird, and then it cried out three times before flying away." This poetic, somewhat cryptic passage seems like a *non sequitur* at the end of a chapter devoted to short, prosaic descriptions of ritual behavior—unless, that is, it is seen as a thematic summary of the chapter as a whole. "Timeliness" *(shi^g)* was Confucius's particular forte; indeed, he is known to posterity (through the efforts of Mencius) as the "timely sage": the one whose ritual responses were always appropriate to circumstances. As Mencius explained:

> When Confucius decided to leave Qi, he emptied the rice from the pot before it was even done and set out immediately. When he decided to leave Lu he said, "I will take my time, for this is the way to leave the state of one's parents." Moving quickly when it was appropriate to hurry, moving slowly when it was appropriate to linger, remaining in a state or taking office when the situation allowed—this is how Confucius was. . . . Confucius was the sage whose actions were timely [*Mencius* 5:B:1].

We have thus seen that, by internalizing the rules and conventions that define a practice such as the rites, one is able at the same time to achieve a certain degree of autonomy in applying them. This autonomy, in turn, can allow one a certain degree of critical distance: Once the meaning embodied in the norms is grasped, the norms themselves can potentially be evaluated, criticized, or even altered. Hence, we have the famous passage, *Analects* 9.3, where Confucius acceded to a modification in the rites: "The Master said, 'A cap made of hemp is prescribed by the rites, but nowadays people use silk. This is frugal, and I follow the majority. To bow before ascending the stairs is what is prescribed by the rites, but nowadays people bow after ascending. This is arrogant, and —though it goes against the majority—I continue to bow before ascending.'" It is certainly possible to exaggerate the iconoclastic character of this passage.[14] Nonetheless, we can appreciate the sense of it without

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[14] We should note that the change to which Confucius acceded was a minor one, and that he did not actually *propose* changing the rite, but simply went along with a popular practice (with possibly a hint of reluctance).

ignoring Confucius's profound conservatism: rites were regarded as expressive of a certain feeling (this constituted their "meaning"), and thus an alteration in the actual rite was permissible if it would not, in the opinion of one who had mastered the rites, alter its essential meaning.

3. Community and Role

Virtue ethics asserts the importance of one's contingent social identity against the Kantian ideal of a characterless moral self, and it never loses sight of the fact that we "always approach our circumstance as bearers of a particular social identity" (MacIntyre 1981, 200). As Annette Baier has noted, individuality is not something someone *has,* and then chooses relationships to suit, but is something that develops out of a series of dependencies and interdependencies and one's responses to them (Baier 1994, 24). Thus, against the universal (and therefore characterless) duties and rights championed by deontology, virtue ethics emphasizes that excellence is always *role-specific.*

The crucial role that community plays in Confucian self-cultivation is clear. One does not learn to cultivate *ren* in solitude, but rather through fulfilling one's role-specific social duties and participating in a judgment community of fellow practitioners, under the careful tutelage of one's teacher. Confucian moral excellence is thus firmly grounded in the role-specific duties of an individual located within a specific familial and social context. As Yuzi, a disciple of Confucius, explained in 1.2:

> It is unlikely that one who has grown up as a filial son and respectful younger brother will then be inclined to defy his superiors, and there has never been a case of one who is disinclined to defy his superiors stirring up a rebellion. The gentleman applies himself to the roots. Once the roots are firmly planted, the Way [*dao*^{h}]^{15} will grow therefrom. Might we thus say that filiality and brotherly respect represent the root of *ren?* [cf. 1.4, 1.6, 2.10]

The formation of a student's character, rooted in family and social duties, is then supplemented by the presence of an interactive community of fellow practitioners. One of the great satisfactions mentioned by Confucius in 1.1 is the joy one feels "to have companions arrive from afar"—a sentiment whose importance might seem a bit puzzling to a modern Westerner not acquainted with the idea of "character-friendship" in the Aristotelian sense.^{16} What Confucius meant by a companion or "friend" (*you*^{i}) was a person who shares one's moral aspirations, and this was the sense in which he warned that one should not befriend a person "who is

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^{15} The "Way" of the world encompasses both its physical (natural) and moral aspects.

^{16} For a discussion of Aristotelian virtue-based friendship, see Cooper 1980.

not as good as oneself" (1.8; cf. 9.30, 16.4, 16.5). One is to compare one-self with other people in general in order to evaluate one's moral prog-ress (4.17, 7.22), but the fellowship provided by a friend in virtue combines a powerful spur to further moral development with a deeply felt solidarity of purpose—an important solace during the long and ardu-ous process of self-cultivation. As Confucius explained in 15.10, the practice of *ren* is like learning a craft, and one "sharpens one's tools" by seeking out the company of like-minded souls. Similarly, a true friend in virtue serves as a support and comfort. The gentleman "relies upon his friends for support in becoming *ren*" (12.24).

A teacher is also essential, for what is being conveyed in moral train-ing is neither a set of rules nor a system of rote routines, but rather a certain "knack" for moral sensitivity. The title and form of the *Analects* is in this respect very revealing. "Analects" means, literally, "the ordered sayings [of the Master]," and the volume comprises conversations be-tween the Master and his students, anecdotes about the Master's con-duct in various situations, and selected admonitions from the mouths of the Master and certain of his disciples. The context-sensitive nature of Confucian teaching puts a great deal of responsibility upon the teacher, who must tailor doctrine to meet the specific individual needs of the disciples. This explains why Confucius defined *ren* in several different ways, depending upon who was questioning him,[17] and gave spiritual advice to some disciples that contradicted the advice given to others.[18] Similarly, the emphasis placed upon learning through emulation of role models contributes to the importance of the teacher, who serves as a third element—along with the social-familial role and the community of fellow practitioners—defining the context in which moral self-cultivation is to be pursued.

4. The Importance of Tradition

Social roles are inherited from and characterized by tradition. There-fore, in contrast to the Enlightenment suspicion of tradition, virtue ethicists perceive tradition as playing an essential and *positive* role in constituting individual identities. Being initiated into a social practice requires accepting the authority of the teacher, as well as the standards of excellence handed down by the practice tradition. Similarly, our un-derstanding of who we are and what we are to strive for is largely given

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[17] See especially book 12.

[18] See *Analects* 11.22. This might be compared with the Buddhist practice of *upaya,* in which the Buddha tailored his message to suit the spiritual level of his audience. Western moralists of a Kantian bent would probably see this practice as glib mendacity, or at least a deplorable failure of principle, but it is a common feature in a virtue ethic.

to us through tradition; there is no way to possess the virtues, for instance, "except as part of a tradition in which we inherit them and our understanding of them from a series of predecessors" (MacIntyre 1981, 119). Excellence in a practice is not achieved through an individual act of will or burst of primal creativity; it is gradually developed in the context of a judgment community of fellow practitioners. One's self-perception is thus not something that needs to be freed from the heteronomous influence of tradition and community; rather, it is inevitably bound up with recognition of and participation in some sort of communally transmitted good. Thus, Bernard Williams notes that the sense of shame as an ethical concept—disparaged in the Kantian tradition as primitively heteronomous—serves an important purpose in restoring the positive role of other people in one's ethical life at the same time that it sets limits to personal moral autonomy by circumscribing the power of autonomous reason to decide on its own questions of right and wrong (Williams 1993, 94–102). A similar point is made by Charles Taylor in arguing that the Nietzschean/Sartrean conception of "absolute choice" is ultimately incoherent, since the issue of what is and can be significant for me, far from being something that I decide, is something that is given to me by my society.[19]

Of course, Confucianism is well known for its traditionalism. The essence of *ren*—which, as I have noted, is the highest of Confucian virtues —is manifested in the legacy from a past Golden Age, which Confucius fought to keep alive. *Ren* was to be sought by practicing the rites of the glorious Zhou Dynasty and studying the words of the *Odes* and the other classics. "I transmit rather than innovate" was Confucius's famous claim in 7.1. "I am faithful to and have a love for antiquity" (cf. 7.20). The traditional practices that Confucius so treasured play an essential constitutive role in the formation of a virtuous individual. The rites, for instance, serve to restrain and transform one's natural emotions and desires, reining in excess, refining crudeness, and allowing one to achieve the proper mean: "The Master said, 'If you are respectful but lack ritual training you will become exasperating; if you are careful but lack ritual training you will become timid; if you are courageous but lack ritual training you will become unruly; and if you are upright but lack ritual training you will become inflexible'" (8.2). Not only does the form of the rites—along with the eloquence of the *Odes* and the restrained lyricism of music—thus temper one's natural responses (1.12, 8.8, 17.8), but one would also be quite

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[19] With regard to Jean-Paul Sartre's famous example of existential choice, Taylor notes that the two options are both already endowed with social meaning: staying home to care for one's mother or going off to fight in the Resistance. As he quite sharply concludes, "I couldn't claim to be a self-chooser, and deploy a whole Nietzschean vocabulary of self-making, just because I choose steak and fries over poutine for lunch" (C. Taylor 1991a, 39).

helpless to express oneself without them (7.6, 16.13). Similarly, the accumulated wisdom of the classics is to form the very basis of one's thinking *(si^j)*. Thinking outside the context of such study might be compared to randomly banging on a piano in ignorance of the conventions of music: A million monkeys given a million years might produce something, but it is better to start with the classics. "I once engaged in thought for an entire day without eating and an entire night without sleeping, but it did no good," the Master confided in 15.31. "It would have been better for me to have spent that time in study" (cf. 17.10, 11.25). This accounts for Confucius's avid devotion to the classics (5.28, 7.17, 7.18, 7.28), as well as his strict adherence to the rites: "He would not sit unless his mat was properly arranged" (10.10).

5. Internal versus External Goods

The fact that the goods that can appear to us as proper objects of pursuit are given to us by our society does not inevitably lead to complete social conventionalism. In contrasting "internal" and "external" goods, MacIntyre explains how the standard of the internal goods proper to any given practice serves as a check upon the influence of merely instrumental goods (MacIntyre 1981, 176). Internal goods can be realized only in the exercise of the practice itself and can be identified and judged only by someone well versed in that practice. Furthermore, as we come to recognize and understand the goods internal to a given practice, we gradually come to take *pleasure* in that practice. Thus, while we might be induced to take up a given practice by the promise of some external good, we do not become true practitioners until the practice becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an external end. The cultivation of the ability to recognize and value internal goods therefore has a liberating effect on the practitioner—not only does it make available to her a unique class of internal goods, the realization of which is subject only to the constraints of the practice itself, but it also unchains her from the endless and endlessly dissatisfying pursuit of instrumental goods that in themselves are empty of value and meaning.

However, the existence of these internal goods also limits the creativity that can be exercised by the practitioner. As MacIntyre explains, all practices place demands upon the practitioner. In pursuing the good internal to the practice, she is to adhere to a traditional body of rules and standards, and any innovations in the practice or criticism of these rules and standards can only take place within a framework of intelligibility defined by the tradition. Practices allow for, but resist and limit, change. The conception of creativity and freedom of expression found in virtue ethics is therefore something quite different from what one finds in, for instance, the Romantic ideal of the genius/artist. The "creative"

practitioner does not draw upon her idiosyncratic genius in order to call forth something unique and unprecedented; rather, she perceives novel possibilities inherent in the practices into which she has been trained, thereby pushing the practice in a new direction. The sort of changes brought about by practice-instantiated creativity are necessarily *evolutionary* rather than *disjunctive,* because they grow out of the shared standards of the practice-community and are constrained by the weight of authority and tradition.

Turning again to ancient China, we find that mastery of the rites and the traditional canon was a means to social status, political power, and a government salary, and no doubt many were induced to undertake this sort of training by the prospect of such goods. Confucius was appalled by this phenomenon. "In ancient times scholars worked for their own improvement; nowadays they seek only to win the approval of others," he lamented in one passage (14.24). "It is not easy to find someone who is able to study for even the space of three years without the inducement of an official salary," he observed in another (8.12; cf. 14.1, 7.12). Granted, a complete novice has little or no conception of what sort of internal goods a given practice might have to offer, and it is therefore understandable (and probably necessary) that children be encouraged by various forms of external encouragement and coercion. Confucius, however, was not in the business of teaching children;[20] the sort of student he desired was one who had gotten beyond the allure of external goods and had caught a glimpse of the Way. While the attainment of external goods was not held to be incompatible with a moral life—and in a good society was indeed to be expected—the aspiring gentleman was to concentrate upon the goods that can be acquired only through Confucian practice: the joy involved in classical study and ritual performance, for instance, or the satisfaction provided by genuine virtue. As Confucius explained in 15.32, "The gentleman is worried about the Way and not about poverty" (cf. 1.14, 4.16). Not only was it thought that the true practitioner would be motivated by internal rather then external goods, but it was also recognized that the pursuit of these internal goods might actively conflict with obtaining such external goods as social status. The gentleman's devotion to rightness *(yi^d)* would prevent him from currying favor, and Confucius was very suspicious of those who were too glib or popular (1.3, 5.25, 16.4, 17.17). The gentleman might wish to gain social approval, but only for the proper reasons and from the proper people:

> Zigong asked, "What would you make of a person whom everyone in the village praised?"

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[20] In the later Confucian tradition, however, the education of children became an important focus, due, no doubt, to the insight common to many virtue-ethic traditions that character formation begins in early childhood.

> The Master said, "I would not know what to make of him."
>
> "What if everyone in the village reviled him?"
>
> "I would still not know. Better this way: those in the village who are good praise him, and those who are not good revile him" [13.24; cf. 12.20, 15.21, 15.22, 15.28].

Confucius was thus quite contemptuous of the "village worthy" *(xiangyüan*[k]*)*—one who derived no real joy from the Confucian Way but nonetheless engaged in Confucian practices in order to obtain social approval. Such a man Confucius called a "thief of virtue" (17.13). Practices might also conflict with material concerns. In 3.17, Zigong wished to do away with the practice of sacrificing a sheep at the new moon in the interest of economy. Confucius replied, "Zigong! You regret the loss of the lamb, whereas I regret the loss of the rite."

This focus upon the goods internal to Confucian practice freed the gentleman from the vicissitudes that attended external goods, and with this freedom (and the psychological strength it conferred) came joy *(le*[m]*)*. In 6.11, Confucius praised his favorite student, Yan Hui, because his dire economic situation did not detract from his joy in the Way. In 7.16, the Master rhapsodized: "Eating plain rice and drinking water, having only your bent arm as a pillow—there is certainly joy to be found in this! Wealth and fame attained improperly *(bu yi*[l]*)* concern me no more than the floating clouds." As excellence in Confucian practice increases, the joy of freedom from the tyranny of external goods combines with the joy of satisfaction in the internal goods of the activity itself. The Master heard the music of the great sage-king Shun and "for three months did not even notice the taste of meat" (7.14); "I never imagined that music could be so sublime" was his explanation.[21] Hearing that the Governor of She had asked Zilu about Confucius, Confucius remarked, "Why did you not just say something like this: 'He is the type of person who becomes so absorbed in his studies that he forgets to eat, whose joy renders him free of worries, and who grows old without noticing the passage of the years'?" (7.19). It is precisely this sense of joy that distinguishes a true practitioner from one who has not yet seen the Way. In 6.20, Confucius described the progression of affective states that a Confucian practitioner must experience: "One who knows it [i.e., *ren* or the Way] is not the equal of one who loves [*hao*[n]] it, and one who loves it is not the equal of one who takes joy [*le*[m]] in it." That is, it is not enough to *know* the meanings of the rites and the contents of the canon; the *Analects* repeatedly speak of "being fond" *(hao*[n]*)* of virtue (9.18, 15.13), *ren* (4.6), the rites (1.15, 13.4, 14.41), and righteousness (12.20, 13.4). Once this stage is

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[21] It should be noted that the pleasure afforded by virtuous activity is not of a simply sensual nature, but rather results from the satisfaction of ethically refined sensibilities.

reached, one will be firmly situated within the practice proper to a true human being and will thus be at ease in the world (4.1, 4.2).

The pursuit of internal goods can also lead the practitioner to call for reforms within the practice tradition itself, when it is perceived that the contemporary forms no longer allow for the flourishing of those goods. This was arguably what drove Confucius himself to further develop the traditional conception of what constitutes a "gentleman" *(junziᵒ)*. Although the term originally referred to noble birth, Confucius quite radically employed it to describe *any* truly worthy man, regardless of birth or social status.[22] Despite his claim that he merely transmitted and did not innovate, Confucius's moralization of *ren*[23] and democratization of "Virtue" *(deᵖ)*[24] were similar advances over the traditional conceptions of the terms. However, these developments were not arbitrary or disjunctive but, rather, evolutionary in nature—involving only broadening the scope of the original meanings. As is the case with all language change, the manner in which Confucius came to use these terms *had* to be at least somewhat contiguous with their traditional meanings for his usage to be at all comprehensible to his contemporaries. The creative freedom of the Confucian gentleman to propose or accede to alterations in the rites (as, for example, in *Analects* 9.3, cited at the end of section 2) was similarly constrained by the traditionally constituted "meaning" of the rite. This necessary element of continuity with tradition was what allowed Confucius to see himself as merely a transmitter of traditional values.

6. The Need for an Overarching *Telos*

Human beings engage in a variety of social practices, and the claims of different practices and the unique goods that they provide often conflict. Practices must therefore be ranked in terms of some overall *telos*— the good of a whole human life (MacIntyre 1981, 189). The true nature of human actions is distorted when they are analyzed in terms of atomistic "basic actions" or in behaviorist terms that ignore intentions, beliefs,

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[22] That this radicalness was limited is indicated by the fact that the *junzi* was still conceptualized in exclusively male terms.

[23] In its earliest usages, *ren* meant something like "handsome" or "nobly formed" and referred to the appearance of the aristocratic *junzi*. In other early usages, it referred to the kindness shown by a superior to an inferior. See Shun 1993, 457, 476, nn. 1, 2, for further details.

[24] *De* signifies a particular kind of moral charisma or power, customarily translated with a capital *V* to distinguish it from "virtue" in a more general sense. In pre-Confucian usage, possession of *de* was the prerogative of the ruler, whereas Confucius felt that it could be acquired by any virtuous person. For a discussion of the evolution of this term, see Nivison 1997, 18–43.

and narrative context, for human actions have a historical character —that is, they are fully intelligible only when considered in terms of the larger narrative context or life story of which they are a part. This is what leads David Wiggins, for example, to declare that the question of life's meaning is the most fundamental for philosophy (Wiggins 1988).

The primary criticism leveled by virtue ethicists against utilitarianism is that they have missed this fundamental point. By speaking of morality in terms of maximizing some particular "good," utilitarians end up reducing *all* goods, preferences, ideas, and desires to the same level (see, for instance, Williams 1985, 85–88). Most commonly, Wiggins notes, all ultimate value is reduced to the level of human appetitive states—ignoring the fact that the beauty of an archway or of some sublime natural phenomenon "may appear to be of an altogether different order of importance from the satisfaction that some human being once had from his breakfast" (Wiggins 1988, 140). Deontology is similarly criticized as being context-deprived. MacIntyre criticizes deontological ethical theories as a "survival," a mishmash of "rules, attitudes, and responses which had once been at home within some larger context in terms of which their intelligibility had been spelled out and their rationality justified but which had become detached from that context" (MacIntyre 1990, 29).

Unlike more limited practices such as the martial arts or artisan crafts, the Confucian practices described and advocated in the *Analects* —ritual training, study, the enjoyment of music—share a very lofty *telos:* the production of a gentleman, one who possesses the overarching Confucian virtue of *ren.* As such, these particularly Confucian practices make up a sort of master practice—the practice of becoming a fully realized human being. In 19.7, Zixia likened the practice of the gentleman to more mundane practices ("The myriad artisans remain in their workshops in order to perfect their crafts, just as the gentleman studies in order to realize his Way"), but with the clear implication that the way of the gentleman is the higher and more inclusive path. Confucius himself was keenly aware of the larger scope of his own practice, and this no doubt accounts for his famous admonition, "The gentleman does not serve as a vessel" (2.12), as well as his occasionally expressed contempt for more limited practices. When a man from Daxiang sarcastically criticized Confucius's lack of technical ability ("How great is Confucius! He is so broadly learned, and yet has failed to make a name for himself in any particular endeavor"), Confucius responded with an equally sarcastic rhetorical question to his disciples: "What art, then, should I take up? Charioteering? Archery? I think I shall take up charioteering" (92; cf. 9.6, 9.7, 13.4). It is important to note that Confucius was critical not of these practices in themselves (indeed, accomplishment in archery was one of the marks of a gentleman, and archery metaphors were well loved

by Confucius), but only of the pursuit of such practices without an over-arching *telos* to put them in perspective. His fear was that one could become so caught up in the limited internal goods of the more mundane practices that one would lose sight of the whole.

Indeed, even the Confucian practices themselves are meaningful only to the extent that they are informed by the virtue of *ren*. As Confucius noted in 3.3, "A man who is not *ren*—what has he to do with ritual? A man who is not *ren*—what has he to do with music?" This is why *ren* is seen as the general Confucian virtue, defined in terms of the perfection and harmony of the lesser virtues (13.19, 13.27, 14.4, 17.6). The *ren* person is usually referred to as the "gentleman," but is sometimes also referred to as the "complete person" (*chengren*q; 14.12)—that is, one who possesses all of the other virtues in full and in the proper proportions. Whether Confucius believed in the unity of the virtues in the strong sense is not entirely clear, but (*pace* MacIntyre 1991, 106) it seems he did subscribe to the weaker (and more plausible) version of this doctrine.[25] While he sometimes seemed to offer guarded approval of certain disciples whom he described as possessing some virtues but not others (5.7, 11.3, 11.18), he also echoed Aristotle's opinion that a virtue like courage, in isolation, is dangerous (8.10, 17.23). In 17.24, Confucius both criticized imbalances in the virtues and discussed semblances of virtue (virtue-like behavior without the guidance provided by the unifying virtue of *ren*).

The gentleman is thus one who possesses the various Confucian virtues in their proper proportions and thereby brings the Confucian practice to completion: "The Master said, 'The gentleman takes rightness as his substance, and then puts this substance into practice by means of ritual, gives it expression through modesty, and perfects it by being trustworthy. Now that is a gentleman!'" (15.18). Cultivating this master virtue is a lifelong task, proceeding through many stages and involving other, lesser virtues. It also requires for its realization a unique virtue that, as MacIntyre notes, makes sense only in relationship to a life *telos:* that of constancy or integrity. Although not recognized as a specific, named virtue in the *Analects,* such constancy is clearly valued as a character trait. In 19.12—which describes the incremental progression of

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[25] In its strong sense, the doctrine of the unity of the virtues holds that no virtue can exist in isolation and requires that a truly virtuous person possess all of the virtues in full and in their proper proportion. As Yearley has argued with respect to Aquinas's treatment of the unity of the virtues, the strong form of this doctrine is not entirely plausible (Yearley 1990, 34–35). A weaker version holds that a truly virtuous person might possess more of one virtue (say, courage) than another (say, wisdom), but also holds that courage *entirely* uninformed by wisdom would be mere recklessness—a *semblance* of the true virtue. In this sense, a truly virtuous person would have to possess all of the virtues to some degree, but could excel in some rather than others.

Confucian training, beginning with the most mundane of tasks—this trait is spoken of as the ability to "start at the beginning and work through to the end." Confucius acknowledged the difficulty of this task, as well as its lifelong nature, in his spiritual autobiography in 2.4: "At age fifteen I set my heart upon learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I became free of doubts; at fifty I understood the Heavenly Mandate; at sixty my ear was attuned; and at seventy I could follow my heart's desire without overstepping the bounds of propriety."

As this account of spiritual evolution illustrates, constancy is required to achieve *ren* (to stay on the path and persevere), but once *ren* is achieved, this constancy comes to permeate every aspect of the gentleman's life. The final stage—being able to follow the heart's desire without overstepping the bounds—reflects the manner in which acting in a *ren*-fashion becomes a sort of second nature: "The gentleman does not violate *ren* even for the amount of time required to eat a meal. Even in times of urgency or distress, he does not depart from it" (4.5). When the gentleman's purpose or ambition *(zhiʳ)*[26] is fully grounded in *ren, ren* will permeate every aspect of his life; he will be strong and firm like the pine and cypress in winter (9.28), without doubt or fears (9.29), and naturally flawless in conduct. "Merely set your heart sincerely upon *ren,*" Confucius claimed in 4.4, "and you can do no wrong."

Despite the crucial importance of *ren* in the Confucian scheme, one is nonetheless struck by its rather indeterminate character. His disciples often questioned Confucius directly about *ren,* and his answers varied.[27] Similarly, he was very reluctant to say that any given person possessed this virtue (see 5.8, 5.19, 7.26, 7.33, 14.1). This reluctance extended even to himself (7.34). Despite his sharp criticisms of various individuals, Confucius was wary about making definitive judgments about people. When it was disclosed that the disciple Zigong was given to going about grading people as to their moral worth (14.29), Confucius responded caustically: "What a worthy man that Zigong must be! As for me, I hardly have the time for such activities."

The apparent vagueness surrounding *ren* is related to the problematic nature of judgments of character. There is always the danger of taking a semblance of virtue or a counterfeit virtue to be the true thing, and the only way to distinguish between true and false displays of virtue is

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[26] *Zhi* is often translated as "ambition." "Ambition," however, has certain negative connotations not present in the Chinese term. *Zhi* refers to one's mental/dispositional projection toward the future and is thus tied to the idea of a life plan. Confucians, for this reason, often assess a person's character by evaluating his or her *zhi* (see 5.26 and 11.26).

[27] Of course, such variation is not always an indication of indeterminacy in the concept; as I noted at the end of section 3, it often is correlated with variations in individual pedagogical needs.

to see the particular act in the larger context of the actor's life. A true virtue is a stable disposition to act in a certain way, not a quality adhering to a particular action. In order to determine whether or not a particular person is courageous, for instance, it is necessary to observe that individual in a variety of potentially dangerous situations over a long period of time. Similarly, the motivations of others are often opaque, and an apparently courageous action (such as standing and fighting against an advancing enemy) may be the result of a less than virtuous impulse (such as the fear of being punished for fleeing). Moreover, if one holds to any version of the doctrine of the unity of the virtues, a truly courageous action would have to be informed by the entire constellation of virtues that constitute a properly lived human life; thus, to judge a person truly "courageous" would require a comprehensive knowledge of his life course and ambitions. The ascription of true virtue to any person or act is therefore problematic, and this no doubt accounts for Confucius's reluctance in 5.8 to accord the description *ren* to any of the disciples mentioned by Meng Wubo. The fact that *ren* functions as the ultimate *telos* defining the narrative arc of an individual's life means that no final judgment concerning whether a given person possesses *ren* can be delivered until that life has been completed. *Ren* is thus often portrayed as the dimly perceived and ever-receding goal of a work eternally in progress:

> With a great sigh Yan Hui lamented, "The more I raise my head the higher it seems; the more I delve into it, the harder it becomes. Catching a glimpse of it before me, I find it suddenly at my back.
> "The Master is skilled at gradually leading one on, step by step. He broadens me with culture and restrains me with the rites, and even if I wanted to rest I could not. Having exhausted all of my strength, it seems as if there is still something left, looming up ahead of me. Though I desire to follow after it, there seems to be no way through" [9.11].

7. The Claim to Universality

Perhaps the most contentious issue facing contemporary virtue ethicists concerns the ontological status of this overarching life *telos,* and their various answers to this question are what mark them off most distinctly from traditional virtue ethicists in the West, whose visions of the good life were firmly situated in religious worldviews. In the case of Aristotle, this *telos* was given by a metaphysical biology. If we deny Aristotle's concept of species-specific goods, MacIntyre notes, "there remains only the individual self with its pleasures and pains" (MacIntyre 1990, 138)—that is, a meaningless life of sensual pleasure and irresoluteness. In the case of Augustine, meaning and order were provided by Christian

faith: faith in the teachings of the Church, faith in one's teacher, and the humility to subject oneself to the order that is to be found in Scripture.

Suspicion of traditional religious worldviews leads modern virtue ethicists to formulate the human *telos* in naturalistic terms, that is, in terms of some sort of conception of human nature.[28] In the opinion of Julius Moravcsik, all "adequate considerations of 'meaning of life' questions turn out to be based upon conceptions of human nature" (Moravcsik 1981, 199). Williams, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* agrees: the level of objectivity we need to be able to claim for our moral insights seems to require a theory of human nature. He admits the difficulty of developing a theory of human nature that will command wide agreement, but he nonetheless claims that such a theory "represents the only intelligible form of ethical objectivity at the reflective level" (Williams 1985, 153). Charles Taylor feels that any effort to present a formal theory of ethics without getting involved in substantialist claims will ultimately fail in the face of a "radical question of justification" (C. Taylor 1991b, 30). For instance, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action must eventually answer the question, "Why be rational?" and the answer to such a question inevitably involves what Taylor calls a "strong valuation."[29]

Agreeing only that Aristotle's metaphysical biology is no longer viable, contemporary virtue ethicists seem to be arranged between two extremes with regard to this question of human nature. On one side are those like James Wallace, who feel that a naturalist account of human good along the lines of the biological study of other species is perfectly plausible (he describes this as using the *form* of Aristotle's project while rejecting the *content* [Wallace 1978, 35]). Wiggins seems to inhabit this end of the spectrum as well, with his belief that values combine anthropocentrism and objectivity as unproblematically as do concepts such as color (Wiggins 1988, 142–43). Somewhere more toward the middle are those like Martha Nussbaum, who believe it possible to provide a "thin" account of the virtues based upon "spheres on human activity" and certain "grounding experiences" (Nussbaum 1988, 36). MacIntyre, in *After Virtue,* and Williams, in *Shame and Necessity,* define the other end of the spectrum. MacIntyre implies that the answer to the question "What is the good life for man?" could at least provisionally be answered

[28] Such an attempt to ground ethics in claim about human nature would, of course, be abhorrent to Kant (Kant 1964, 92–93; 1786, 59).

[29] Habermas seems to appeal to some implicit conception of human beings as *zoon echon logon* (the "talking/reasoning animal"), and even Kant was eventually forced to refer to a substantialist picture of human nature: "as we *are* rational beings, we should act in line with this, as it is our nature. We should respect reason both in ourselves and others" (C. Taylor 1991b, 30).

by considering "what all the answers to the former question ['What is the good life for me?'] have in common" (MacIntyre 1981, 203). He also claims that at least some virtues are universal and necessary for any human practice to flourish (MacIntyre 1981, 180–96). On the other hand, he also claims that the "narrative quest" of a human life (which gives it its *telos*) is "not at all a search for something already adequately characterized, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil"; on the contrary, it is "always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge" (MacIntyre 1981, 204). He thus rejects out of hand anything like Aristotle's metaphysical biology. His point seems to be that although some general outline of a human *telos* is needed in order for human beings to function as ethical beings (and even to choose practices in which to engage), the results of the "quest" of life cannot be predefined: the picture is never complete. Williams expresses an even stronger objection to any sort of determinate picture of human nature. We should, he writes, be "wary of the extent to which we allow ourselves to be led back to the ideas of Aristotle" (Williams 1993, 160). Attending instead to the worldview expressed in early Greek tragedy, we should realize that the world will never be more than partially intelligible; neither will it be well adjusted to our ethical aspirations.

If we put this modern Western debate aside for the moment, it is clear that an appeal to universality is part of the structural vision of the *Analects.* Confucius assumed the model of the "complete person," who fully embodied the *telos* toward which all human beings should strive, to be valid for *all* people.[30] This was because the ideal of becoming a *ren*-person was not conceived to be a merely contingent practice but, rather, was seen as correlating human beings with the will of Heaven. Confucius's call for a return to the ritual practice of the Zhou was a response to what he perceived as a Heavenly mandate *(tianming^s)* to reinstate the religious dynamic that had existed between the early Zhou rulers and the universe. As Donald Munro has described it, the relationship established through ritual between the Confucian gentleman and Heaven represented a democratization of the exclusive relationship that previously existed between Heaven and the Shang and early Zhou kings, who derived the Virtue that allowed them to rule by obeying the

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[30] Barbarians, who, being outside of the Chinese cultural sphere, lacked the proper ritual practices, were described as living a less than human life, although they, too, were considered to have the potential to become "true people" if properly educated (3.5, 13.19). Although Confucius shared the patriarchal orientation of his day and apparently never considered the idea that women could become sages, stories from the later Confucian tradition (for example, the *Lienu Zhuan* or "Biographies of Exemplary Women") credited women with the capacity to reason in the same moral terms as men and often portrayed women as upbraiding their husbands or sons for ritually incorrect or morally questionable behavior. See Raphals 1998 for a discussion of the place of women in early China.

Mandate of Heaven—that is, by adhering to the practices that reflected the design of Heaven (Munro 1969, 61–63). It was the will of Heaven that one follow the Way and that the culture of the Zhou be re-established (3.24, 9.5). Understanding the Mandate of Heaven was described as a crucial step in self-cultivation (2.4, 16.8, 20.3). Like many versions of traditional Western virtue ethics, then, the ethical project of Confucius was inextricably linked to a carefully articulated theistic vision.[31]

In addition to this theistic justification, though, one rather late passage—*Analects* 17.21—seems to move toward grounding the Confucian Way in human biology. A certain Zai Wo complained to Confucius that the three-year mourning period for one's parents was too great a burden and suggested that it be shortened to a single year. Confucius responded that if he felt comfortable shortening the period of mourning, he should do so. After Zai Wo left, however, Confucius remarked bitterly to his disciples, "How lacking in *ren* this Zai Wo is! A child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for three years—this is why the three-year mourning period is a universal custom. Did not this Zai Wo receive three years of love from his parents?" Here the universality of a three-year mourning period was linked to an essential characteristic of human biology: the helplessness and dependence of the child through the third year. The length of the mourning period was therefore not arbitrary, but grounded in the very nature of human experience.

Such a direct link between Confucian practice and human nature was rarely discussed in the *Analects,* but later it became a major element in the thought of Mencius. The Confucian tradition in this way came to espouse a metaphysical biology very similar in function to Aristotle's picture of human nature. Although this biology continued to retain a theistic flavor in Mencius, by the time of the later Confucian Xunzi, it had become thoroughly naturalized: by living according to the rites and realizing the *telos* of Confucian practice, the individual simply took his proper place in the cosmic order. This, in turn, became a very common theme in late Warring States and early Han Confucian texts. In the *Zuo Zhuan,* for instance, the practice of the rites was explicitly linked to the structure of the cosmos and to human nature:

> Ritual is that which ties together what comes above and what comes below—it is the warp and woof of Heaven and Earth. It is that by which the people live, and it is for this reason that the former kings thought so highly of it. Thus the man who has the ability to either curb himself or straighten himself so as to rush forward toward ritual we may call a "complete person" *(chengren^q)* [quoted in Cook 1995, 36].

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[31] For the often neglected religious aspects of Confucianism, see R. Taylor 1990.

This is a conclusion of a much longer passage in which, according to Scott Cook,

> ritual is portrayed as nothing less than the overall name for that which in human society lends support to basic human nature *(xing^t),* by means of a strict systematization, regulation, and delimitation of human behavioral manifestations and inclinations . . . which accord with the natural regulating principles inherent in the operations of Heaven and Earth [Cook 1995, 36].

8. Conclusion

I am inclined to agree with scholars such as Nussbaum, Taylor, and (the early) Williams that a certain degree of objectivity must be claimed for the moral insights achieved in a virtue ethic if they are to present themselves to the practitioner as real life options.[32] Without the element of universality lent to a virtue ethic in the form of substantialist claims about human nature, it is difficult to see how the slide into cultural relativism—which would reduce any virtue ethic to a mere "notional" curiosity—can be checked. Aware of how such claims about human nature have historically been used to oppress and marginalize, we are, of course, justifiably uneasy about making them, and the postmodern attempt to undermine universalism in general can arguably be attributed to the moral outrage aroused by such past abuses. Nonetheless, as Taylor has so eloquently argued, it would seem that "it belongs to human agency to exist in a space of questions about strongly valued goods," and that such strong valuations inevitably entail claims about an "ontology of the human" (C. Taylor 1989, 31, 5). This does not mean that our conception of human nature needs to be absolutely fixed. We can imagine something like Stuart Hampshire's open-ended conception of shared human nature as "a set of shared potentialities . . . not arbitrarily asserted or assumed, but rather . . . tested by argument and evidence of many different kinds" (Hampshire 1989, 31). While deriving its force from the belief that it is our best account to date, such a conception would be constantly open to expansion or revision, and our task as comparative philosophers would be to test it through contact with alternate conceptions.

That such conceptions of human nature can be developed in a sophisticated manner has already been demonstrated in the work of contemporary philosophers such as Nussbaum. Recent empirical work in linguistics and anthropology seems even more promising. Steven Pinker,

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[32] In the sense of Williams's distinction between "real" and "notional" confrontations (1985, 160). It goes without saying that such "objectivity" would necessarily be understood as *anthropocentric* objectivity.

Donald E. Brown, and others have been documenting what they believe to be a set of linguistic and social universals that underlie the apparent riot of diversity that prevails among various human cultures.[33] In the field of cognitive science, scholars such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson are elaborating a conception of "embodied realism" that would explain commonalities in the structure of human cognitive metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987). Similarly, in this article I have drawn parallels between Confucian and Aristotelian conceptions of self-cultivation in an effort to identify crosscultural commonalities in human experience—in this case, in the way human beings are initiated into and pass on traditions of social practice.

The sort of approach to human flourishing suggested here might help to address MacIntyre's concern about how an encounter between Confucianism and Aristotelianism can get beyond mere warranted assertability to statements of truth that are *adaequatio intellectus ad rem* (MacIntyre 1991, 112ff.). The participants in the discussion are not, in fact, starting from radically incommensurable intellectual frameworks, because they all have some access to an extradiscursive realm of "things" that can help to adjudicate specific differences. To claim that such extradiscursive demonstrability is *a priori* impossible is to remain imprisoned in the Cartesian paradigm that continues to inform postmodernism and the various forms of sterile linguistic and cultural relativism that it has spawned. The appeal of something like "embodied realism" is the image of human beings already existing with one foot firmly planted in a shared world of bodies and things, and thus always at least partially free of the tyranny of culture and language. This is not to deny the existence of very real (and perhaps intractable) points of difference and barriers to understanding between cultures, but rather to suggest that turning our attention to the space of embodied commonality can at least allow the conversation with the "other" to begin in earnest.

[33] See, for example, Pinker 1994, Brown 1991, Tooby and Cosmides 1990 and 1992, and the works cited therein. Inspired by Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG), Brown's project is to characterize a "Universal People (UP)."

APPENDIX

a 仁	k 鄉愿
b 禮	l 不義
c 學	m 樂
d 義	n 好
e 質	o 君子
f 文	p 德
g 時	q 成人
h 道	r 志
i 友	s 天命
j 思	t 性

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