The Confucian Conception of the Political

Loubna El Amine

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS

Adviser: Charles Beitz

November 2012
For my parents
Abstract

Confucianism is often presented as a primarily moral philosophy. Recent work on Confucianism has been mainly concerned with unearthing core Confucian ethical concepts, like *de* (virtue), *ren* (humaneness or benevolence), and *li* (ritual propriety), from which implications about Confucian political thinking are drawn. Differently from this conventional view, I focus in this dissertation on the passages on government and politics in the early Confucian texts. I present Confucianism as a political philosophy, and argue that its political dimension is neither secondary to, nor does it directly follow from, its ethical dimension. More specifically, I contend that the central motivating concern of Confucian political thought is the preservation and promotion of political order.

Political order can be separated into two levels: on a basic level, order is the absence of disorder, chaos, and war. In pursuit of order, the Confucians countenance the hereditary succession to the throne or, alternatively, the rule of hegemons. They also favor the imposition of strict but restricted punishments, and the pursuit of welfare policies aimed at fulfilling the basic needs of the common people. Ideally, however, the Confucians prefer a more complex level of order that is also more lasting: they recommend the establishment of a ritual system that, by assigning social roles according to ability and making social distinctions visible, encourages the division of labor in society, prevents conflicts over scarce resources, and promotes harmony.

Contrary to the conventional view, the development of virtue for all members of society is not the goal of Confucian government, even when it aims at harmony. The common people are not typically expected to become virtuous though they are encouraged, through welfare policies, and through rituals, to develop qualities of loyalty and productiveness. It is the Confucian
gentlemen, the junzi, for whom politics is an arena for the development of virtue, as they seek, and obtain, roles as ministers. This role is to be sought even under a corrupt ruler since the aim of the Confucian gentleman is not only to develop his personal virtue, but also to promote political order in society.
Acknowledgments

It is only fitting for a dissertation on Confucianism to start with an acknowledgment of debts incurred towards teachers, friends, and family. But I write this with great delight as well, not for having internalized the sense of duty, which only Confucian sages can do, but because I have been very fortunate to have the supportive, kind, and inspiring teachers, friends, and family I have had.

First and foremost, I wish to express my gratitude to my advisors. Chuck Beitz has been supportive of my project since its inception, and has always been available to talk, to read, and to provide feedback and reassurance. He has patiently read and commented on my chapters in their numerous versions, constantly reminding me not to lose track of the bigger picture. Alan Patten’s encouragement has been crucial for me in writing this dissertation, and in my PhD experience more generally. He has helped me conceive of the nature and form of this project, and has ensured that many a bad argument did not make it into the dissertation. Willard Peterson has welcomed me and my project since the first day I landed in Jones Hall, and has generously provided tutorials on Chinese history and intellectual history. Our discussions have assisted me in honing the angle through which I chose to study Confucianism and in making me mindful of the historical context and issues at stake. Finally, Steve Angle has graciously accepted to become part of the dissertation committee more than two years ago and has since provided continuous guidance, feedback, and tips. He has challenged me to think carefully through the view on Confucianism I offer in this dissertation, and his commitment to Chinese philosophy has been an inspiration.
I have also greatly benefited from discussing my work with many more persons than I can mention here, but particular thanks are due to Tongdong Bai, Daniel Bell, Joseph Chan, Martin Kern, Melissa Lane, Steve Macedo, Kwong-loi Shun, and Yang Xiao. I also owe a particular debt to Mick Hunter for patiently answering numerous questions on Classical Chinese and on the history of early Chinese texts. For reading and commenting on particular chapters, I am very grateful to Sandra Field, Kirk Johnson, Karuna Mantena, Geneviève Rousselière, Zakir Paul, and Bernardo Zacka. Earlier versions of Chapters 3 and 4 have been presented at the Workshop on East Asian Perspectives on Legal Order, organized by the Asia Research Institute and National University of Singapore, in collaboration with the Centre for Ethics, University of Toronto (Singapore, August 2010) and at the Mid-Atlantic Region Association for Asian Studies Conference (Princeton, October 2011), respectively. Finally, I want to thank Xu Xiangdong at Peking University for sponsoring my stay in Beijing in 2009, and the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, the University Center for Human Values, and the East Asian Studies Program for funding this and other China-related trips. I also thank UCHV and PIIRS for year-long dissertation writing fellowships that provided me with vital support allowing me to complete this dissertation.

There is an old Arabic proverb that says: Seek knowledge even if in China. It was not necessity, however, that led me to China. All the credit for lighting this enchanting and novel path to me goes to my mentor at the American University of Beirut, Yahya Sadowski, who recommended the study of East Asia when it was (and still is) more customary in the Arab world to direct inquiries inwards and to consider China a faraway, inaccessible place. When I arrived at Indiana University, Bloomington, it was Robert Eno’s course on Classical Chinese Philosophy that introduced Confucianism at its most colorful to me.
Moving now to the personal plane, I am thankful to Ghassan Zeineddine for his companionship during many years of writing this dissertation, and for many pleasurable hours spent working together in cafés in Beirut. Katy Ghantous has provided me with a Beirut in Princeton with her hospitality, good-naturedness, and perpetual readiness for a party. It has been comforting to have someone like her share my two worlds, and to spend hours mulling together over identity crises. Geneviève Rousselière and Sandra Field have been a constant source of academic advice, stimulating intellectual and political discussions, and life (and cooking) tips. It has been such a pleasure having them as friends, and it is not an exaggeration to say that Princeton would not have been the same without them. Finally, I feel very lucky to have met Kirk Johnson, particularly at the difficult time when I did, and to have enjoyed since the delightful benefits of his patient ear, soothing words, and contagious curiosity.

My brothers Mehdi and Ramzy have had many occasions to tease me about Confucius and the PhD in the past few years. It is not only with their characteristic humor, however, but also with much gentleness, that they have both, though each in his own way, cheered me on all throughout. My parents, Adnan El Amine and Fadia Hoteit, have always been an inspiration to me, for their intellectual, political, and ethical commitments. They have not only done all they could to provide the three of us with the enabling conditions (the Rawlsian “basic structure”) to have a good life, but they have also left us the freedom to decide what this would mean for each of us, offering their unwavering support along the way.
Note on translations and transliterations


I have used Lau’s translation of the Analects and the Mencius, and Knoblock’s of the Xunzi’s, as default translations when quoting directly from the texts: where a translator is not specified, it should therefore be assumed that it is Lau (for the former) or Knoblock (for the latter). In the cases where I quoted a different translation, I have indicated explicitly the name of the translator in the footnotes.

I have adopted the Hanyu Pinyin system for the Romanization of all Chinese characters throughout, including the names of Chinese authors.
Table of Contents

I- Introduction: Ethics and politics in early Confucianism ........................................ 1
  I- The conventional view ................................................................................................. 4
  II- A new approach to Classical Confucianism ............................................................ 9
  III- Comparison to other views on the relationship between ethics and politics .......... 13
  IV- The historical background of early Confucianism .................................................. 19
  V- Dissertation outline .................................................................................................... 30

II- Political order ............................................................................................................ 36
  I- The virtue argument ..................................................................................................... 38
  II- The democracy argument .......................................................................................... 44
     Succession to the throne ............................................................................................... 45
     Removing a bad ruler .................................................................................................... 54
     Ruler and ruled .............................................................................................................. 58
  III- Hegemons .................................................................................................................. 63
  IV- Order-promoting policies .......................................................................................... 74
  V- Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 83

III- A harmonious society .............................................................................................. 84
  I- The case against the Mohists and the Legalists ......................................................... 86
  II- Rituals .......................................................................................................................... 98
     Communal bonds ........................................................................................................... 101
     Restraining desires ....................................................................................................... 102
     Social distinctions ........................................................................................................ 103
     Public display .............................................................................................................. 105
     Harmony ...................................................................................................................... 107
     Enriching and strengthening the state ......................................................................... 109
     The question of human nature .................................................................................... 111
  III- Filiality ....................................................................................................................... 115
  IV- Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 123

IV- Rulers and ministers ................................................................................................. 131
  I- Promoting the worthy ................................................................................................. 133
II- Xunzi’s vision ........................................................................................................ 145

III- Insubordinate ministers ......................................................................................... 155

IV- Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 167

V- Appendix ................................................................................................................. 172

V- Political involvement ............................................................................................... 175

I- The Confucians in history ......................................................................................... 176

II- The virtue of political involvement .......................................................................... 178

III- Dilemmas of political life ....................................................................................... 187

1. Mencius ................................................................................................................... 188

2. The Analects ............................................................................................................ 206

3. Xunzi ....................................................................................................................... 218

IV- Heaven .................................................................................................................. 221

V- Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 229

Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 230

Epilogue: Global political theory .................................................................................. 236

I- The methodological question ..................................................................................... 237

II- The Western tradition ............................................................................................... 244

1. The place of the “Western tradition” in the practice of the history of political thought 245

2. The sociological and political basis for the Western tradition .................................... 254

III- Toward a “global political theory” ......................................................................... 265

- The human condition ................................................................................................ 266

- Implications ............................................................................................................... 272

Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 276
I- Introduction: Ethics and politics in early Confucianism

Asked about the meaning and origins of the category of the political, political theorists are likely to turn to their early Greek repertoire. We know that the word for politics comes from the Greek word *politikos*, which means “of, or pertaining to, the *polis*.” A common translation for the “*polis*” is the city-state, and Athens and Sparta are its models. The idea of a “political science,” or *politikê epistêmê*, originated with Aristotle. We also inherited from Aristotle, and from Socrates and Plato, the familiar themes of political theory, such as the tension between individual freedom and responsibility towards one’s community, the contrast between public and private interest, the nature of democracy and its discontents, the concept of justice, and the idea of civic virtue.

While we can thus trace our ideas about the political from the early Greeks through Augustine and Aquinas, Machiavelli and Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, Kant, Marx, and Rawls, the question naturally arises as to how thinking about politics developed outside the Western tradition. Places beyond Europe certainly had their rulers and their rules and their thinkers who assessed these rulers and rules. As John Dunn puts it,

the view that the subject matter of the history of political theory has been essentially confined (at least until very recently) to the reflexive experience of Europe and its diaspora is not merely culturally offensive. It is also impossible to defend. Wherever there have been literate civilizations of any political scale or longevity (in China, in the Islamic world, in Japan, in India, in Indonesia, in nineteenth-century West Africa), there have developed traditions of understanding of prominent and undeniably important aspects of politics.\(^1\)

---

Whether or not they had an equivalent category for the Greek concept of the political, the question can still legitimately be raised about these non-Western traditions’ conceptions of political life, i.e. about their ideas on how societies are, and ought to be, governed.

Confucianism might not at first appear as the most likely candidate for a project that is motivated by such a question for, like other “Eastern” schools of thought, its wisdom has generally been understood to be moral or spiritual in kind, rather than political. This is not especially surprising insofar as the Classical Confucian texts, the Analects, the Mencius and the Xunzi, are largely made up of disparate sayings that typically express the Confucian Masters’ judgment about a person’s conduct in society. To illustrate, the first entry in the Analects goes as follows:

The Master said: ‘Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar? Is it not gentlemanly not to take offence when others fail to appreciate your abilities?'

Social relationships are central to the early Confucian texts. The latter are full of guidelines about how to treat parents, siblings, neighbors, friends, and superiors. Anecdotes about the proper relationship between parents and sons especially abound. Mencius, for example, relates the story of Shun who persisted in his obedience to his parents despite their cruelty towards him. As the story goes, Shun’s parents once asked him to fix the roof of the storehouse and then set fire to it while he was repairing it. On another occasion, they made him go down the well and then covered the well with him inside. Nevertheless, Shun remained unwavering in his

---

2 Even the famous “Manifesto for a Re-appraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture,” prepared by prominent Chinese intellectuals in 1957 and addressed to their Western counterparts, includes in the section on “What the West can Learn from Oriental Thought” only spiritual and moral ideas like accepting the present, adopting all-embracing wisdom, developing compassion, perpetuating culture and treating the world like one family. See “Manifesto” in Carsun Chang, The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought (New York: Bookman Associates, 1962), 455-483.

3 Analects 1.1.
respect for them, an accomplishment which, recognized by the extant emperor, was to earn him the position of next emperor.4

The preponderance of anecdotes about social relationships should not, however, mask the fact that the anecdotes relating to government are also plentiful, easily constituting half of the content of the texts. The Mencius thus starts with a presumed encounter between Mencius himself and King Hui of the state of Liang in which Mencius encourages the king to give up concern for profit in favor of ren 仁5 and rightness (yi 義).6 The Xunzi includes chapters on the regulations of kings, on enriching and strengthening the state, on the Way of ministers, and on military affairs. In fact, it is precisely the intriguing question of the relationship between its ethical and its political components that makes Confucianism an interesting case to study. To return to the story of Shun, we can glean already in the anecdote reported above the intertwining of ethics and politics, for it reveals not only the importance of filial piety, but also of the virtues worthy of a good ruler, which Shun was to become.

As Benjamin Schwartz has argued, one should think of the Confucian texts as working along two dimensions: an ethical dimension concerned with “self-development” (xiu shen 修身, xiu ji 修己), and a political dimension concerned with the “ordering of society” and the “pacification of the world” (zhi guo 治国, ping tian xia 平天下). The relationship between the two is fraught with a certain tension, indicated by Schwartz’s use of the concept of “polarity” to

---

4 Mencius 5A.2.
5 A wide controversy surrounds the translation of ren into English. Stephen Angle translates it as “humaneness,” Gongquan Xiao, as well as D.C. Lau, as “benevolence,” Edward Slingerland as “goodness,” Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont as “authoritative conduct,” while others yet, like Benjamin Schwartz, prefer to leave it un-translated. I follow Schwartz in leaving it un-translated. I offer a justification for my choice in Chapter 3.
6 Mencius 1A.1.
characterize it. In his 1985 book, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, Schwartz argues, in relation to the concept of the *Dao* (道) – the Way – in the *Analects*, that it refers, in its most expansive meaning, to the whole sociopolitical order: this includes the different social and political roles to be performed—starting in the family—and the rituals governing the performance of these roles. On the other hand, the *Dao* also “emphatically” refers to the “inner” moral life of the individual. Schwartz thus contends that “a central problematique of the *Analects* involves the relation between the two.”

I- The conventional view

The problem with the way this relation has been understood in much of the English language literature on early Confucianism is that it has been morphed into a one-sided relationship where politics is wholly dependent upon ethics, thus dismissing the fruitful tension between the two. Indeed, prominent writers on Chinese political thought, including Joseph Needham, Gongquan Xiao, Feng Yulan, D.C. Lau, and Herbert Fingarette work with the assumption that Confucian politics are the logical conclusion of Confucian ethics and that the second is therefore more important than the first. Thus Lau writes that “Mencius’ political philosophy … is not only consistent with his moral philosophy but is derived from it. Ancient

---

9 Thus Needham argues that “in early Confucianism there was no distinction between ethics and politics.” See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, v. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 9.
Chinese thinkers all looked upon politics as a branch of morals.”¹² Heiner Roetz similarly argues that Confucius politics is “subordinated to a moral goal” which is “the cultivation of man … his moral elevation.”¹³ In an introductory book on Chinese philosophy, Jeloo Liu writes that “Confucians believe that morality is an indispensable element in politics: the ideal ruler should be a sage king; the ideal function of government is to morally transform its people.”¹⁴ These commentators typically identify core Confucian virtues and then argue that the preferred Confucian political arrangement is the one that allows for the development of these for all (or most) members of society. For example, in Herbert Fingarette’s little book, Confucius: The Secular as Sacred (1972), which set the tone for much of the contemporary philosophical re-appraisal of Confucianism, the emphasis is on ceremonial ritual and its centrality to moral flourishing. When it comes to Confucius’ political vision, Fingarette interprets it as being aimed at propagating the same value of ceremonial ritual through an emphasis on the need for cultural unity for the competing regional states of the day, on the grounds that culture is necessary for the development of ceremony.¹⁵

Famously, William Theodore de Bary has argued that this dependence of Confucian politics on ethics, specifically with relation to the idea of a “sage king,” is “the trouble with Confucianism,” “there from the start, to become both a perennial challenge and a dilemma that

---

¹² D.C. Lau, Introduction to Mencius, 37. In addition, when listing Mencius’ contributions to Confucian thought, Lau mentions no idea relating to politics. Indeed, he sums up Mencius’s contributions as being worthy of a “true mystic.” See Lau, Introduction to Mencius, 45-6.


¹⁵ Herbert Fingarette, Confucius: The Secular as Sacred (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1972), 64.
would torment it through history.”

Similarly, Stephen Angle struggles with the idea of the “interdependence” between morality and politics as a “central tenet” of Confucianism. He takes this interdependence to be the main challenge in adapting Confucianism to a modern, democratic politics, given the weight it gives, according to him, to the presence of a virtuous ruler on top of the political system, to the detriment of institutional constraints on the ruler’s actions.

Recent attempts to rethink Confucianism have thus centered on recasting core Confucian ethical values into a more appealing political vision than the one offered by the early texts. Angle’s solution to the sage king problem rests on rethinking the implications of key Confucian ideas, such as the idea that each and every person can become virtuous, and the idea that virtue requires political involvement, to imagine a more democratic and inclusive form of politics.

Likewise, in *The Democracy of the Dead* (1999), Hall and Ames suggest, on the basis of “the unsuitability of the central tradition of rights-based liberalism for the Chinese situation,” that essential Confucian tenets, like the emphasis on rites, “might well be translated into a communitarian form of democratic society.” Their student, Sor-hoon Tan, takes her lead from core Confucian ideas like *ren* and rituals to offer a distinctive form of “Confucian Democracy” that combines Confucianism and the pragmatism of John Dewey and that builds on the idea that “ethical ends are political ends, and vice-versa, in early Confucianism.”

---

20 Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (New York, SUNY Press, 2004), 131. Similarly, Ranjoo Seodu Herr argues that Confucianism is compatible with democracy by focusing on the Confucian notion of *ren*, which she translates as “humanheartedness.” She contends that *ren* allows us to see the “continuity between ethics and politics” whereby politics is concerned with self-realization. Democracy follows from the recognition of the equal potential of all for self-realization. See Herr, “Confucian Democracy and Equality,” *Asian Philosophy* 20:3 (2010): 270.
while explicitly rejecting what he calls the “depoliticization” of the *Analects* (a reference to the approach of contemporary best-selling Chinese author Yu Dan, who focuses on the spiritual dimension of the text), also discusses the moral values advanced by the early Confucians more than he discusses their own political vision. Bell draws on the work of Chinese intellectual Jiang Qing who is interested in what he describes as “Political Confucianism”\(^{21}\); the proposals he advocates, such as a bicameral legislature (to track both merit and popular representation),\(^ {22}\) owe more, as he says, to Jiang’s “political imagination than to ancient texts.” He argues, however, that such imagination is precisely what is necessary in a forward-looking interpretation of core Confucian ideas, like hierarchy, ritual propriety, and merit that would yield a distinctively Confucian form of democracy.\(^ {23}\)

To some extent, the focus on a set of core Confucian moral values can be understood as a continuing reaction to the critique of Confucianism by modernization enthusiasts, Chinese and Western. For example, during the May Fourth movement (1915-1921), Chinese protesters called for the repudiation of Confucianism and the establishment of constitutionalism, democratic freedoms, and individual rights. In the middle of the century, the Chinese Communists also attacked Confucianism for its patriarchal conception of the family, its hierarchical leanings, its relegation of the least educated to the lowest rung of society, and its promotion of hypocrisy on the part of the ruler towards the masses.\(^ {24}\) To counter these charges, it was necessary to elicit the “best” in Confucianism, and build upon it a modern politics. This was the strategy pursued in the interlude between the May Fourth Movement and the Cultural Revolution (1960s), when

---

22 Bell, *China’s New Confucianism*, 14.
23 Bell, *China’s New Confucianism*, 180.
disillusionment with Western ideals encouraged the reevaluation of Confucianism through a turn toward “the interpretation of Confucius’ ethical concepts.”\textsuperscript{25} It is also this same approach that has been pursued since the 1970s. As Yu Yingshi, an eminent Chinese-American historian puts it, “In the West today we are more inclined to see Confucianism as a way of life involving faith and spiritual values,” in contradistinction with “a crude but once dominant notion that Confucianism was no more than a political ideology that functioned to legitimate imperial authority.”\textsuperscript{26} Thomas Metzger also describes Chinese intellectuals of the 70s and 80s as “sifting through the impure ore of their past to extract a “spirit” of morality which could serve for the future.”\textsuperscript{27}

Another reason why Confucian politics are relegated to a secondary status in comparison to Confucian ethics can be traced to the great Confucian commentator, Zhu Xi (1130-1200). At the risk of over-generalization, it might be contended that, until the twentieth century when efforts to look at Confucianism afresh multiplied, Chinese interpreters after Zhu Xi read Confucianism through the lens of moral self-cultivation. Zhu Xi is considered as the most influential proponent of what is now known as Neo-Confucianism, which is characterized by a concern with the development of the inner self. Zhu Xi was in fact so influential that his selection and commentary on four Classical texts (the \textit{Analects}, the \textit{Mencius}, the \textit{Great Learning}, and the \textit{Doctrine of the Mean}),\textsuperscript{28} known as the “Four Books,” became the canon for learning and formed, from the fourteenth century until 1905, the foundation of the curriculum for the Chinese

\textsuperscript{25} Louie, \textit{Critiques of Confucius in Contemporary China}, 177.
\textsuperscript{26} From the introduction to Hoyt Tillman, \textit{Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), ix. Yu also argues that “if we trust Confucius’ \textit{Analects}, then the sage’s original vision was focused decidedly more on personal cultivation and family life than on the governing of the state. Or, we may say, Confucius was primarily concerned with moral order and only secondarily with political order,” from de Bary et al, Roundtable discussion on the trouble with Confucianism, \textit{China Review International} 1(1): 27-8, quoted in Angle, \textit{Sagehood}, 190.
\textsuperscript{28} The \textit{Xunzi} was excluded presumably because of Xunzi’s argument that human nature is bad.
imperial civil examination system. In recent attempts to present Confucianism to the modern world, Zhu Xi’s influence is still felt. For example, William Theodore de Bary and Du Weiming earned their eminent place in Confucian scholarship by unearthing a “liberal” strand in Confucianism based on its concern with the individual’s inner life. Thus, in The Liberal Tradition in China (1983), de Bary sheds light on what he considers Confucius’s reformist creed and on the “vitality,” “creativity,” “critical temper,” strong individualism, voluntarism, and concern with self-development characteristic of the Neo-Confucianism of the Song period (960-1279 C.E.).

Similarly, in Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation (1985), Du showcases Confucian authors and ideas that exhibit a concern with self-realization.

II- A new approach to Classical Confucianism

In recent work by Chinese intellectuals, the taken-for-granted dependence of the Confucian political vision on its ethical dimension is being rethought. Stephen Angle thus discusses some recent Confucians scholars, the so-called “New Confucians,” who have taken up the issue of the tension between ethics and politics. He mentions Xu Fuguan (1902-82) who identifies two distinct standards in Classical Confucianism: a standard for self-cultivation aimed at virtue, and a standard for government aimed at the satisfaction of people’s “natural lives,” i.e. their physical needs. This leads Xu to favor, in his thinking about an updated form of Confucian politics, “public standards” that are different from, and more attainable than, the

30 See also Chenyang Li, “Confucian Value and Democratic Value,” Journal of Value Inquiry 31: 2 (1997), where the author, having quickly dismissed the argument that Mencius’ conception of government is democratic, moves on to inquiring about core Confucian values and their compatibility with core democratic values.
31 Angle, Sagehood, 191. See also Honghe Liu, Confucianism in the Eyes of a Confucian Liberal: Hsu Fu-Kuan’s Critical Examination of the Confucian Political Tradition (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 72-82.
standards one should impose on oneself in one’s private life. Angle also discusses the views of 
Mou Zongsan (1909-95) whose “political project is an effort to pry apart ethical and political 
values,”

by advocating restrictions on the pursuit of morality in politics.

In this dissertation, my aim is to not to argue that the Confucian approach to politics
should not follow from Confucian ethics, but to show that it does not, as a matter of fact, do so. I
do this by taking the political discussions in the Classical Confucian texts as my starting point.
In other words, instead of considering the discussions of rulers, ministers, political exemplars,
rituals and regulations as secondary or antiquated,
I take them to be central to understanding
Confucian political theory, and to showing that the latter is not a direct application of Confucian
ethical doctrine.

While I do not necessarily disagree with Bell and the other contemporary interpreters of
Confucianism on the need for “imagination,” I engage in this dissertation in a different kind of
project, one that is more concerned with a close interpretation of the early Confucian texts than
with how Confucianism can be adapted to the modern world. Historical curiosity is not the only
reason for my study. This project is also important for assessing the assumption that the
Confucian political vision is wholly derived from Confucian ethics, and for providing a detailed
account which would allow for understanding this vision well. I will therefore offer, on the one
hand, a systematic account of Confucian politics based on the passages relating to government,
rulers, ministers, the people, rules and regulations, etc., a number of which has been ignored in

---

32 Angle, Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy, 24.
33 Yuri Pines also takes as a starting point for his most recent book his “wish to reverse the loss of interest in the
political sphere of pre-imperial Chinese intellectual history in the West during the last twenty years.” See Yuri Pines,
Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era (Honolulu: University of Hawaii
Press, 2009).
34 Thus Yu Ying-Shih argues that “for a modern reader, passages in the Analects dealing with the art of government
are no longer relevant, even though historically interesting,” from de Bary et al, Roundtable discussion on the
trouble with Confucianism, China Review International 1(1), 27-8, quoted in Angle, Sagehood, 190.
the secondary literature on Confucianism. On the other hand, I will ask how the political dimension fits with the ethical components of the early texts.

My argument is that the relation between Confucianism’s ethical and political dimensions is much less direct than it is often thought to be. What commentators have missed, I contend, is the Confucian concern with political order (zhì 治). Indeed, Confucian political philosophy is motivated by the same problem that Sheldon Wolin identifies as central to Western political philosophy, namely, the problem of how “to render politics compatible with the requirements of order,” that is, “how to reconcile the conflict created by competition under conditions of scarcity with the demands of public tranquility.” I argue that the success of political rule in Confucianism is judged by its own standard, independent of the standards the Confucians use for the assessment of individual life. This standard is the standard of order. On a basic level, political order means the absence of chaos. It is produced through the fulfillment of the basic security and welfare needs of the common people. The Confucians recognize a political society that fulfills this level of order, without producing any of the virtues propounded in their ethical teachings, as acceptable. Rulers and ministers who help achieve this level of order are also approved of. Moreover, it is incumbent on Confucian gentlemen to promote political order in their society.

On the other hand, in its more exalted, and thus more durable, form, order is not merely the absence of disorder. It is harmony. Harmony (hé 和) is not a concept that the early Confucians use much, but it is a useful one for my purposes here. It is useful because it is a

---

36 Angle discusses harmony as a central concept for Neo-Confucians, but it carries with it for the latter thinkers a metaphysical dimension that is absent for the early Confucians. Thus Angle defines harmony as the “realization of coherence,” where coherence is meant to capture a certain underlying pattern to the world and to our place in it. It is beyond the scope of my aim to elaborate on this, but for an illuminating discussion on coherence and on harmony, see Angle, *Sagehood*, 31-50 and 61-74, respectively.
normative standard that operates on both the ethical and the political planes, thus signaling the overlap between the two. On the personal level, it is coordination achieved in one’s interactions with those around. On the political level, harmony is coordination between different segments of society. Harmony, on the personal level, is not itself a virtue, but the consequence of the attainment of the core Confucian virtues: ren 仁, rightness (yi 義), wisdom (zhi 智) and ritual propriety (li 禮), in addition to other important Confucian virtues, like dutifulness (zhong 忠) and reciprocity (shu 恕). On the political level, a harmonious society is achieved through the maintenance of a system of rituals (li 禮) which all members of society abide by. To the extent that they do so abide, thus encouraging, especially in the common people, qualities like ritual propriety, reciprocity, dutifulness, and honesty, the political realm produces some (not all) of the virtues required in the Confucians’ ethical teachings. But the development of these virtues is not the aim of politics. In my argument, the aim of politics is the achievement of order, of which harmony is a more enduring form. The virtues are produced as a means toward harmony. This does not mean that they will not be genuine virtues. It only means that, in contradistinction to the ethical requirement that these virtues be ends in themselves, the expectation in politics is that they be conducive to the achievement of an orderly society.

The third and final feature of the relationship between ethics and politics in early Confucianism involves the necessity of engaging in politics for becoming fully virtuous, a goal that I will argue is reserved for the scholarly-official elite. In other words, ethics is dependent on politics, rather than the other way round.
III- Comparison to other views on the relationship between ethics and politics

The details of my argument about the independence of political standards from ethical ones in early Confucianism will be filled in the chapters to come, but it might be helpful in this Introduction to compare my thesis to other theses on the relationship between ethics and politics both in Confucianism and in the Western tradition.

The first candidate for comparison is Aristotle whose *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* have prompted questions about their relationship similar to the one that I have raised in relation to early Confucianism. Like the early Confucians, Aristotle is often read as proposing a politics that is a conceptual development of his ethics. Richard Kraut has argued, for example, that “Aristotle conceives of the *Ethics* and *Politics* as following a logical progression” in that the latter provides “the further detail that allows his examination of human well-being [undertaken in the *Ethics*] to be put into practice.”\(^{37}\) On a closer look at Aristotle’s *Politics*, however, we might notice that the evaluation of political regimes is not always based on whether or not they allow for human flourishing for all. Instead, Aristotle often seems concerned with stability (as opposed to well-being and the excellences) in his judgment about different kinds of political arrangements.\(^{38}\) Based on this revisionist reading, one could perhaps think of Aristotle’s *Politics* as operating according to two registers: ideal theory, elaborated in Chapters VII and VIII, where ethical ideas are embodied in the life of the community, and non-ideal theory, implicit in Chapters III-VI, where concerns about stability render the assessment of different constitutions relative to environmental, historical and other contingent conditions.

---


\(^{38}\) For example, in his argument in favor of a middle class constitution. See *Politics* (1295a5-45).
The question that thus arises is whether my revisionist reading of Classical Confucianism is akin to the proposed revisionist reading of Aristotle. On the one hand, my distinction between a basic and an exalted level of political order in Confucianism is akin to the distinction between non-ideal and ideal theory in Aristotle’s work. On the other hand, the ideal vision of political order in Confucianism cannot be reduced to a straightforward application of ethical ideals, as Aristotle’s discussion of the ideal regime in the last two books of the *Politics* can be to a concern with the virtuous flourishing of citizens. For, as I argued above, the goal of Confucian political order is, in some sense, order itself, although it does include, and even requires, the development of virtues in the political elite (and of lower-level qualities of orderliness in the common people). Another way to formulate this is to say that the Confucian concern with the good of the society is not reducible in a straightforward manner to the good of its individual members or, to echo the central argument of this dissertation, Confucian political theory, even in its ideal moments, is not entirely collapsible into ethics.

Based on the preceding, Machiavelli might come to mind as exemplifying a mode of political theory that is not subservient to ethical ends and to the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. But I do not think that the Confucians’ project is similar to Machiavelli’s either. The reason for this relates to the nature of the latter’s writings, especially *The Prince*: as advice meant for princes, the nature of its political content can be explained by its particular aim. It is true that, as wandering philosophers who went from one king to another hoping to gain a position at court, the Confucians could also be thought to be motivated in their teachings by the aim of winning the good ear of kings. This is indeed what commentators sometimes mean when
they describe the *Mencius* as “political.” The problem with this argument, however, is that, contrary to the view offered in the *Prince*, it is not at all clear that the view of politics offered by the early Confucians would have been appealing at all to self-seeking kings. As I will argue in Chapter 2, the political order envisioned by the Confucians is directed at benefiting all segments of society alike, rather than towards fulfilling the self-interest of kings. In short, when I describe the early Confucian texts as “political,” I mean that they assign politics a central theoretical role, rather than that they played, as texts, a political function historically.

One could perhaps insist on a less instrumental reading of Machiavellian politics, as some contemporary political theorists do when they take him to exemplify a mode of political theory that is sensitive to the problem of violence as the distinctive characteristic of the political world. Other canonical figures usually listed in this category are Hobbes, Nietzsche, Lenin, Schmitt and Arendt. The political theorists who follow this line of thought defend the separation of political theory from moral philosophy. Political philosophy, according to them, should be more attentive to politics as a domain of action and conflict. Again, however, this is not the way in which I take the political, for the Confucians, to follow a life of its own. Not that I deny—and this will become clear below—that war looms large in the background of Confucian political thought. But it is not the fact of violence, or the fact of continual conflict between states, or the realization, spurred by the fact of war, that human beings can never agree, that come up in the early Confucian texts as subjects of deep concern. The reason for this, I contend, is

---

39 Eno divides the *Mencius* into two parts: one “political,” relating to Mencius’ travels and political goals, while the second part conveys Mencius’ “theoretical statements,” thus precluding the thought that the *Mencius* could be political and theoretical at the same time. See Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), 100-101.


Confucianism’s deep-seated optimism about the possibility of people living together peacefully in society (contrast this with the pessimism of much of Western political philosophy). This optimism means that, instead of dwelling on the nuisances of the world around them, the Confucians prefer to shift the focus to thinking about a better world. I call this “optimism” rather than “idealism” for a reason: the Confucians would be idealists if they did indeed, as the commentators mentioned above would have it, respond to political chaos by advocating virtuousness for all members of society. But this is not in fact their preferred template for the ordering of the political realm. In any case, the point I wish to make here is that it is not some deep sensibility to the problem of violence that encourages the Confucians to chart a political vision that is delinked from an ethical ideal. Instead, their motivation to do so stems from the simple realization that the world of politics, which is characterized by manifold actors and the requirement of material subsistence for all, demands its own philosophical approach, different from an ethical perspective which focuses on individuals.

This leads me to Hobbes. The Confucians’ political project might be thought to be akin to his, since both are concerned with political order, both see similar sources for disorder, and both advocate a vision of order that is not loaded with high ethical ideals. Moreover, although Hobbes is usually included as an example of a political philosopher who takes the fact of conflict as his starting point, he clearly does see a way out of this fact, and offers a full-fledged template for this. As I will show in Chapter 3, however, the Confucians are so much more optimistic about human nature than Hobbes is, which leads them to favor a starkly different conception of order than the one found in *Leviathan*. Furthermore, Hobbes insists, in what he takes to be his own scientific vein, on grounding his political project in first principles (the “laws of nature”). The Confucians, on the other hand, are not concerned with metaphysical questions. As AC Graham puts it, the
crucial question for the early Chinese philosophers is “not the [abstract] Western philosopher’s ‘What is the truth?’ but [the more pragmatic] ‘Where is the Way?’” i.e. “the way to order the state and conduct personal life.”

Finally, to compare my view to that of some Chinese commentators, it is clear that it is similar to some extent to Xu Fuguan’s view as reconstructed by Angle and presented above, though I do not argue that it is simply the concern with the satisfaction of people’s life needs that urges the Confucians to focus on attainable goals in politics. While the conception of order that I offer includes the need to satisfy the basic welfare of the common people, it is not limited to this goal, especially not in its exalted, ritual-centered version (which, as I said, aims at coordination or harmony). As to Mou Zongsan’s (and Angle’s) views, they amount to an effort to offer a normative solution to the problem in the early Confucian texts of the dependence of politics on ethics. My strategy instead, is to deny, or at least question the nature of, the problem itself.

Lastly, my understanding of Confucian politics does not follow the line of thought adopted by the school of thought known as “statecraft,” or more literally, “ordering the world” (jing shi 經世). This school was concerned with administrative matters (flood control, the provision of grain, etc.) and political matters (the prerogatives of the ruler, power politics, etc.), and rebuked the emphasis on abstract ethical and metaphysical issues characteristic of mainstream Confucianism. For example, consider Chen Liang (1143-1194), a contemporary of Zhu Xi’s. Chen and Zhu lived in a dwindling Chinese empire which was then threatened by the Jurchens from the North. In the face of the crisis, Chen favored practical solutions to abstract

---

philosophy, insisting that Confucius would have done the same. He thus argued that it was not true, as Zhu Xi and his allies proposed, that Confucius, in his conception of the “golden age of antiquity,” favored the unbending pursuit of virtue regardless of political results. Chen contended that the idea of a golden age ruled by sagely kings was not a historical reality, but a creation of Confucius’ aimed at defending the proper rules of government and social relations against the threat of the Daoists. It is not entirely clear what Chen (in Tillman’s reconstruction of the argument) means by this, but the point to see is that Chen understood Confucius’ teachings, even in their most idealistic moments, to be motivated by practical political concerns (the rescuing of civilization from the threat of foreigners) rather than by the exclusive concern with moral development. For Chen, indeed, the distinction between a focus on virtue and a focus on politics is the distinction between abstract philosophy and practical policy. What I elicit as the Confucians’ stand-alone politics, on the other hand, is not “practical” in any meaningful sense. Although I do take seriously the thought that the Confucians were concerned with responding to an actual political crisis, this does not imply that they thought of the solution in the practical terms of public policy making. Hobbes is again a good object of comparison here: he was obviously concerned about the English civil war, but this did not make his proposal any less abstract. Similarly, when the Confucians propose for example (as I show in Chapter 3) rituals as the institutional mechanism for the regulation of society, it is difficult to see this as being “practical.” Instead, their proposal should be understood as both political and theoretical through and through. When the political is not defined in reference to the ethical, it is easier to avoid the

45 Tillman, *Utilitarian Confucianism*, 137.
pitfalls of assuming a dichotomy between ethics as abstract and theoretical and politics as tangible and practical.

IV- The historical background of early Confucianism

Having outlined, in broad brushstrokes, the thesis of my dissertation, it remains for me to relate it to the historical context in which Confucianism arose. Confucian thought is usually associated with the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), which together make up the reign of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. The Zhou Dynasty was the longest lived dynasty in Chinese history, but its glory is concentrated in the first half of its tenure, known as the Western Zhou (1045-770 BCE). As Edward Shaughnessy writes, “Throughout China’s long history, the Western Zhou has served as its guiding paradigm for governmental, intellectual, and social developments.”46 The Western Zhou was also “the largest geopolitical unity ever achieved by a single power” until the reunification of the Chinese world by the Qin Emperor in 221 BCE.47 It stretched around the Yellow River, in the northeastern part of modern China. It is known as the “Western” Zhou because its capital was located closer to its Western border than to its center.

The Zhou king ruled on the basis of what was known as the “Mandate of Heaven” (tian ming 天命). The first reference to this notion can be found in the “Great proclamation” chapter of the Classic of Documents (more on the Classics below) which relates the story of the first succession crisis of the Zhou reign. As the story goes, two years after conquering the Shang

Dynasty, the Zhou leader King Wu died. Precedent had it that King Wu’s son, Song (later known as King Cheng), was to succeed, as sons had succeeded their fathers for the preceding two generations. However, King Wu’s younger brother, Zhou Gong Dan (eventually known as the Duke of Zhou), announced that Song was too young to rule and that he would therefore act as his regent. King Wu’s more senior brothers were not convinced. From their posts in the east, they rebelled against the supposed usurpation. A civil war followed which the Duke of Zhou and King Cheng won. The chapter in the *Classic of Documents* presents the debate between King Cheng and his advisers that preceded the former’s attack on his uncles. King Cheng undertook the usual turtle shell divination to figure out whether the signs concerning the attack were auspicious. They were. However, his advisers admonished him against such a difficult task. King Cheng insisted on his decision. Crucially, he read the divination signals as a sign from Heaven. What he said was that Heaven had assisted King Wen (father of King Wu and founder of the Zhou Dynasty) and conferred its mandate upon the Zhou to rule. This was the first mention of the notion of the Mandate of Heaven in Chinese history.

On the administrative level, in contrast to the preceding Shang Dynasty, which was an “aggregation of self-governing communities,” the Zhou extended the reach of the central government, especially over the vast terrain to the east of the capital, by appointing princes of the royal family as local rulers. As Li Feng writes, “These numerous states, bound to the Zhou royal court through a unified ancestral cult and by their need of royal support to survive in the new environment, formed the macro-geopolitical structure of the Western Zhou state.”

48 Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 311.
against the common description of this system of Zhou rule as feudal.\textsuperscript{51} The local Zhou states were both more independent, and less independent, than traditional European fiefs. On the one hand, each of the regional states “constituted an autonomous geopolitical entity located in a specific area, and was equipped with a small but complete government that enjoyed the combined rights of civil administration, legal punishment, and military authority.”\textsuperscript{52} On the other hand, the relationship between the Zhou king and the local state rulers was “much closer and more dictatorial” than the contractual relation between feudal lord and vassal. Central political authority was maintained through the “Lineage Law,” which ensured the submission of “minor lines” to the “primary lines” of royal descent, through the installment by the royal court of the office of “Overseers of the States” (\textit{jian guo 監國}) in the regional states, and through the visits to the royal court that regional rulers were mandated to perform upon assuming office.\textsuperscript{53}

As successful as it was, the Western Zhou Dynasty eventually started to lose power, spurring both the new geopolitical realities and the nostalgia for the Zhou that defined Confucianism. The Western Zhou’s weakening can be attributed to three factors: first, the increasing pressure and threats exerted by outside powers, like the Xianyun (also known as Quanrong) in the northwest and the Huaiyi in the southeast; second, the dissolution of blood ties, cultural commonalities and, most importantly, political control between the central court and the regional states; and third, the weakness caused by the continual grants of landed property as a favor from the Zhou king to the aristocrats at the central court.\textsuperscript{54} Since the Zhou could no longer maintain their capital in the West, they moved East in 771 BCE. This move was accompanied by

\textsuperscript{51} Throughout the dissertation, I will thus refer as “regional rulers” to what is commonly translated as “feudal lords” (\textit{zhu hou 諸侯}).
\textsuperscript{52} Li, \textit{Landscape and Power in Early China}, 111.
\textsuperscript{53} Li, \textit{Landscape and Power in Early China}, 112-4.
\textsuperscript{54} Li, \textit{Landscape and Power in Early China}, 139-40.
an eastward move of aristocratic linages, like Zheng and Guo, who established their own states in the East. The move severely diminished the authority of the Zhou court, and concomitantly increased the power of regional rulers, some of whom declared war on the Zhou, and then competed among themselves for hegemony over the Eastern plain, inaugurating a “new era of interstate military conflict.”

This era lasted until 221 BCE, when the ruler of the state of Qin succeeded at reunification and called himself Emperor. The Qin’s reign was short lived, but it was the precursor to consecutive reigns of imperial dynasties that ruled China until 1911.

The period between 771 and 221 BCE is, as I said above, usually divided into the Spring and Autumn, and Warring States, periods, and witnessed an increasing intensification of interstate conflict. The rise of territorial, centralized states out of a long period of war is sometimes compared to the rise of the modern European nation-states out of the Thirty Years’ war, whereby in both cases “the state made war and war made the state.”

Mark Edward Lewis provides a succinct account of the political structure of the emerging states:

The new style of polity that appeared in the Warring States period was both an expansion and a contraction of the old Zhou model. It was an expansion in that it developed a full-blown territorial state in place of the city-based state of the Zhou world, but it was a contraction in that it concentrated all power in the court of the single monarch. In place of the hereditary nobility who had been scattered across the state in numerous local replicas of the king’s court, the new state was centered on the unique person of the ruler and his single capital.

Despite the fierce competition of the Warring States period (or perhaps because of it), the period witnessed such intellectual ferment that it became known as the “age of the philosophers.”

Before dwelling on the social basis of scholarship during this period, it should be noted that, as

---

57 Mark Edward Lewis, "Warring States Political History," 597.
Martin Kern argues, “even within the limited social group of ancient practitioners of textual knowledge, the particular circle that Western scholarship usually calls the "philosophers" was a rather small minority.”⁵⁸ What Kern is pointing to is, on the one hand, the link between textual and ritual practice during this period, since texts were usually inscribed on animal bones, turtle shells, bamboo slips and, most lavishly, bronze ware, all of which were also used in ritual practices. This said, the disentangling of texts from ritual practices is not necessarily an alien imposition on the Chinese tradition. As Kern himself points out, "For the longer time of Chinese studies, and partly following choices by the Chinese tradition in reflecting upon itself, much of the culture of the Zhou dynasty and the early empire has been discussed in terms of intellectual history."⁶⁰ On the other hand, Kern’s point is that “philosophy” in the early period was very much entangled with other kinds of textual practices. The early Chinese philosophical works thus greatly make use of what became known as the “Five Classics,” attributed in the Chinese tradition to the Spring and Autumn period (and often to Confucius himself), but only canonized during the Han Dynasty, in 136 BCE. These include the *Classic of Documents* (*shu jing* 書經), which comprises presumed speeches and edicts of early rulers, the *Classic of Changes* (*yi jing* 易經), a divination manual, the *Classic of Poetry* (*shi jing* 詩經), comprising a collection of poems and hymns, the *Classic of Rites* (*li jing* 礼記), which includes an account of ancient rites and court ceremonies, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*chun qiu* 春秋), relating events in the small state of Lu. Indeed, these Classics, as well as the essential commentaries on them, such as the *Zuozhuan* commentary on the *Annals*, formed a large part of the world of textual knowledge of early China, and thus the world with which the Confucians, as well as the Daoists, the Legalists,

---

⁵⁹ Kern, *Text and Ritual in Early China*, XI.
the Mohists, and other scholars of the early period, were versed and which they contributed to. And vice versa: for example, in his study of the Zuo zhu an, David Schaberg shows how the historiographical project of the commentary partakes of the same normative Confucian project as philosophical texts such as the Analects, the Mencius and the Xunzi, exhibiting similar aims and rhetorical devices.61

My focus in this dissertation will be primarily on the “philosophers,” who offered new visions of life and society for a rapidly changing world. Indeed, it was during the breakdown of authority triggered by the fall of the Western Zhou that “schools” emerged, taking advantage, as Mark Edward Lewis argues, from the opening up of new avenues of social advancement as the prerogatives of birth that had defined the Zhou hierarchical system weakened:62 Edward Slingerland describes the world of the Warring States as “a huge market of talent, in which a gifted person could seek employment at any of the competing courts.”63 The emerging schools consisted of a master and his followers, and often took their names from the master. The Confucians are an exception to this rule, as they were then known as ru 儒, which was a term reserved for ritual practitioners. This meant, to return to the point just made, that the early Confucians “were part of a broader social grouping of men who did not invariably devote themselves to the transmission of texts.”64

Lewis explains that scholarship during the Warring States period emerged outside of government courts, but scholars also entered the governmental sphere as they got recruited by

61 David Schaberg, A patterned past: Form and thought in early Chinese historiography (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 50-54.
competing rulers. The accession to political circles became significant in the fourth century when it is thought that the rulers of the states of Wei and Qi provided stipends for scholars to lure them to their own courts. In Qi, scholars are said to have gathered under the Ji gate of the capital city, hence the provenance of the much cited Jixia (under the Ji) academy. Despite his acknowledgment that the specific nature of the Jixia academy cannot be ascertained and its importance cannot be exaggerated, Lewis argues that “it marks a significant development. For the first time on record a state began to act as patron of scholarship out of the apparent conviction that this was a proper function of the state or as a means of increasing its prestige.”

It is likely, however, that the scholars maintained a certain distance from the state and were able to move between government and society, thus securing for themselves a position that could not be abolished with the disappearance of the local courts upon the Qin unification. Schaberg makes a similar point, arguing that the protagonists of his own work, namely the historiographers, “separated themselves from a tendentiously characterized ruling class and identified themselves with a ministerial class depicted as steadfastly conservative, prescient, and eloquent.”

The tension in the scholars’ relationship to government can be gleaned from what we know of the three early Confucians who will be the subject of this dissertation. Kongzi 孔子, better known as Confucius (the Latinized version of his name adopted by Jesuit missionaries to

66 Lewis, "Warring States Political History," 643. Yuri Pines disagrees with Lewis on this point, arguing that “Scholars and other shi [scholar-officials] who were patronized by a ruler or by a powerful courtier may have been independent of an individual court, for they could shift their allegiances to a different one, but they were not independent of the system of power relations that I call “the state.” Not only was the ruler’s patronage a direct extension of his power as the de jure owner of the state, but even the so-called private courts, famous for their support of shi, were largely entangled in the state-ordered web of power.” See Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 138. Pines’ argument seems, however, overstated, at least for my purpose here, which is to highlight the ability of scholars to move from one court to another (as opposed to move out of the state system altogether). I return to Pines’ argument in Chapter 4 when discussing the economic dependence of the scholar-officials on the state.
67 Schaberg, A patterned past, 259.
China in the 17th century), is said to have lived during the Spring and Autumn period. He held minor positions in the state of Lu where he was born in 551 BCE, was then presumably promoted to a junior position, where some disagreement must have arisen to force him to travel to other states, first to Qi, after which he returned to Lu, and then left again to Wei, Song, Chen, and Cai, hoping to be employed by one of their rulers. His quest proved unsuccessful, and he is said to have died in his native state of Lu around the year 479 BCE. The text attributed to Confucius, known in the West as the Analects (“Collected Sayings”), poses great difficulties for contextualization given the amount of controversy surrounding its composition. What we are certain of is that Confucius himself did not write any of it, and that whatever his disciples recorded of his sayings—as is usually believed they did—was heavily edited by the imperial scholars of the Han Dynasty (the dynasty that came after the short-lived Qin). The text we have today is mostly an Eastern Han creation, edited by He Yan (190-249 CE). He Yan used the chief commentaries of Zhang Yu (d. 5 BCE) and Zheng Xuan (127-200 CE). In some sense, then, the Analects is not so much a creation of the Warring States period, as much as it is a product of imperial choices taken centuries later. But it is plausible to think that it includes many sayings by (or attributed to) Confucius and his disciples that were current during the Warring States period. In any case, there can be no real solution to the problem of situating the Analects until scholars agree on the dates of its different passages. The only way out of this problem is to interpret the Analects in conjunction with the Mencius and the Xunzi, both of which present themselves as building upon Confucius’ project, while their own origins are less controversial.

69 This is the version that both Lau and Slingerland use for their translation purposes. See Lau, trans., Confucius: The Analects 221 and Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, xiii.
70 Edward Slingerland plausibly argues that “It is highly unlikely that any stratum of the Analects was composed after the early fourth century B.C.E.” based on the idea that the text does not allude to the sophisticated controversies of Mencius’ and Xunzi’s times. See Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, xv.
than the *Analects*. In any case, I will still refer, throughout this dissertation, to Confucius saying or arguing a particular point, for ease of reference, since most of the passages in the *Analects* start with “The Master said” （*zi yue 子曰*). It should be assumed that Confucius did not necessarily utter any of the statements attributed to him.

Mencius (*Mengzi 孟子*) was born in the state of Zou, around 372 BCE and like Confucius before him, travelled to a few states, including Liang and Qi, offering his consultancy services. He is said to have retired from public life in his old age, dying in 289 BCE. The text of the *Mencius* is likely a compilation of his disciples’ (possibly verbatim) notes from his lectures. The version of the text we have today is an edition by the Han scholar Zhao Qi (d. 201 CE). D.C. Lau argues that the *Mencius* is one of the best preserved texts from the Warring States period.

*Xunzi 荀子* was a native of the state of Zhao, probably born around 312 BCE. He travelled to the state of Qi which, as I said above, was eager to attract scholars, then he left to Chu, where he held a position as a magistrate and where, though he eventually lost this position, he remained and died sometime around 221 BCE (late enough to witness the Qin imperial unification). The text of the *Xunzi* is less well preserved than the *Mencius*, but parts of it are probably written by Xunzi himself. Other parts have been added later. The division into thematic chapters is also thought to be a sign of later editing: the Han librarian Liu Xiang produced a collection of 32 chapters towards the end of the 1st century BCE. The order we have today was the creation of the 9th century commentator, Yang Liang. Since the bulk of the work was probably composed by or during the time of Xunzi, we can use the material it offers with more

---

71 Again, this is the version that Lau translates.
72 Lau, Introduction to *Mencius*, 222.
safety than the *Analects*. Yet the caveat that applies to the *Analects* also applies to some extent to the *Xunzi*: we can neither assume one authorial voice in the text, nor can we attribute it with certainty to a specific time period.

Given that the three texts do not mention events relating to, or coming after, the Qin unification, we can presume that their content mostly emerged during the Warring States period, but was later edited by the officials of the Han Dynasty. Even, however, if there is no mark of actual additions by the Han officials (meaning additions which mention the Qin or Han Dynasty), the latter could still have had a great impact on the content of the texts (especially the *Analects*) by deciding, among a corpus of recorded material that they had access to, what to keep in and what to keep out for the purpose of creating authoritative versions of the texts. They also provided the order and titles of the chapters that we have today (the original records were usually inscribed on thin bamboo slips, bundles of which were assembled with the use of a cord which often decayed with time, jumbling the original organization). One conclusion that one could draw from this is that the texts as they packaged them presented in their eyes a favorable, or at least not unfavorable, vision for the Han imperial agenda. This would not mean, as Yuri Pines has argued, that we find in early Confucianism (or, even less plausibly, in all stripes of political thought in early China, as he says) the seeds of the imperial, monarchical culture that was to last in China until the early twentieth century. It would only mean that the Confucian political project was probably appealing to a new dynasty that was aiming to bring some order into a previously tumultuous realm. Whether the order it and consequent dynasties did bring about was actually “Confucian” in nature is a totally separate question.

---

74 I have greatly learnt about this problem of dating from Mick Hunter.
Moreover, one could also argue that Confucian political thought was more aligned with the new state-centered politics of the Warring States period than it was imperial in nature. Indeed, I contend that the adulation of the Zhou Dynasty notwithstanding, the Confucians offered a new politics that they took to be more responsive than the decaying Zhou system to the social and political transformations that were underway in their day. Although they clung to the ideal of imperial unification, the politics they proposed were wholly fitting to the new states of their times. For, as the Zhou weakened and got replaced by a multiplicity of smaller states each with its own ruler, a crisis of legitimacy ensued: the question inevitably arose as to who now enjoyed the Mandate of Heaven. The Zhou was able to maintain the Mandate by tying it to the supreme position in a complex lineage order where status was obtained through hereditary succession. But as the Zhou received threats from outside, and as many of the regional rulers it appointed grew autonomous, the royal order could no longer work as a basis of authority. And now that the scene was populated by many a contender to the supreme position of ruler over the expansive territory that had previously been the Zhou’s, new standards had to be devised to decide who was a legitimate ruler and who was not. The Confucians offered such new standards by heeding the needs of the newest player on the political scene: the common people. In the Zhou political system, the common people were far removed from the Zhou king himself. Their only contact was with the regional rulers responsible for their territory, and thus many layers of princely hierarchy separated them from the center of Zhou power. In the states emerging from the fall of the Western Zhou, as Mark Edward Lewis’ account above reveals, the relationship between the ruler and the common people was much more direct, and also reciprocal. The ruler now needed his people: they formed the bulwark of his army and the producers of his realm. To succeed as a ruler, he needed their support. As I will show in the following chapters, the Confucians
recommended specific measures, centered on the welfare of the people, for forging a complementary relationship between ruler and ruled.

V- Dissertation outline

I argued above for a three-pronged approach to understanding the relationship between Confucian ethics and politics: that politics is almost completely divorced from ethics in the Confucian acceptance of a very basic level of political order; that there is an overlap, though not a complete one, between ethics and politics in the Confucian vision of a harmonious society (a more enduring form of political order); and finally, that ethics is dependent on politics in that virtue necessitates political participation. The first of these dimensions will be explored in Chapters 2, 4 and 5, the second in Chapter 3, and the third in Chapter 5. The chapters will also cover other ground, as I explain in what follows.

In Chapter 2, I explore the relationship between ruler and ruled that the Confucians advocated for the new territorial states. I argue against two common interpretations of this relationship: the democratic view that asserts that, in the Confucian vision of politics, the common people have a say in the choice of the ruler and the direction of government, and the virtue-centered view that presents Confucian government as aiming at the inculcation of virtue in the citizenry. I show instead that the underlying motif of Confucian political thought is, as I mentioned above, a concern with political order and that this order is produced, in its basic level, by forging a complementary relation between the ruler and the common people. I argue that the support of the common people for the ruler, at this level of political order, is exemplified by their physical proximity to him, i.e. by their willingness to be loyal and the absence of any intention
on their part to defect. I use the analogy of metal and magnet to suggest the way in which the common people are instinctively inclined as a mass towards a ruler that satisfies their needs. These needs are primarily basic livelihood needs, but the people also required protection from outside threats and a certain measure of regulation to prevent conflict in society.

I fulfill three further aims in Chapter 2: first, I elicit the qualities expected of the common people by the Confucians and show that they are qualities pertaining to orderliness, not full-fledged virtues. Secondly, I discuss the Confucian distinction between kings and hegemons, arguing that hegemons, though lacking in virtue, are accepted by the Confucians because they are successful at establishing a minimal level of order. Thirdly, I discuss some of the economic policies favored by the Confucians for the establishment of order.

**Chapter 3** takes up the second part of my three-pronged thesis as I presented it in the first part of this Introduction. I argue that though the Confucians accept a society that achieves the basic level of order outlined in Chapter 2, as when a society is ruled by a hegemon, they prefer a society that produces a more exalted level of order. This higher level is achieved by means of rituals which operate as an institutional mechanism for the regulation of society.

It is at this level of political order that Mencius’ and Xunzi’s views diverge. Mencius is more optimistic about the ability of people to develop morally in a spontaneous way, and about the power of the emulative example of the ruler. Xunzi, on the other hand, emphasizes more strongly the role of rituals. Though it is hard to ascertain this claim, it might be conjectured that Xunzi departs from some of the idealism and optimism of Mencius’ view because of the worsening political conditions of his day, as fights between the warring states intensified before the Qin unification.
Chapter 3 will thus be divided between Xunzi’s focus on rituals and Mencius’ on filial qualities. I will explain how their differing emphasis on rituals can be attributed to their differing views of human nature. This said, it should be kept in mind that, though Mencius does not emphasize rituals much, they are an essential part of the background of early Confucian thought in its all varieties. Indeed, rituals are not new to early China and far from being an invention of the Confucians. They were indeed one of the central pillars of Zhou rule. They included rites of passage for men of noble descent into adulthood, rites surrounding divination and ancestor worship, and rites for investiture and the distribution of titles. Edward Shaughnessy argues that as the Zhou developed more complex structures of government, rituals also transformed from intimate affairs using small sets of vessels to more elaborate performances, using much bigger sets, and having a much more public character, including an audience witnessing their performance.76 On the face of it, the new states that emerged with its fall relied on a very different kind of politics than the ritualistic politics of the Zhou: theirs was a realpolitik world of war-mongering, punishments and rewards, population control, etc. But Zhou rituals did not fully disappear, despite the fact that the old hierarchy had all but imploded. Ancestral temples, for example, continued as focal points in the lives of the new states’ members.77 Even new laws, which were in principle there to replace rituals as means of social control, had their roots in Zhou rituals.78 This said, the lingering presence of rituals was kept underground, so to speak. Where the Confucians’ contribution lies was in explicitly pressing the importance of rituals for the regulation of the new polities. They did not think that laws and punishments would foot the bill,

76 Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 332.
and thus proposed a reconceptualization of an old ritualistic system for a new world. They proposed that rituals be used to harness natural human inclinations towards sociability, in order to produce the lower-level “virtues” in the populace expounded in Chapter 2. Based on their view of rituals, I argue that the Confucians are optimistic about the possibility of achieving a harmonious society, even while recognizing that high morality cannot be expected in politics.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the division of labor between ruler and ministers needed to maintain the Confucian vision of an orderly society, in both its versions. It should be noted that ministers gained a new importance in the new politics of the Warring States. While under the Zhou, positions were mostly distributed on the basis of descent, the states of the Warring States period relied on the recruitment of able men who could assist in the administration of the newly autonomous governments. Men of hitherto unknown origins were suddenly promoted to ministerial ranks, often becoming more famous than the rulers themselves.

These developments prompted the thinkers of the Warring States period, including the Confucians, to advocate a new meritocratic politics and to propose standards for the assessment of merit. The Confucians also developed novel conceptions of ministers’ role and their responsibilities vis-à-vis the ruler. In Chapter 4, I argue that they made ministers responsible for the day-to-day business of government, leaving the ruler with a largely ceremonial role as the upholder of political order in society.

Chapter 5 argues that involvement in politics is necessary for the full development of virtue. The chapter is conceived from the perspective of the scholarly-official elite who, as I mentioned above, were co-opted by the governments of different states but also tried to maintain their distinctive place, resisting subservience to the rulers. I first present the case for the Confucian view that a person cannot become fully virtuous in isolation from politics. I then
argue against the contention that the scholarly elite, including the Confucians, adopted a purist approach, rejecting any involvement in political regimes that they deemed corrupt. Instead, I suggest that they advocated involvement in politics based on a consequentialist logic: involvement is permitted, even advisable, insofar as it can bring about political order.

In the Conclusion, I summarize the main arguments of the dissertation and elaborate on its central theme of the relationship between ethics and politics in early Confucianism.

Finally, in the Epilogue, I discuss my approach to the study of a non-Western tradition like Confucianism, engaging in some of the debates around the emerging field of Comparative Political Theory. As this dissertation will make clear, my foremost methodological concern in the study of non-Western texts is that they be given the close, detailed, and nuanced study offered to Western texts, before, or at least in conjunction with, making comparisons between East and West and investigating the applicability of non-Western traditions in the modern world.

Moreover, I will argue that, on the one hand, the methodologies developed for the study of the history of political thought in the Western tradition are largely suitable for the study of non-Western traditions. On the other hand, I will contend that, when practitioners of the history of political thought in the Western tradition defend its importance and its purpose, they typically do so by pointing to its importance for making sense of the story-line of Western thought, since studying ancient Western thinkers and ideas reveals what was ultimately admitted, and what was omitted, from the “canon.” Since this narrow view of our heritage makes it difficult to include non-Western authors and texts, I argue for a dispositional shift towards a “global political theory” that relies on a more expansive notion of the “canon” and the “tradition.” Global political theory allows for serious engagement with non-Western texts and authors as contributing to our
understanding of the category of the political, and to our reflections on the human condition and the challenges of our contemporary world.
II- Political order

How should we describe the relationship between ruler and ruled in Confucian political thought? How is it best to understand the aims of Confucian government? The literature on early Confucianism is dominated by two clusters of responses to these questions: In one cluster, it is argued that Confucian government aims at the development of virtue in the populace. The second cluster is held together by the contention that the people have ultimate authority in Confucian government, i.e. that Confucian government exhibits democratic tendencies. Interpretive problems have saddled both sets of claims. Arguments about the inculcation of virtue in the populace face the challenge of explaining the Confucians’ portrayal of the common people in ways that belie their potential to become virtuous. Arguments about the democratic pedigree of early Confucianism face the problem of squaring the common people’s importance in political life with the absence of any clear indication that they play a direct role in choosing the ruler, or even in removing him from the throne.

In this chapter, I argue that both sets of interpretive difficulties can be solved by replacing the language of virtue and the language of democracy with the idea of political order. The concept from the early Chinese texts that I am glossing as “political order” is zhi 治, which is usually translated as simply “government.” If we take government, in its most rudimentary sense, to mean the administration of people who live together in a given territory for the sake of security and cooperation, then this is precisely what I mean by political order. I argue therefore, with Heiner Roetz, that “In general, the Confucians legitimize political rule as a precondition of a safe, peaceful, and civilized living together of men (…)”. Roetz, however, also adds that
Confucian government has a moral purpose, relating to the cultivation of virtue.\textsuperscript{79} I argue in this chapter that this additional statement is misleading.

A concern with political order is usually recognized of Xunzi, primarily because of his emphasis on rituals—more on this in the next chapter. But it is precisely because of this recognition that commentators set him apart from his predecessors, Confucius and Mencius, who are thought to be concerned only with virtue in government. Although there is no denying the differences in the thought of the three Confucian thinkers, my aim in this chapter is to emphasize the similarities.

The chapter will proceed as follows: I show, in the first section, that the qualities expected of the common people are not full-fledged Confucian virtues, but qualities pertaining to orderliness. I contend that the low level of expectations from the common people arises from viewing them as a “mass,” as part of a perspective on politics which focuses on social groups, rather than on distinct individuals. In the second section, I show that the significance of the common people is not so much in choosing or removing a ruler, but in signaling the ruler’s ability to maintain order. They do not do so signal by expressing individualized opinions, but by their physical movement, again as a “mass,” away from, or in the direction of, the ruler. In the third part of the chapter, I turn to the Confucian discussion of rulers known as “hegemons.” I show that, contrary to received wisdom, the Confucians countenance, and sometimes approve of, hegemons, largely because of the latter’s ability to maintain political order. Finally, I use the discussion of hegemons to conclude the chapter with an account of government policies that can be considered as necessary for the establishment of a minimal level of political order. In the next chapter, I will discuss other types of institutional mechanisms which are favored by the

\textsuperscript{79}Roetz, \textit{Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age}, 91.
Confucians for bringing about a more exalted version of political order than the one described in this chapter.

### I- The virtue argument

On one reading of early Confucianism, adopted by Gongquan Xiao and Benjamin Schwartz, the aim of Confucian government is to make the common people “noble and virtuous in character and deed.” In other words, its end is “transformation through teaching.”

Schwartz draws a comparison between the Confucians and Plato and Aristotle, arguing that, like the early Greeks, Confucius views the political community as an ethical society aimed at promoting the virtues of the citizenry. This explains, according to him, why it is the virtuous that are supposed to rule, and why providing for the welfare of the common people, a theme I will return to later in this chapter, is important: they can be hindered by adverse circumstances from achieving moral education.

Schwartz cites Mencius on this:

> Nowadays, the means laid down for the people are sufficient neither for the care of parents nor for the support of wife and children. In good years life is always hard, while in bad years there is no way of escaping death. Thus simply to survive takes more energy than the people have. What time can they spare for learning about rites and duty?

The thought that Confucians view political life as being geared towards promoting virtue in the common people appears to be the logical continuation of the Confucian emphasis on virtue, and the idea that all persons are equally capable of becoming virtuous: told that he was being spied on with the purpose of seeing whether he was the same as everyone else, Mencius retorts:

---

81 Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 96-7. Xiao also draws a comparison between Confucius and Plato, arguing that they both value ethics over politics, the only difference between the two is that Plato values knowledge above both. See Xiao, *History of Chinese Political Thought*, 113.
83 *Mencius* 1A.7.
“In what way should I be different from other people? Even [sage kings] Yao and Shun were the same as anyone else.” Xunzi also says that “A man on the street can become a Yu,” Yu being the third sage king of antiquity.

There also appears to be direct evidence in the Confucian texts for the view that Confucian government aims at the moral improvement of the common people. Consider, for example, Confucius’ response to Ji Kangzi’s question about the best way to govern. Confucius says, “To govern (zheng 政) is to correct (zheng 正). If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?” The same Ji Kangzi asks for Confucius’ advice about getting rid of thieves. Confucius answers, “If you yourself were not a man of desires, no one would steal even if stealing carried a reward.” When asked by Ji Kangzi again about how to inculcate in the common people the virtues of reverence (jing 敬), of dutifulness (zhong 忠) and of enthusiasm (quan 勸), Confucius answers:

Rule over them with dignity and they will be reverent; treat them with kindness and they will do their best; raise the good and instruct those who are backward and they will be imbued with enthusiasm.

When asked by Zilu about government, he responds, “Encourage the people to work hard by setting an example yourself.”

All these passages indicate that it is possible for the ruler, by providing for the people, setting himself as a model (of correctness and lack of desires), treating the people with dignity and kindness, and promoting the worthy, to encourage the people towards moral reform. But what is also clear, and no less significant, about these passages and other similar ones is that they

---

84 Mencius 4B.32. See also Mencius 2A.8 and 6A.6.
85 Xunzi 23.14. See also Xunzi 23.7 and 23.12.
86 Analects 12.17.
87 Analects 12.18.
88 Analects 2.20.
89 Analects 13.1.
reveal that the qualities expected of the common people are not, typically, the cardinal Confucian virtues of ren 仁, righteousness (yi 義), wisdom (zhi 智) and ritual propriety (li 禮) that Confucius expects of himself and his disciples.

That high virtue is not expected of the common people should not actually be surprising if one considers Confucius’ view of the common people’s intellectual abilities, expressed in his statement that “The common people can be made to follow it [i.e. the Confucian Way], but they cannot be made to understand (zhi 知) it.” Similarly, Mencius says that the multitude (zhong 羣) do not realize (zhu 著) what it is they practice, do not examine (cha 察) what they repeatedly do.

---

90 In comparison to around a dozen examples from the early Confucian texts that suggest that high virtue is not expected of the common people, I could identify only three separate anecdotes that counter my view: Analects 1.9: “when funerals and sacrifices are properly undertaken, the virtue of the common people will incline towards fullness (hou 厚),” Analects 15.35: “Ren is more vital to the common people than even fire and water. In the case of fire and water, I have seen men die by stepping on them, but I have never seen any man die by stepping on ren” and Mencius 7A.23: “when sages rule the world, they make grain be as plentiful as water and fire. When the people have as much grain as they have water and fire, how can they fail to be ren?” (quoted from Van Norden). This said, only the third of these is evident. In the first, it is not clear what virtue inclining towards fullness means, and in the second, it could plausibly be that it is vital for the people to have a ren ruler, rather than be ren themselves. Other potential evidence for the claim that the common people are expected to become virtuous is even more ambiguous: in Mencius 7A.13, people under the rule of a king (as opposed to a hegemon) are said to move toward goodness (shan 善), but this is not the same as ren per se, especially since they are said to do so “without realizing” it. In 4A.3, Mencius says that an ordinary man (shu ren 竇) should be ren in order to preserve his limbs, but here Mencius is not talking about the people taken as a mass—which is what I am concerned with—but as individuals. In 4A.20, Mencius says that “If a ruler is ren, no one will fail to be ren.” The interpretive problem with this passage is that it is not clear whether “no one” here refers to the ministers serving the ruler, or to everyone in the realm. Finally, one can cite Analects 15.25 where it is said that “the common people are the touchstone by which the Three Dynasties were kept to the straight path.” Slingerland argues that one interpretation of this passage (by Liu Baonan and Bao Shenyang) is that one tests the character of the ruler by the extent to which his people achieve virtue. But the passage might be read as suggesting that the wellbeing, rather than the character, of the people is a standard for judging the ruler.

91 A wide controversy surrounds the translation of ren into English. Angle translates it as “humaneness,” Xiao, as well as D.C. Lau, as “benevolence,” Edward Slingerland as “goodness,” Ames and Rosemont as “authoritative conduct,” while others yet, like Schwartz, prefer to leave it un-translated. I follow Schwartz in leaving it untranslated.

92 I will argue in the next chapter that the common people are in fact encouraged to abide by rituals, but that they do not necessarily internalize the importance of ritual propriety in the way that a Confucian gentleman does.

93 Analects 8.9 quoted from Slingerland. Slingerland argues that early commentators, like Zhang Ping, read this statement as pertaining to rule by force only. In other words, the claim would be that those who rule by force cannot allow the people to understand their plans for fear they would evade them. See Slingerland, trans., Confucius, 81. It is unclear what the evidence for this reading is, especially since, as can be seen above, this statement is entirely consistent with others made to the same effect by the early Confucians.
and do not understand (zhī 知) the path they follow all their lives.\(^9^4\) For Xunzi, the virtue of the common people merely consists in following custom, treasuring material possessions, and nurturing their lives.\(^9^5\)

Even Xiao himself admits that some people cannot actually be educated, and these are “not a minority,” hence the Confucians’ inevitable resort to punishment at times.\(^9^6\) For Yuri Pines, the reason why the Confucians’ concern for fulfilling people’s needs and reaching their hearts did not result in an institutionalized form of political participation from below (more on this in the next section) is due to the identification of commoners with petty men (xiao ren 小人).\(^9^7\) He cites in this regard Mencius’ approval of the common saying: “There are those who use their minds and there are those who use their muscles. The former rule; the latter are ruled.”\(^9^8\)

What I wish to suggest, based on the preceding, is that Xiao and Schwartz are right in thinking that people’s dispositions can be improved by government, but wrong in assuming that such improvement amounts to the full-fledged pursuit of Confucian virtuousness. Instead, it is more accurate to see the dispositions sought for the common people (to refrain from stealing, to work hard, and to be “correct”) as dispositions relating to orderliness, rather than virtuousness. Indeed, the focus on orderliness is made clear in statements by Confucius that emphasize obedience. He thus argues, “When those above are given to the observance of the rites, the common people will be easy to command.”\(^9^9\) Infuriated by Fan Chi’s questions about growing crops, Confucius answers:

\(^9^4\) *Mencius* 7A.5.
\(^9^5\) *Xunzi* 8.11.
\(^9^8\) *Mencius* 3A.4.
\(^9^9\) *Analects* 14.41.
When those above love the rites, none of the common people will dare to be irreverent (*bu jìng* 不敬); when they love what is right, none of the common people will dare to be insubordinate (*bu fù* 不服); when they love trustworthiness, none of the common people will dare to be insincere (*bu yòng qìng* 不用情). In this way, the common people from the four quarters will come with their children strapped to their backs. What need is there to talk about growing crops?\(^{100}\)

Mencius and Xunzi also emphasize the importance of obedience. Thus Mencius contends that if the people are not provided for in times of plenty, then in times of need, when the ruler needs them to fight on his behalf, they could refuse to do so.\(^{101}\) Xunzi says that the common people should be filial, respect their elders, be honest and diligent, and not dare to be indolent or haughty.\(^{102}\)

In short, the qualities expected of the common people are qualities like reverence, subordination, honesty, diligence, and correctness. There is no talk here of *ren*, rightness, or wisdom. What is at stake, then, in statements to the effect that the people should learn about rites and duties,\(^{103}\) or that the ruler should teach (*jiao* 敎) and instruct (*hui* 誨) them,\(^{104}\) is not a full-blown moral education, but instruction in qualities favorable to an orderly society. One can even understand the idea of “reform” in Confucius’ famous statement that the goal of government should not be merely to keep people out of trouble, but also to encourage them to “reform” (*ge* 格) themselves, to simply mean the acquisition of the qualities listed above.\(^{105}\) But if this is true, then what should we make of the tension between the Confucians’ insistence that anyone can

\(^{100}\) *Analects* 13.4.  
\(^{101}\) *Mencius* 1B.12.  
\(^{102}\) *Xunzi* 4.8.  
\(^{103}\) *Mencius* 1A.7. See above.  
\(^{104}\) *Xunzi* 19.20.  
\(^{105}\) “Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves” (*Analects* 2.3).
become virtuous and the resistance to describe the common people as being able to do so? To deal with this tension, David Hall and Roger Ames argue for:

a perhaps blurred yet significant contrast between the amorphous, indeterminate mass of peasants (min 民), in themselves having little by way of distinguishing character or structure, and particular persons (ren 人).107

The depiction of the common people as an “amorphous, indeterminate mass,” I contend, stems from the Confucians’ adoption of what can be called an “external” or “sociological” point of view, which looks at society as a whole, thus considering social groups, rather than individuals, as units of analysis. This perspective can be contrasted with an “internal” or “individual-oriented” one that looks at moral development from the standpoint of each and every (socially-embedded)108 individual. From the internal point of view, the theoretical possibility of becoming virtuous is emphasized because the Confucians do not believe that endowments of birth are different between individuals. In their position within society as a whole, however, individuals are part of social groups with distinguishing lifestyles. The common people, as Hall and Ames point out, were mostly peasants, and were thus engaged in daily manual labour. As such, they did not enjoy the leisure needed to invest their time in the mental and social activities required for moral perfection. Instead, they devoted their days to communal agricultural practices, and their worries were naturally related to their livelihood, which accounts for the passivity and lack of differentiation with which they are described.

This does not mean that individual peasants cannot, in theory, break out of their social group; it just means that they are, as a matter of fact, unlikely to be able to do so: the obstacle to

---

106 I thank Stephen Angle for putting this question to me.
108 Social relationships are crucial to the Confucian understanding of personhood and the self. Confucians do not conceive of individuals in isolation from society.
the common people’s moral and intellectual cultivation arises not from their ascriptive qualities, or their pedigree at birth, but from the social demands of the material life associated with the social group into which they are born. In other words, the limitation is not inborn but socially and economically imposed. ¹⁰⁹ There is therefore no contradiction between the Confucians’ insistence on equal potential among all human beings, and their recognition that the common people, from the standpoint of their status as peasants, are unlikely to develop their potential for virtue. ¹¹⁰

To conclude, I have argued in this section that the idea that Confucian government aims at instilling virtue in the common people is unsustainable because the evidence suggests that the common people, viewed as a group, are unlikely to ever become virtuous. I have also shown that the qualities expected of, and encouraged in, the common people are qualities worthy of an orderly society. In the following section, I turn to rejecting another view of Confucian government, namely that it exhibits democratic tendencies.

II- The democracy argument

¹⁰⁹ Hall and Ames argue that what makes someone move from the group of the min 人人 to become individualized ren 人 is not the privilege of being born into an elite class, but the “personal cultivation and socialization that renders him particular” and they describe this move as “cultural.” See Hall and Ames, Thinking Through Confucius, 139. My contention, however, is that the conditions for this “cultural” move to occur are socioeconomic. My interpretation of the Confucian view of peasants is akin to the one that Jill Frank reads in Aristotle, which recognizes the effects of the activities they undertake in life on the development of persons’ capacities and thus on their political status. See Jill Frank, “Citizens, Slaves, and Foreigners: Aristotle on Human Nature,” American Political Science Review 98, no. 1 (February 2004): 91-104.

¹¹⁰ Schwartz argues, in relation to Mencius, that what is needed to fulfill people’s equal potential for goodness are the right circumstances (basically, ones in which basic needs are met), which are ensured by a virtuous elite. See Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, 288. My contention is that more than basic needs have to be met before the common people are able to achieve virtue: a social class of peasants would have to no longer exist, a possibility which the Confucians did not likely envision.
Succession to the throne

In the previous section, I elicited the Confucian political perspective from which the common people are viewed as a social group of manual laborers and argued that, from this perspective, the common people are not expected to become virtuous, but to acquire qualities relating to political order. In this section, my aim is two-fold: to reject another view of Confucian political thought that sees in it democratic ideas,\(^{111}\) and to elaborate on the idea of orderliness I introduced in the first section. I start by showing that the framework of political order allows for a more plausible interpretation of passages from the *Mencius* that have traditionally been analyzed according to whether or not they reveal democratic tendencies. I move from there to analyzing the view of political order revealed by these passages, which I will show is based on a particular notion of fittingness between ruler and ruled.

In the first relevant passage where Mencius discusses succession to the throne, he starts out repudiating the story from the *Analects* in which Emperor Yao, a sage king of antiquity,\(^{112}\) is said to have abdicated the throne to Shun, another sage of antiquity, seeing that the latter was worthy of it.\(^{113}\) Mencius argues that “the Emperor cannot give the Empire to another.” Instead, “Heaven (\(tian\) 天) gave it to him.”\(^{114}\) He then explains how Heaven’s choice is revealed: When Emperor Yao died, Shun, who had served Yao for twenty-eight years, left the empire in the hands of Yao’s son and took leave. Nonetheless, “the regional rulers of the Empire coming to

\(^{111}\) For example, Wing-tsit Chan contends that “no one in Chinese history has stressed more vigorously the primary importance of the people for the state” than Mencius and adds that echoes of this idea “were especially strong in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries.” He also writes that Mencius is “generally considered the most democratic of all Chinese philosophers.” See Wing-tsit Chan, *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 62 and 69, respectively.

\(^{112}\) Yao, Shun, and Yu are paragons of virtue often cited by the early Confucians. They are supposed to have lived between 2500 and 2000 BCE, but are probably mythical.

\(^{113}\) See *Analects* 20.1.

\(^{114}\) *Mencius* 5A.5.
pay homage and those who were engaged in litigation went to Shun, not to Yao’s son, and ballad singers sang the praises of Shun, not of Yao’s son.” Mencius takes this to be a sign that Heaven favored the appointment of Shun, rather than Yao’s son. He adds that Heaven “sees with the eyes of its people” and that it “hears with the ears of its people.”

Mencius then recounts a similar story of succession following the death of Shun.\textsuperscript{115} Shun recommended Yu, and Yu also withdrew once the mourning period for Shun was over. Yet the people followed him just as they had followed Shun upon Yao’s death, suggesting that Heaven favored Yu over Shun’s son.

These accounts, however, should not suggest that Heaven, and the people, will always choose meritorious ministers to accede to the throne, for the story takes a different turn when Yu dies. Mencius explicitly argues against the idea that virtue declined once Yu favored being succeeded by his own son, instead of choosing a “good and wise” man to ascend the throne. He again directs responsibility to Heaven: If Heaven decides to give the throne to a good and wise man then this would be the right choice. But if it decides to give it to the extant son, then this would also be right. And it is the people who again indicate Heaven’s choice in this case. Instead of following Yi, whom Yu had recommended, they went to Yu’s son, Qi, instead: “Ballad singers sang the praises of Qi instead of Yi, saying, “This is the son of our prince.”\textsuperscript{116}

Spurred by the debate on the compatibility between Confucianism and democracy, interpreters have usually focused, in reading these passages, on the extent to which the people can be said to be responsible for the choice of the ruler. As Joseph Chan comments, “For some scholars, this emphasis on the people’s acceptance or consent represents a democratic value or

\textsuperscript{115} Mencius 5A.6.
\textsuperscript{116} Mencius 5A.6.
principle.” Indeed, Gongquan Xiao concludes from these passages that “the people’s acceptance or repudiation should be the ultimate standard for determining a change of political power, or the adoption or abandonment of any item of governmental policy.” In others words, authority is placed in the people.

This claim assumes that the answers to the two following questions are clear: First, what is, all things considered, Mencius’ preferred mode of succession to the throne and, secondly, what is the common people’s role in it? But they are not, in fact, clear. There is actually reason to think that Mencius prefers hereditary succession. Although in his account of the transition of power from Yao to Shun to Yu to Qi, Mencius says that the accession of both virtuous ministers (Shun and Yu) and heirs (Qi) is acceptable, it is possible to read the cases of Shun and Yu as exceptional (instead of taking Qi’s accession to be the exceptional one, as is more common to do). Indeed, it is not untypical of Mencius to provide ad hoc justifications for the actions of the sage kings of antiquity when these do not fit his teachings. On my reading, then, Mencius dwells on the cases of Shun and Yu not because he takes merit-based accession to the throne to be the model to follow but, on the contrary, because these cases depart from his preferred option—hereditary succession—and thus require justification.

---

117 Joseph Chan, “Democracy and Meritocracy: Toward a Confucian Perspective,” Journal of Chinese Philosophy 34:2 (2007): 185. Benjamin Schwartz also says that this emphasis has been the basis for arguments about “popular sovereignty” in the Mencius. He argues that whether or not Mencius’ account is about “popular sovereignty” depends on one’s definition of sovereignty, adding that Heaven’s role cannot be ignored. See Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, 284. Chan argues that “the people’s consent” is not necessarily a sign of a democratic system, since a monarchical system could also be based on consent. He contends that, for it to be a sign of a democratic system and of democratic ideals like “popular sovereignty or political equality,” consent has to be the product of adequate “institutions or procedures” for equal political participation (emphasis in the original). See Chan, “Democracy and Meritocracy,” 186.


119 Even more strongly, he writes that “ultimate sovereignty lay with the people” and that “the ruler’s relation to the people becomes in the last analysis one of equality.” Xiao, History of Chinese Political Thought, 158-9.

120 See, for example, the defense of Shun in Mencius 4A.26, 5A.1, and 5A.2.
My admittedly controversial interpretation relies on a statement that Mencius appends to the accounts above, and in which he argues that, when a ruler obtains the throne through hereditary succession (ji shi 繼世), he can only be put aside by Heaven “if he is like Jie or Zhou [Xin],” both tyrants.\footnote{Mencius adds another qualification to the accounts above. He says that, in the case of a commoner (pi fu 匹夫), virtue alone is not sufficient to win the Empire, the Emperor’s recommendation is also necessary. “That is why,” Mencius says, “Confucius never possessed the Empire.” How does the need for ruler’s recommendation fit with my reading? It is hard to see on what grounds Yuri Pines argues that “in the final account, it is solely the ruler’s prerogative [not Heaven’s, or the people’s] to decide to whom to transfer power.” See Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 76. More plausibly, Justin Tiwald takes the point about the need for the ruler’s recommendation to be an extension of hereditary succession, presumably in that a departure from the latter can only be made through the approval of the ruler. See Justin Tiwald, “A Right of Rebellion in the Mengzi?,” Dao 7, no.3 (Fall 2008): 274. The problem with this interpretation, as with all interpretations of Mencius’ view on succession (including mine), is that there is not enough evidence to support any view definitely: in this case, Mencius only mentions the need for a recommendation in relation to Confucius. I therefore find it more likely that interruption of hereditary succession typically occurs when a very bad heir arises, which is signaled by the common people, not the extant ruler. \footnote{Mencius 3A.3. For further discussion of this passage, see Chapter 4.}} This statement shows that Mencius is not against hereditary succession, but also that whatever benefit he sees in it is forfeited by the rise of a tyrant. The best way to interpret this benefit such that it fits both the rule and the exception is to see it as revolving around the avoidance of political turmoil: heredity as the default method of succession helps in the maintenance of orderly transitions to power. On the other hand, it can also produce heirs who bring havoc to the realm, which defies its own purpose (order), and thus justifies the exception that Mencius attaches to it. This interpretation is in line with Mencius’ preference for emolument of ministers on the basis of heredity,\footnote{Xiao, History of Chinese Political Thought, 176.} and for Xiao’s interpretation of this preference as ensuring a modicum of order and propriety in a time of free-for-all competition for power and public office.\footnote{Confucius shows a preference for hereditary prerogative when he argues against the usurpation, in the state of Lu, of the hereditary ritual prerogatives of the ducal ruler (Analects 3:1), and against the attack on the state of Zhuan Yu, whose rulers have a royal prerogative to preside over sacrifices to the eastern Meng mountains (Analects 16.1).} Speaking of Confucius’ own preferment of the heredity principle,\footnote{Confucius shows a preference for hereditary prerogative when he argues against the usurpation, in the state of Lu, of the hereditary ritual prerogatives of the ducal ruler (Analects 3:1), and against the attack on the state of Zhuan Yu, whose rulers have a royal prerogative to preside over sacrifices to the eastern Meng mountains (Analects 16.1).} Benjamin Schwartz argues that the reason for it stems from Confucius’ belief that lineage is “the most potent base for social order and harmony,” and that the overthrow of rulers by force is a recipe
for chaos. Something similar, I argue, would explain Mencius’ preference for the hereditary succession of rulers.

Although there is no further textual evidence for supporting my view, the evidence for all alternative views (merit-based succession, popular choice, appointment by Heaven, and appointment by the current ruler) is also slim, given that all Mencius says about succession is included in the three cases mentioned above, and in the corollary statements on which my interpretation has relied. I think Robert Eno is right when he argues that the relevant passages in the *Mencius* “have the effect of delegitimizing arbitrary cessions of thrones and supporting the institutional status quo,” and when he describes Mencius’ attitude as “institutional conservatism.” As to what the “institutional status-quo” consists of, this is where I lean towards the hereditary succession view.

If my argument about Mencius’ preference for hereditary accession to the throne is correct, then this would make Mencius’ position close to Xunzi’s: Although he is the most adamant defender of meritocracy among the early Confucians, Xunzi’s meritocratic principles do not extend to the position of king. He justifies the non-hereditary accession of Shun and Yu by arguing that, in the absence of a worthy descendant, the accession of a virtuous high-ranking minister to the throne does not cause significant interruption in government. Mencius does not explicitly make the same argument about Shun’s and Yu’s rise to the throne (he merely cites Heaven’s choice to justify it), but if it is true, as I argue, that he is concerned about interruption

---

127 He thus says: “Although a man may be the descendant of commoners, if he has acquired learning, is upright in conduct, and can adhere to ritual principles, he should be promoted to the post of prime minister (qing xiang 卿相), scholar-official (shi 士), or counsellor (da fu 大夫).” There is no mention here of his appointment to the position of king (*Xunzi* 9.1 quoted from Watson).
128 *Xunzi* 18.5. Like Mencius, Xunzi argues that that when a bad descendant like Jie or Zhou Xin ascends the throne, he cannot be said to legitimately rule and therefore the fact that the throne is taken over by worthy contenders (Kings Tang and Wu, respectively) is no usurpation (*Xunzi* 18.2).
in government, then a similar concern could explain his purpose in recounting the story of the accession of Shun and Yu.

The question that remains is how to determine when a ruler is bad enough, when he counts as a tyrant, such as the interruption of hereditary succession for his removal is warranted. This is where, I argue, the common people come in. Xunzi argues that a bad ruler is one who gets deserted by the regional rulers and the people.\(^{129}\) This is the flip side of the portrayal of the people, in the stories of succession relayed above, as being “content” (an 安) in the presence of a good ruler, going to him for litigation, and singing his praises. In both cases, the people act as a gauge of the worth of candidates: if they find the ruler worthy enough, they give him their support. If they do not, they abandon him, either literally or metaphorically, precipitating the unraveling of political order.\(^{130}\)

It might be helpful here for me to explain why I have not assigned Heaven any role in the choice or removal of the ruler. Though indeed Mencius says that Heaven chooses the ruler, a more basic question can still be asked concerning the basis upon which Heaven makes its choice. Mencius continues his discussion above by trying to explain why it is that Heaven favored hereditary succession in the case of Yu’s son, but not in the case of Yao’s and Shun’s. He says that Qi, Yu’s son, was capable, and worthy of succeeding his father, while Yao’s and Shun’s sons were useless. Moreover, Yi had only assisted Yu for a short period of time, while Yao and Shun had assisted Yao and Yu had assisted Shun over a long period of time, and had benefited the people. He concludes:

\(^{129}\) Xunzi 18.2.

\(^{130}\) A lonely but intriguing statement in Analects 16.2 says that when the Way prevails, ordinary people do not “discuss” (yi 論), (presumably matters of government, since what precedes in the anecdote is about government). This statement fits with the rest of my interpretation if it is taken to mean that the people express resentment (rather than actually deliberate and discuss) when they are not well governed.
Shun and Yu differed from Yi greatly in the length of time they assisted the Emperor, and their sons differed as radically in their moral character. All this was due to Heaven and could not have been brought about by man. When a thing is done by no one, then it is the work of Heaven; when a thing comes about though no one brings it about, then it is decreed (ming 命).\textsuperscript{131}

Mencius thus recasts Heaven’s involvement in the choice of a ruler as bringing about that some candidates are worthy and others not, hence some candidates are deserving of promotion and others not. Heaven is no metaphysical being which decides, according to standards fully fathomable only to it, the appropriate recipient of the throne and then signals him to the people. Rather, it simply causes some sons to be superior in some cases, and ministers being superior in other cases. As Robert Eno argues, Mencius reduces Heaven to “descriptive political realities,” rendering it into a “chameleon-like notion that resembles nothing more than a convenient rhetorical device.”\textsuperscript{132}

But if this interpretation is correct, then why should Mencius mention Heaven at all? Since this period in early China witnessed a decline in myths, cosmological arguments and allusions to Heaven,\textsuperscript{133} one can only understand the continuing Confucian talk of Heaven as an appeal to a persisting, though weakening, discourse inherited from a previous era. We have no straightforward evidence that the Confucians believed in a metaphysical entity called Heaven. Instead, one should understand the Confucian use of the Zhou notion of the mandate of Heaven (tian ming 天命) as symbolic: it is a metaphorical way to ascertain the legitimacy of a given ruler, important because it ensures continuity with previous Zhou discourse, and because of ongoing,

\textsuperscript{131} Mencius 5A.6.
\textsuperscript{132} Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 105-6.
\textsuperscript{133} See for example Graham, Disputers of the Tao, 12 and Chad Hansen, A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 30.
albeit diminishing, appeals to Heaven in the discourse of the period.\textsuperscript{134} As Sor-hoon Tan argues, references to Heaven could be attributed to Mencius’ desire to make “an allowance for existing religious practices in his desire to win over new adherents to Confucianism,” while also “reinterpreting it to serve Confucian purpose.”\textsuperscript{135} For the Confucians, indeed, the idea of the Mandate appears as an effective way to back political authority. In other words, the Mandate of Heaven is not the source, but the legitimating cover, for political authority.

To return now to the role of the common people, it is important to note that the common people act as passive,\textsuperscript{136} rather than as active, political agents whose approval of the ruler, as Joseph Chan puts it, is more “automatic”\textsuperscript{137} than deliberative. Another way to describe the people’s approval is as instinctual or emotional (rather than deliberative); as William Theodore de Bary’s suggests, it is the people’s “feelings” that matter.\textsuperscript{138} D.C. Lau speaks of the common people exercising “moral judgment,” but describes this judgment as possible even for “the most simple minded,” which suggests that he also views the people’s response as spontaneous rather than deliberative.\textsuperscript{139} These views are borne out by textual evidence. Thus Mencius portrays the common people as turning to a virtuous ruler like the grass bends to the wind,\textsuperscript{140} or like “water

\textsuperscript{134} The Mohists, for example, still expressed belief in Heaven and other metaphysical beings like ghosts.
\textsuperscript{135} Tan, \textit{Confucian Democracy}, 137.
\textsuperscript{136} Sungmoon Kim suggests that, while it is true that the common people are “passive … beneficiaries of the benevolent government,” Mencius is not referring to them alone when he speaks of the people’s approval of various candidates to the throne. In fact, as mentioned above, the regional rulers also pay homage to their preferred candidate. Kim argues that the regional rulers, along with “ministers of the noble families” are “active subjects” who confer legitimacy on the ruler. See Sungmoon Kim, “Confucian Constitutionalism: Mencius and Xunzi on Virtue, Ritual, and Royal Transmission,” \textit{The Review of Politics}, no. 73 (2011): 382. This argument does not undermine, but rather buttresses, my contention in this section about the passive role of the common people. More generally, I agree with Kim about the importance of ministers in government. This will become clear in my discussion of hegemons below. The division of labor between a largely symbolic ruler and his competent and virtuous ministers is a key aspect of Confucian government which will be discussed in Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{137} Joseph Chan, “Democracy and Meritocracy,” 18.
\textsuperscript{138} De Bary, \textit{The Trouble with Confucianism}, 21.
\textsuperscript{139} Lau, Introduction to \textit{Mencius}, 39.
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Analects} 12.19, \textit{Mencius} 3A.2.
flows downwards or as animals head for the wilds.”

Xunzi says that people follow their superiors “just like an echo responds to sound, or a shadow to a form.” In other words, the common people act, in Justin Tiwald’s apt description, as a “barometer” of the success of government, rather than as agents expressing significant political choice. This is why any identification of democratic, or proto-democratic, tendencies in the Confucian view of government is misleading. It is true that the Confucians recognize the common people as an important part of political society and it is also true that they assign them the significant role of deserting a bad ruler through which they can cause the breakdown of the almost organic order that keeps them together. But, as will become clearer below, the importance of the common people can be reduced to being part of a holistic conception of political order based on the complementarity of interests between ruler and ruled. Government is neither “of the people” nor “by the people,” and it is also not “for the people” exclusively. Government aims at an orderly society, of which the common people are a—key—component. The ruler derives his authority from establishing political order, and not from fulfilling the needs or aspirations of the common people per se.

I will discuss in the last section of this chapter the policies that the ruler has to pursue to win the loyalty of the common people and thus create order. Suffice it to say here that these policies revolve around the satisfaction of people’s welfare needs and the pursuit of consistent regulations regarding appointments to office and punishments for crimes. What I want to emphasize here is the nature of the conception of political order being presented. On the one hand, part of my underlying aim in this chapter, and in the dissertation more generally, is to show

141 Mencius 4A.9. See also 1A.6 and Xunzi 15.11.
142 Xunzi 16.8. See also Xunzi 12.4.
143 Tiwald, “A Right of Rebellion in the Mengzi?,” 272.
that the Confucians share Hobbes’ motivating concern with how to secure “order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation”—to answer what Bernard Williams calls “the “first” political question.” On the other hand, the Confucian view of political order as I have presented it is very different from that of someone like Thomas Hobbes. The Confucian view, combining hereditary succession with a limited role for the common people, is far from being based on any notion of individual interest as Hobbes’ is. For Hobbes, political order is achieved by a group of persons, concerned with their individual security, contracting among themselves to authorize a sovereign to govern them, thus escaping the inevitable state of war outside of government. For the early Confucians, the common people act as a “mass” rather than as a group of individuals with distinct interests. The legitimacy they confer upon the ruler is not produced by deliberative agreement, but by an instinctive and physical movement of approbation. Political order is not held together by a juridical notion of authorization, but by the physical proximity between ruler and ruled enabled by the complementarity of the interests of both (more on this below). Conversely, political order is lost when the people decide to withhold approval of the ruler by going to another one; legitimacy can thus be withdrawn from the ruler, as it cannot be in Hobbes. This, however, should not mean that the Confucians allow for popular revolution. I will briefly reject arguments about popular revolution in the following subsection, then turn to a further clarification of my conception of political order, before concluding this part of the chapter.

Removing a bad ruler

144 Bernard Williams, In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.
I concluded the previous section by suggesting that the people express their disapproval of a bad ruler by disentangling themselves from the web of connections that bind them to him. It is difficult to see how this image could be squared with any notion of popular revolution. But the idea “that the people may justly overthrow a ruler who harms them”\(^{145}\) is often imputed to the early Confucians, primarily to Mencius. This interpretation emerges from combining two sets of passages in the *Mencius*: the passages cited above revolving around the people’s role in the choice of the ruler, and another set of passages which suggest the permissibility of the removal of a bad king. Since I already discussed the first set of passages in the previous section, arguing that the people’s role in the choice of the ruler is limited, I focus here on the second set of passages, and argue that the permissibility of overthrowing a bad ruler has no implications for the role of the common people in it.

Consider, then, two anecdotes in the *Mencius* that deal with the issue of the removal of a bad ruler. In one anecdote, Mencius asks King Xuan of Qi what he thinks should be done about a friend who, entrusted with the care of one’s wife and children, leaves them to suffer from cold and starvation. The king answers that one should break with this friend. Then Mencius asks what should be done about the Marshal of Guards who cannot maintain order among his ranks. The king answers that he should be removed from his office. Finally, Mencius asks what should be done if the whole society is badly governed. “The King turned to his attendants and changed the subject.”\(^{146}\)

---

\(^{145}\) Chan, “Democracy and Meritocracy,” 188. Xiao also agrees with this view. Xiao, *History of Chinese Political Thought*, 157. In his comment on 1B.8, Wing-tsit Chan argues that “The doctrine of revolution is here boldly advanced and clearly stated … Confucianists have always upheld this doctrine, and it has been used by almost every rebel.” See Chan, *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 62.

\(^{146}\) *Mencius* 1B.6.
In the second story, it is the king himself who asks Mencius about the truth of what is told of King Tang banishing the tyrant Jie, and King Wu marching against the dictator Zhou Xin. When Mencius confirms, the king asks whether this means that regicide is permissible. Mencius’ answer goes as follows:

A man who mutilates ren is a mutilator, while one who cripples rightness is a crippler. He who is both a mutilator and a crippler is a mere fellow (yi fu 一夫). I have indeed heard of the punishment of the “fellow Zhou,” but I have never heard of any regicide.147

What these two anecdotes specify are the reasons that make removing a ruler permissible: when a ruler fails to fulfill his obligations in governing his realm or, worse, is ruthless, then he is no longer worthy of the title and position of king, and his removal is allowed. But do they specify the holders of the prerogative to remove the king?148 One hint we get from the second anecdote is that those who banish the tyrants Jie and Zhou are Kings Tang and Wu, both virtuous contenders to power. Indeed, Xunzi, who similarly argues that the overthrow of Jie and Zhou by Kings Tang and Wu is not tantamount to regicide (since to execute a tyrannical ruler is like executing a “solitary individual”), also emphasizes the virtuousness of Tang and Wu against the wretchedness of Jie and Zhou.149 The necessity that worthies be the ones to remove the tyrant is

---

147 Mencius 1B.8.
148 Yuri Pines identifies the holders of this prerogative in the following statement by Mencius: “Those who rise (xing 興) only when there is a King Wen are ordinary men. Outstanding scholar-officials (shi 士) rise even without a King Wen Mencius 7A.10. One can read xing 興 as meaning “to flourish” rather than “to rise,” in which case this passage from the Mencius has no relevance to the issue of rebellion.
149 Xunzi 18.2. Despite his recognition that only a few members of the elite can ever depose a ruler, and then only if he is extremely bad (like Jie and Zhou Xin), Pines still finds Mencius to be “almost a revolutionary.” See Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 72. On the other hand, although Xunzi justifies Tang’s and Wu’s overthrow of Jie and Zhou Xin just like Mencius does, Pines finds him to be almost conservative. He reads Xunzi’s view as a post facto justification of Tang’s and Wu’s acts, but not an attempt like Mencius’ to apply this principle of removing a bad ruler to “modern circumstances.” See Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 88. Yet we have no evidence proving that Mencius was more forward-looking than Xunzi. Both Mencius and Xunzi wanted to leave the door open, if only so slightly, to legitimizing the removal of bad kings. But this is only a fleeting possibility, and the hereditary principle of kingly appointment, and of kingly immunity, is still the default principle for ordinary times.
also made clear in another anecdote in the *Mencius*, relating to Tai Jia, the son of Prince Tang, and Yi Yin, his virtuous minister:

Gong Sun Chou said, ‘Yi Yin banished Tai Jia to Tong, saying, “I do not wish to be close to one who is intractable”, and the people were greatly pleased. When Tai Jia became good, Yi Yin restored him to the throne, and the people, once again, were pleased. When a prince is not good, is it permissible for a good and wise man who is his subject to banish him?’
‘It is permissible,’ said Mencius, ‘only if he had the motive of a Yi Yin; otherwise, it would be usurpation.’

The actual removal of a bad ruler is thus clearly restricted to the inner circle of highly-ranked officials. The removal is legitimate when the member of the elite responsible for it is virtuous, because this is the only way to make certain that the removal is done for the right reason, i.e. for the reason that the extant ruler fails to govern well. What the preceding passage also reveals again is that the common people’s importance is restricted to signaling the appropriateness or lack thereof of the appointment of a ruler, by merely showing outward signs of satisfaction or lack of satisfaction.

In short, the common people are not themselves the agents responsible for the removal of a bad ruler. There is no revolutionary impulse in Mencius, or early Confucianism more generally. Instead, just as the web-like relationship that I have described between ruler and ruled is formed gradually, as the ruler initiates policies to which the people respond favorably, so does it unravel through the gradual untangling of the common people from the web as they lose trust in the ruler.

---

150 *Mencius* 7A.31.
151 Justin Tiwald makes much of the anecdote in 2B.8 where Mencius argues that though the invasion of Yan is justified in itself, not anyone is justified in leading it. Only a Heaven-appointed official is (and the King of Qi, who invades Yan, is not one). He takes it to suggest that what is important about this person (who is justified in overthrowing the ruler) are not so much his qualifications, but his appointment. In other words, he emphasizes what he calls the “procedural” aspect of political authority. In line with what I argued above, I disagree that one should take literally the idea of appointment by Heaven. I take the claim that one is appointed by Heaven to be a claim about this person’s qualifications. See Tiwald, “A Right of Rebellion in the *Mengzi*?” 273.
There are no contracts to be ended, no rights to be recovered, and thus no popular revolution to achieve such aims.

**Ruler and ruled**

That the common people do not choose the ruler, and that they are largely portrayed as passive, should not imply the view that Confucian government aims at the benefit of the ruler alone. On my interpretation, the maintenance of political order benefits both parts of society, ruler and ruled, equally. As I explained in the Introduction, the common people emerged as an object of political concern with the rise of the warring states of early China (ca. 770-221 BCE). The leaders of the newly independent states relied on the common people as a source of military and economic strength. For the common people to persevere in this role, the ruler had to provide them with political order by promoting welfare and security measures—to be discussed below. In other words, both ruler and ruled would benefit from the establishment of political order.

My view is thus distinct from two available ones in the literature. On one—minority—interpretation, usually made about the *Mencius*, the Confucian conception of government is ultimately aimed at fulfilling the ruler’s self-interest. On this reading, Mencius’ advice to kings is motivated by what is profitable for the king personally. The point of ensuring the satisfaction of the people, for example, is for the king to protect his own, personal rule, as opposed to protecting political society as a whole.\(^1\) The problem with this argument is that, if the ruler’s self-interest is really what is at stake in these texts, then it is hard to see why the Confucians are so insistent

\(^{152}\) Thus Creel argues that, against conventional wisdom, Mencius actually advocates that the ruler adopt a utilitarian position, citing the encounter with King Hui of Liang. See Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Chinese Thought, from Confucius to Mao Tsé-Tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 86-7.
on explicitly discouraging it. For example, the first story we read in the *Mencius* illustrates Mencius’ practice of convincing rulers not to care for profit:

Mencius went to see King Hui of Liang. ‘Sir,’ said the King. ‘You have come all this distance, thinking nothing of a thousand leagues. You must surely have some way of profiting my state.

‘Your Majesty,’ answered Mencius. ‘What is the point of mentioning the word “profit” (*li* 利)? All that matters is that there should be *ren* and rightness (*yi* 義).’

In another anecdote, Mencius is dismayed by his fellow pacifist philosopher, Song Keng, who is eager to convince the Kings of Qin and Chu to end their hostilities by showing them the “unprofitability” of war. As Mencius tells Song Keng, “Your purpose is lofty indeed but your slogan is wrong.”

Xunzi’s case against profit is also as straightforward as it is succinct: to put rightness (*yi* 義) before profit (*li* 利) is honorable; to put profit before rightness is disgraceful, he argues. This is why “the Son of Heaven does not speak of quantities, the regional rulers do not speak of benefit and harm, counsellors do not speak of success and failure, and scholar-officials do not discuss commerce and merchandise.” It is true, of course, that ultimately the rejection of profit allows the king to maintain his rule, since, as Mencius suggests, it prevents discord with the people and the possibility of regicide on the part of officials. But though it might be true that the maintenance of political order is beneficial for the ruler, this does not mean it is beneficial to him alone.

On the second, more common view, which falls short of the democratic view presented above but is akin to it, and which Chan, borrowing from Joseph Raz, calls the “*Service*
conception of authority,”157 the common people are said to be the most important element in Confucian political theory, and the goal of the Confucian ruler is said to be aimed at satisfying their needs. This view is taken to be illustrated by Mencius’ statement that the people are most important, followed by the altars of the earth and grain (the symbols of the state), while the ruler comes last.158 The difference between my argument about political order and this view is revealed by my disagreement with the way some describe the mixed scenario that Mencius’ account of the role of the people in government presents “as government for the people and of the people but not by the people.”159 It is obvious from this description that its interpreters struggle with understanding how it is that the common people matter, without their importance translating into a say in government. The struggle is clear in Lau’s following thought on Confucius:

Confucius may not have had too high an opinion of the intellectual and moral capacities of the common people, but it is emphatically not true that he played down their importance in the scheme of things. Perhaps, it is precisely because the people are incapable of securing their own welfare unaided that the ruler’s supreme duty is to work on their behalf in bringing about what is good for them.160

The analogy that comes to mind here, which the Confucians themselves use,161 is to parents and children. Mencius, indeed, suggests that the proper attitude for the ruler to assume towards his people is that of a parent: in various sections in which he propounds the need to ensure the people’s welfare, he reminds the ruler that not doing so is failing to live up to his role

158 Mencius 7B.14.
159 See Xiao, History of Chinese Political Thought, 161. See also Li, “Confucian Value and Democratic Value,” 185-6.
160 Lau, Introduction to The Analects, 36.
161 The analogy actually predates these Confucian texts, as it can be found in the Classic of Poetry (shi jing 詩經) and also in the Classic of Rites (li ji 禮記). In other words, it is not an idea introduced by the Confucians, but probably a prevalent one which they gave their own spin on. I thank Mick Hunter for alerting me to this.
as “father and mother to the people” (min fu mu 民父母). The following is a characteristic passage where he confronts King Xuan of Qi:

There is fat meat in your kitchen and there are well-fed horses in your stables, yet the people look hungry and in the outskirts of cities men drop dead from starvation. This is to show animals the way to devour men. Even the devouring of animals by animals is repugnant to men. If, then, one who is father and mother to the people cannot, in ruling over them, avoid showing animals the way to devour men, wherein is he father and mother to the people?162

Besides providing for the people, for Mencius, acting as a parent also involves promoting the worthy to government.163 As for Xunzi, he argues that superiors generally, and kings particularly, should treat their inferiors as if they were protecting a child.164 The people will, in turn, treat their king as they would their own parent and will be willing to die for him.165 Xunzi also echoes Mencius when he argues that if a ruler is good, promotes the worthy, and provides for the people’s needs, then people from all corners of the empire will follow him, looking upon him as their father and mother.166

The parental analogy in the early Confucian texts need not however necessarily be equated with a view that Confucian government is ultimately “for the people.” On my view, there is no normative conception of “the people” as the source or aim of government. The aim of government is political order. It is for “the people” to the extent that they benefit from living in an orderly, secure, and productive society. What Mencius means, then, by his statement that the people are more important than the ruler is not that their well-being is the ultimate aim of Confucian government, for which the ruler is a mere means, but rather that they are

---

162 Mencius 1A.4.
163 Mencius 1B.7.
164 Xunzi 11.18, 11.22.
165 Xunzi 11.22.
166 Xunzi 9.26. Mencius 2A.5. See also Xunzi 15.2.
developmentally more important than the ruler, i.e. that no political order can obtain without
their needs being satisfied first. This is made clear in Mencius’s statement that winning the
empire requires winning the hearts of the people.\(^{167}\)

Moreover, the parental analogy can be interpreted not with an emphasis on the status of
the common people as children, but with an emphasis on the ruler as impartial among the people
as a parent is towards his children. The ideal of impartiality can indeed be found elsewhere in the
texts: in the *Analects* we are told that impartiality (\(gong \ 公\)) is the best way to win the people,\(^{168}\)
and Mencius is at pains to deny that Emperor Shun was partial to his own brother to the
detriment of the common people.\(^{169}\) Xunzi also suggests that if he desires safety in governing,
the ruler should govern fairly (\(ping \ zheng \ 平政\)) and love the people.\(^{170}\) Moreover, the parental
analogy can be seen to buttress the sense in which the ruler and the common people are
inextricably tied to each other, as I have argued above, by suggesting that the ties between them
are almost organic, rather than artificial, and that a relationship of mutual dependency prevails
between them.

To conclude, I have clarified in this section the relationship between ruler and ruled as a
way to further clarify the Confucian conception of political order. I have emphasized the
complementary relationship between the two, suggesting that political order follows precisely
from this complementarity. This view is set in contradistinction to two alternative views: one that
argues that politics in Confucianism benefits the ruler primarily, and one that argues that
Confucian government is “for the people.”

\(^{167}\) *Mencius* 4A.9.
\(^{168}\) *Analects* 20.1. See also *Analects* 7.31 where the governor is said to be partial for taking a wife from the same clan
as his own.
\(^{169}\) *Mencius* 5A.3.
\(^{170}\) *Xunzi* 9A.4. On the other hand, however, we are told that the ruler should give up his role as impartial arbiter the
moment it interferes with his duties towards his parents. I will discuss this point in the next chapter.
III- Hegemons

In this part of the chapter, I further illustrate and substantiate my contention that the central organizing motif of Confucian political thought is the concern with orderliness by showing how this concern explains the intriguing acceptance, even praise, that the early Confucians express for a subset of rulers who are far from virtuous.

A hegemon (ba 霜, literally “the senior one”) was the title attributed to the statesmen who rose to prominence during the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE). At that time, the Eastern Zhou king was king in name alone, and the Zhou realm had disintegrated into many independent states ruled by previous princely vassals of the preceding Western Zhou Dynasty. Different states achieved dominance at various times. While the first state to do so was the state of Zheng, the first one to actually receive the title of hegemon was the state of Qi.171 Ancient texts usually refer to “five hegemons” (including Duke Huan of Qi) of the Spring and Autumn period.172 These hegemons helped maintain a system of alliance among the states of the day, fending attacks from “barbarians” at the borders, with the stated aim of preserving “the Zhou cultural and political order.”173 In reality, though, they contributed to the gradual dissolution of the Zhou order. The precarious system of alliance they established was not to last long: the alliance devolved into more open competition during the subsequent Warring States period. It was only in 221 BCE that the ruler of the state of Qin succeeded at winning over all of his adversaries and called himself Emperor.

172 See for example Mencius 6B.7, 7A.30. Besides Duke Huan of Hi, these hegemons are thought to be Duke Wen of Jin, Duke Zhuang of Chu, Duke Mu of Qin and Duke Xiang of Song.
173 Hsu, “The Spring and Autumn Period,” 566.
Because of their effectiveness in government, hegemons are usually associated with a school of thought now known as Legalism (fa jia 法家) which consists of an amalgamation of texts on statecraft from the Warring States period. Given the usual opposition between Legalism and Confucianism, hegemons are often thought to be anathema to the Confucians. Wing-tsit Chan’s view, that for the Confucians the only contrast is between “kingliness and despotism,” is common. What I want to show instead is that there is a third meaningful class of rulers for the Confucians (less good than virtuous kings but better than despots) and that hegemons occupy it. Indeed, although hegemons’ political effectiveness often came at the expense of virtuousness, the early Confucians countenanced, even praised, them. I contend that this approval stems from their ability to maintain political order at a time of chaos.

Before I proceed to discussing the early Confucians’ view on hegemons, I should note that it is generally not the hegemons per se that the Confucians express praise for: except in Xunzi’s case, the achievements of hegemons are mostly attributed to their ministers. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I am interested in the aims of government rather than in its internal division of functions. Therefore, the relevant unit of analysis is the mode of government pursued by hegemons. When I refer to “hegemons,” it is thus to refer both to hegemons and to their ministers, i.e. as a shorthand for hegemonic government more generally.

Consider, then, the state of Qi which, as I mentioned above, was first to acquire the title of hegemon. Its ruler, Duke Huan of Qi, owes his ascent to power to his prime minister Guan

---

174 One of these, the Guanzi, is actually named after Guan Zhong, the prime minister of Duke Huan of Qi (the first of the hegemons), and is presented as a collection of his thoughts on government, but the attribution is spurious.


176 Chan, Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, 64.

177 Irene Bloom describes the Confucian account of the legitimacy of the hegemons’ rule as “ambiguous.” See Bloom, trans., Mencius, 6, fn19.
It is these two figures that are mostly discussed in the Confucian texts. I will present what the early Confucians had to say about Duke Huan and Guan Zhong, eliciting the revealing ambivalence in each thinker's position about them: while hegemons are criticized at points, primarily for lacking virtue, they are also praised at others. I will show, as I said above, that this praise stems from hegemons' ability to establish and maintain a modicum of political order in otherwise turbulent times.

To start with Confucius, he disparagingly calls Guan Zhong a “vessel of small capacity” and wonders whether, if even Guan Zhong can be said to understand the rites, anyone does not. Everything else he says about Guan Zhong, however, is positive. He recounts the fact that Guan Zhong took over three hundred households from the fief of a certain Bo family, without the latter daring to complain, which presumably indicates the extent of Guan Zhong’s popularity. He also says that Guan Zhong was behind King Huan’s ability to unite the regional rulers several times without resort to force. Confucius adds:

---


179 For Confucius, virtuous people act as the vessels through which rites are put into practice. See Fingarette, Confucius.

180 Analects 3.22. Slingerland writes at one point that “Confucius admired his [Guan Zhong’s] skill and achievements, but had doubts about his moral worthiness” (250). I have no disagreement with this statement. In his commentary on 3.22, however, he contends that despite Confucius’ admiration for Guan Zhong, “at a deeper level he disapproves of his narrowly pragmatic approach and flouting of traditional norms and institutions” (27). But why should we think that the disapproval of Guan Zhong on the moral level is “deeper” than the approval of him on the political level? The standards used to judge political action are simply different (rather than less important) than the standards used to judge action from a strictly moral point of view.


182 Analects 14.16. The sentence that concludes this last anecdote, however, is more controversial. Like Chinese commentators before them, those translating the text into English disagree on how to render the sentence ru qi ren 如其仁. D.C. Lau translates it as “Such was his benevolence [ren], such was his benevolence,” (Ames and Rosemont also adopt the “such was his ren” formulation). Edward Slingerland’s translation, on the other hand, denotes criticism: “But as for his goodness [ren], as for his goodness …” Earlier Chinese commentators adopted a position closer to Lau’s, however, since it is implausible for Confucius to describe Guan Zhong as exhibiting genuine ren (given his criticisms of the latter, reported above), they took the claim to mean that Guan Zhong’s actions merely had the appearance of ren, or had the consequence, but not the form, of ren. The latter is also Zhu
Guan Zhong helped Duke Huan to become the leader of the regional rulers and to save the Empire from collapse. To this day, the common people still enjoy the benefit of his acts. Had it not been for Guan Zhong, we might well be wearing our hair down and folding our robes to the left. Surely he was not like the common man or woman who, in their petty faithfulness, commit suicide in a ditch without anyone taking any notice.\textsuperscript{183}

On a straightforward reading, the contrast that Confucius establishes is between Guan Zhong and petty commoners. But a more telling, albeit more conjectural, way to recast this contrast is as a contrast between Guan Zhong’s actions and those of Zhao Hu, who served with Guan Zhong as minister to Prince Jiu of Qi. When the Prince was murdered by his own brother, none other than Duke Huan,\textsuperscript{184} who then ascended the throne, Zhao Hu killed himself while Guan Zhong simply shifted allegiance to Duke Huan. However loyal Zhao’s decision was, it was Guan Zhong’s which had the more admirable consequence: as Confucius says, Guan Zhong saved Zhou civilization from complete breakdown (by helping Duke Huan win the authority that made him into a hegemon and thus allowed him to unite the states of the day and fend off attacks from outsiders). Indeed, Benjamin Schwartz takes Confucius’ defense of Guan Zhong to be motivated by the master’s loyalty to the collapsing Zhou dynasty and his readiness to “do anything possible to prevent the further disintegration of its sacred authority.”\textsuperscript{185} But one can understand Confucius’ loyalty to the Zhou to be more than a mere emotional attachment to the vestiges of the past. It is a principled commitment to the ideal of political order that the Zhou

\textsuperscript{183} Analects 14.17.

\textsuperscript{184} Duke Huan is, however, described favorably in Analects 14.15, where he is said to be correct (zheng 正), in comparison of Duke Wen of Jin, who is “crafty.” Slingerland reports that a few Chinese commentators describe Duke Huan as having “dedicated himself to public duty at the expense of his own interests,” which fits with the rest of the description of his and Guan Zhong’s actions as I present it here. See Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, 160, fn 6.

\textsuperscript{185} Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, 110.
represented. In other words, Guan Zhong’s praiseworthiness stems from his ability to maintain order in a time of chaos.

Moving now to Mencius, he also, at first glance, appears dismissive of Guan Zhong and Duke Huan. He is thus appalled when one of his disciples, Gong Sun Chou, asks him whether, were he to get the chance to rule in the state of Qi, he would do as Guan Zhong did. Mencius cites Zeng Xi’s claim that Guan Zhong’s achievements were not important.\(^{186}\) In another similar anecdote, when King Xuan of Qi asks Mencius about Duke Huan of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin (the second of the five hegemons), Mencius dismisses the question as one that Confucians were never keen on answering. He offers to speak instead of virtuous kings.\(^{187}\)

Yet, like Confucius, Mencius is ambivalent about Guan Zhong,\(^ {188}\) since he describes him in a different passage as an accomplished statesman: indeed, Mencius cites Guan Zhong as part of a longer list of statesmen, which includes Shun, but also other less known ministers such as Jiao Ge who was a worthy official at the court of the tyrant Zhou Xin,\(^ {189}\) and Bai Li Xi who helped Duke Mu achieve political eminence.\(^ {190}\) The purpose of the list is to illustrate the lowly origins of all these statesmen, and Mencius argues that it is only when a person first suffers that he is then able to innovate.\(^ {191}\) The reference to Guan Zhong together with other worthy statesmen thus reveals that Mencius takes him to be a worthy statesman as well.

---

\(^{186}\) *Mencius* 2A.1.  
\(^{187}\) *Mencius* 1A.7.  
\(^{189}\) *Mencius* 2A.1.  
\(^{190}\) *Mencius* 5A.9.  
\(^{191}\) *Mencius* 6B.15.
That Guan Zhong is a competent minister worthy of praise, in Mencius’ eyes, is further revealed in another anecdote from the *Mencius*. Mencius describes Guan Zhong as an example of a minister “who cannot be summoned” (*suo bu zhao zhi chen* 所不召之臣), i.e. a minister who is respected by his ruler. This is especially significant since Mencius refers to himself as one such minister: when Mencius receives a message from the king asking to see him, he refuses to go, justifying his refusal by arguing that

>a prince who is to achieve great things must have officials he does not summon. If he wants to consult them, he goes to them. If he does not honour virtue and delight in the Way in such a manner, he is not worthy of being helped towards the achievement of great things … Today there are many states, all equal in size and virtue, none being able to dominate the others. This is simply because the rulers are given to employing those they can teach rather than those from whom they can learn.*\(^{192}\)

Mencius then mentions two examples of officials who cannot be summoned: Yi Yin (who served under Prince Tang) and Guan Zhong. Yi Yin is a paragon of virtue from antiquity.*\(^{193}\) Guan Zhong is thus being compared to Mencius himself and to Yi Yin. Based on the quote above, it is clear that what makes Guan Zhong worthy of such a comparison is that he helped his ruler (Duke Huan of Qi) towards “the achievement of great things” and towards gaining “dominance” over neighboring states. The achievements of Duke Huan, allowed by his sponsorship of Guan Zhong, are made explicit in yet another anecdote where Mencius describes Duke Huan as the leader who brought the regional rulers together on a five-fold pledge, revolving around filiality, merit, and the good treatment of neighbors.*\(^{194}\)

In short, what Mencius’ discussion of Guan Zhong and Duke Huan reveals is the implicit recognition that, however lacking in virtue Duke Huan of Qi was, his ability to unite the states of

\[^{192}\textit{Mencius} 2B.2.\]
\[^{193}\textit{Mencius} 5A.6.\textit{ See also Mencius} 7A.31.\]
\[^{194}\textit{Mencius} 6B.7.\]
his day, and set up rules for their interaction and internal regulation, prevented conflict and anarchy from erupting. Duke Huan was only able to do this because he was willing to listen to the advice of Guan Zhong. Writing about the depiction of Guan Zhong in the *Analects*, Benjamin Schwartz argues that he is judged, not on the basis of “pure ethics,” but on the basis of an “ethics of political life which often involves the typical political choice between the greater and lesser evil.” The same can be said about the depiction of Guan Zhong in the *Mencius*: what earns him praise is not his virtuousness, but the fact that, from the perspective of a simple concern with the avoidance of political disorder, his actions helped avoid the greater evil of war and the decay of Chinese civilization.

Finally, Xunzi offers the most sustained discussion of hegemons among our three thinkers. He suggests at first that hegemons only give the appearance of *ren*, but are actually only concerned with profit. They do not care for instruction or culture (*wen* 文), but merely for mastering the tactics of war, and their army is motivated only by a desire for rewards. What better proof is there of hegemons’ lust for power than the fact that Duke Huan, whom Xunzi considers the most successful of the five hegemons, started his career by killing his own brother.

---

195 In two anecdotes in the *Mencius*, Mencius is encouraged to take up an official post with the argument that he can turn the ruler either into a king, or at least into a hegemon, suggesting that the latter possibility was not considered as anathema to Mencius (it would not otherwise have been used in efforts to convince him). See *Mencius* 2A.2 and 3B.1.
197 Though Xunzi is clearest in his support for hegemons among our three thinkers, some still argue that this support is not wholehearted. Thus Mark Edward Lewis argues that later essays in the *Xunzi* “grudgingly accept the practices of the Spring and Autumn hegemons when no true king exists.” See Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 66.
198 *Xunzi* 7.3 and 9.10.
199 *Xunzi* 7.3.
200 *Xunzi* 15.3.
and usurping the throne? As for Guan Zhong, Xunzi describes him as nothing but a man from the fields not fit to become the counsellor of a king.

This depiction of hegemons shows that they are inferior to virtuous kings. On the other hand, Xunzi says that hegemons are better than rulers who merely rely on force. Indeed, he contends that the hegemon:

- opens up lands for cultivation, fills the granaries and sees that the people are provided with the goods they need. He is careful in selecting his officials and employs men of talent, leading them on with rewards and correcting them with punishments. He restores states that have perished, protects ruling lines that are in danger of dying out, guards the weak, and restrains the violent.

But if hegemons do all of the preceding, what makes them less worthy than virtuous kings? Xunzi says that the virtuous king extols rituals, while the hegemon is merely good at governing (zheng 政), which he argues is better than being merely good at collecting taxes. Xunzi also says that the king seeks to establish rightness (yi 義) while the hegemon seeks to establish trust (xin 信). This trust is obtained by using consistent punishments and rewards, avoiding deceiving the people, and honoring agreements with allies. Xunzi’s most repeated formulation of the difference between virtuous king and hegemon is that one who extols rituals and honors the worthy becomes a king, while one who stresses regulations (fa 法) and loves the people becomes a hegemon.

As Hoyt Tillman suggests, Xunzi’s systematic account of hegemons could be seen as distinct from the account of the historical hegemons (Duke Huan and Guan Zhong) who, though

---

201 Xunzi 7.1.  
202 Xunzi 27.63.  
203 Xunzi 9.9 quoted from Watson.  
204 Xunzi 9.5.  
205 Xunzi 11.2.  
206 Xunzi 11.4.  
207 Xunzi 16.1, 17.12 and 27.2. Another formulation is that the king seeks to win the people, the hegemon seeks to win allies, while the ruler who relies on force seeks to win land (Xunzi 9.6).
they were competent, did not necessarily fulfill all the responsibilities adumbrated by Xunzi above.\textsuperscript{208} What Xunzi offers in the comparison between virtuous kings and hegemons is an idealized model of the latter, which can be seen as building upon the historical hegemons’ achievements, to imagine what their principles of government should have been like. It should be clear from this account of idealized hegemons that their government aims at the production of an orderly society through the provision of grain, the use of consistent punishments, winning the trust of the people, and honoring agreements with allies.

In short, what I have tried to show in the foregoing is that, for our three Confucian thinkers, hegemonic rule is appreciated for its success in preventing the unraveling of the Chinese states amidst turbulent times. It might be argued, however, that this success, and the praise that it induces, stems from the fact that hegemons exemplify a modicum of moral virtues such that, if we conceive morality as a spectrum from least virtuous to most virtuous, hegemons would fall somewhere in the middle.\textsuperscript{209} Sor-hoon Tan argues, for example, that “Mencius’ distinction between hegemony and true kingship does not preclude the possibility of a developmental process connecting the two.”\textsuperscript{210} The problem with this argument, however, is that there is no textual evidence to suggest that the qualities recommending hegemons are a primitive form, or a diluted version, of the central Confucian virtues. It is true that hegemons exhibit trustworthiness, which is an important virtue for the Confucians. They also exhibit, at least for Xunzi, love for the people, which Xunzi takes to be a characteristic of hegemons borrowed from kings.\textsuperscript{211} Yet the qualities that the three Confucians converge on in describing Guan Zhong are

\textsuperscript{208} See Tillman, “The Development of Tension between Virtue and Achievement in Early Confucianism,” 23.
\textsuperscript{209} I thank Stephen Angle for pressing me on this point.
\textsuperscript{210} Tan, Confucian Democracy, 197.
\textsuperscript{211} This explains why Xunzi says that hegemons enjoy a “mixed” form, while kings possess the pure form of Confucian government. (Xunzi 16.6).
qualities like resoluteness, courage, and effectiveness. These three qualities do indeed appear in the Confucian texts, but they only appear in relation to the master virtues cited earlier:

Resoluteness (gang 剛) is mentioned three times in the Analects as something one should aspire to, but it is not clearly defined.\(^{212}\) Once one turns to the Xunzi, it is clear that resoluteness is steadfastness in moral conduct specifically: it is used to describe a worthy person to whom the whole world yields,\(^{213}\) a sage minister,\(^{214}\) and morality as such.\(^{215}\) Courage (yong 勇) is also praised in the Confucian texts, yet the courageous person needs to also be versed in the rites in order to be counted as virtuous.\(^{216}\) In fact, in the Analects, martial courage is explicitly rejected in favor of moral courage,\(^{217}\) and Mencius makes a distinction between small and great valor: the first is the valor of common men, while the latter is the valor of virtuous men like King Wen.\(^{218}\) Finally, it is hard to find evidence to show that effectiveness is a quality that the Confucians count as a virtue in itself. In short, resoluteness, courage and effectiveness are only favored by the Confucians when associated with ren, rightness, and rituals. They are not virtues in themselves, and are not presented as preparatory ground for other virtues. Guan Zhong is complimented for having them as such, and not for being on the path towards virtue. The spectrum view of virtue, though plausible in itself (it might, for example, be applied to the qualities characteristic of the common people) does not account for the Confucian approval of hegemons.

---

\(^{212}\) See Analects 5.11, 13.27 and 17.8. In 5.11, it is associated with a lack of desires. In 17.8, it is said to need to be balanced by a love of learning.
\(^{213}\) Xunzi 6.12.
\(^{214}\) Xunzi 13.5.
\(^{215}\) Xunzi 30.4.
\(^{216}\) Analects 8.2, 14.12 and 17.24. In 17.8, the suggestion is that courage must be combined with learning.
\(^{217}\) Analects 5.7, 8.10, 14.4, and 17.23.
\(^{218}\) Mencius 2B.3. See also 2A.2.
A similar argument explaining the Confucians’ approval of hegemons is also offered by Tan who argues that

hegemons’ coercive authority is legitimate to the extent that it creates the external conditions for personal cultivation, while its inadequacy lies in failing to foster the internal conditions for personal cultivation through transformative exemplification.”

I disagree with this argument. First, although it is true that personal cultivation, on the Confucian view, requires adequate external conditions (such as basic subsistence), it is not necessarily true that the aim of establishing the latter is personal cultivation. The good of welfare, peace, and order, is a good in itself, and need not be justified through the fulfillment of “ethical” standards. Indeed, this is precisely what my discussion of hegemons is meant to show. To put it differently, my aim in this chapter, and in this dissertation as a whole, is to elicit a space between “crass politics” and “ethical politics.” Hegemons lie in this space.

To sum up, then, hegemons are countenanced, and at points praised, because they have historically succeeded, through the efforts of their leading ministers, at saving the empire from all-out war by forming strong states and rules of engagement among these. Also, as an ideal type, at least in the way Xunzi presents them, hegemons provide the model of how a ruler succeeds at achieving political order without necessarily showing qualities of virtue. In other words, hegemons can serve as a model of what an heir should do to maintain the throne. This is revealed through the policies they pursued to maintain order, which I now turn to before concluding this chapter.

---

219 Tan, *Confucian Democracy*, 196.
220 This said, historically speaking (rather than as an ideal type), hegemons, like Duke Huan of Qi, usurped hereditary prerogative to become rulers. When Mencius and Xunzi advocate hereditary succession, they are therefore implicitly criticizing hegemons for violating the hereditary rule. In 6B.7, Mencius explicitly says that the five hegemons were offenders against the three kings of antiquity.
IV- **Order-promoting policies**

I have elicited so far a Confucian concern with political order in their defense of hereditary succession to the throne, in the qualities they demand of the common people, and in their—qualified—admiration for hegemons, and I have argued that this political order follows from the fulfillment of a mutually beneficial relationship between ruler and ruled. To clarify more specifically what the basic level of political order amounts to, I now turn to presenting the kinds of policies that produce it. I have already intimated that these policies are related to fulfilling the security and welfare needs of the common people which, in turn, encourages the latter to remain loyal to the ruler and paves the way for them to develop the qualities of productiveness and discipline described above. In this section, I will present these policies in more detail.

Some of these policies have already been revealed in the account of hegemons above. In terms of foreign policy, for example, a large part of hegemons’ success stems from their ability to forge and lead sturdy alliances with neighboring states. As I said above, Confucius praises Guan Zhong because he was able “to save the empire from collapse” by helping Duke Huan bring together the regional rulers of the day. Similarly, as I also mentioned, Xunzi cites the ability to honor agreements with allies as one reason that makes hegemons successful at ruling. In both cases, the praise is directed at hegemons’ ability to defend their states without resort to force.\(^{221}\)

\(^{221}\) The Confucians are, on the face of it, wary of the resort to military means (see, for example, *Analects* 15.1). This said, they do accept, even praise, military ventures aimed at helping people of neighboring countries, and so long as they involve the good treatment of the people involved (both those enlisted to fight and the members of countries attacked). See *Mencius* 1B.10, 1B.11, 3B.5 and 7B.4 and *Xunzi* 9.7, 9.26, 15.5, 15.6 and 15.12. For a discussion of Mencius and “Just and unjust war,” see Daniel Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 23-51.
The discussion of hegemons in the previous section also underscored the importance of the promotion of the worthy for our three Confucians. The recognition of merit (in his treatment of Guan Zhong and in the five-fold pledge he sponsored among the states of the day) is indeed a central reason behind Mencius’ admiration for King Huan of Qi. The promotion of the worthy is also explicitly cited by Xunzi as a typical policy employed by hegemons. The emphasis on merit should not be seen as contradicting the Confucian preference for hereditary succession discussed in the first section of this chapter: hereditary succession is clearly meant to be restricted to the highest position in the land. Indeed, the importance of meritorious ministers arises precisely because hereditary succession cannot ensure the competence of the rulers who ascend the throne.

Thirdly, Xunzi’s account of hegemons emphasizes their use of consistent punishments and rewards. Elsewhere, Xunzi argues that punishments only work so long as they are strictly applied; as soon as they are slightly relaxed, the people inevitably return to being disobedient. He considers the use of punishments to be appropriate only as a last resort, and even then, restricted to as few people as possible.

What I wish to focus on in this section, however, are Confucian policies that can be subsumed under the general category of “political economy.” These were briefly mentioned in the discussion of hegemons above: Xunzi describes hegemons as providing lands for agriculture, stocking the state’s granaries, and generally making sure that the people’s welfare needs are satisfied. The discussion of economic policies in the early Confucian texts is worth dwelling on further because it is an area that has been largely ignored in the secondary literature on early Confucianism. What the literature does underscore is the Confucian emphasis on the need to

---

222 Xunzi 16.2.
223 Xunzi 15.10 quoted from Watson.
provide for the common people, but there has not been sufficient attention to the exact policies favored by the Confucians for doing so.

A few words first are in order about the injunction to provide for the people, after which I turn to the policies meant to fulfill it: Rulers are enjoined not to overwork or overburden the people: “In guiding a state of a thousand chariots,” Confucius says, “employ the labor of the common people only in the right seasons.”224 As a response to a bad harvest, You Ruo, a disciple of Confucius’, advises the governor of the state of Ai to reduce taxes to one in ten (of agricultural output). The Governor of Ai retorts that the tax of two in ten is already insufficient for the government, how could a tax reduction help? You Ruo’s reply suggests the intimate connection between the interest of the ruler and that of the common people. As he puts it, if the people have enough, the ruler cannot be said to be lacking, but if the people are in need, how could the ruler ever be content?225

Mencius develops You Ruo’s argument above by recasting the welfare requirement not so much as a matter of restricting expenditures or actively pursuing the state’s enrichment, but rather a matter of sharing, thus again emphasizing the complementarity between ruler and ruled.226 When King Xuan of the state of Qi complains to Mencius that he has a park only forty leagues square but the people consider it big, Mencius advises the king to share his park with the people.227 The same King Xuan of Qi is also encouraged to share his pond and terrace with the people,228 as well as his fondness for music,229 money, and women.230 Duke Wen of Teng, for his part, is counseled to do his part in militarily defending the country alongside the people.231

224 *Analects* 1.5.
225 *Analects* 12.9.
226 *Mencius* 1A.2.
227 *Mencius* 1B.2.
228 *Mencius* 1A.2.
229 *Mencius* 1B.1.
Finally, Xunzi emphasizes kindness (hu 惠) as the attitude that the government should espouse towards the people. Kindness involves taking care of the “five incapacitated groups” (the dumb, deaf, crippled, limbless, and dwarfed), but also more generally rearing (zhang 長) and nourishing (yang 養) the common people.

As I mentioned above, these injunctions are widely documented in the secondary literature (in order to show the importance the Confucians bestow on the common people), but less attention has been given to the specific mechanisms meant to fulfill these injunctions. Benjamin Schwartz writes that “There were many … signs during [the Warring States] period of what we could call now development” and continues that “the crucial point is that they are not particularly germane to the concerns of the Master [i.e. Confucius].” This, I think, is incorrect. I reveal in what follows that the Confucians were indeed concerned with issues of political economy, i.e. issues of land expansion, population increase, taxation, agricultural production, etc.

First, the early Confucians simply recognize that size (territory and population) matters for economic productivity. This is important to note because the Confucians, especially Mencius, suggest at points that virtue trumps all other means for establishing a successful government. For example, in 4A.7, Mencius argues that no one can be stronger than a ruler who models himself after King Wen (founder of the Zhou Dynasty), on account of his virtue, and not on account of

---

230 Mencius 1B.5.  
231 Mencius 1B.13. See also Mencius 1B.4: “The people will delight in the joy of him who delights in their joy, and will worry over the troubles of him who worries over their troubles. He who delights and worries on account of the Empire is certain to become a true King.”  
232 Xunzi 9.4.  
233 Xunzi 9.1.  
234 Xunzi 6.9.  
the size of his state. As he says, “Against ren there can be no superiority in numbers.” Yet, turning to the first part of the anecdote, one can also find the suggestion that size does matter. There, Mencius claims that the success of those emulating King Wen will be faster in coming for the rulers of large states than for the rulers of small states: seven years for the latter, and only five for the former. This is akin to his assessment of the state of Qi, in which he argues that it is easier for the ruler of Qi to become a true king than it was for King Wen, because Qi has a territory (di 地) exceeding that of the Zhou dynasty, and the Xia and Shang, at their height. Qi has a concomitantly large population (min 民), supposedly evidenced by the fact that “you can hear roosters crow and dogs bark from one side of the state to the other.”

The evaluation of Qi echoes Confucius’ exclamation, upon travelling by the state of Wei, “How numerous (shu 庶) the people of this state are!” That this comment has a positive connotation is made clear in the follow-up question by Ran Qiu, who wonders what more can be done, once the population is already numerous, thus implying that a numerous population is itself a goal to pursue. Commenting on this passage, Slingerland notes what I already discussed above about the importance of population during this period, observing that “the main source of state wealth and strength were taxes on peasant agricultural production and levying of peasant armies.” He also adds that the peasants were mobile, and could thus easily leave a given state if unsatisfied, hence the added keenness with which rulers tried to win them over.

If, thus, a large population is important as a source of revenue and military strength, a large territory is important as the source of the physical space and the land resources needed to

---

236 Mencius 4A.7. Xunzi also emphasizes virtue over territory in 7.4, 8.18, 11.14. In 14.3, Xunzi argues that it is the combination of territory and population on the one hand, and the Way on the other, that secures the foundation of a country.
237 Mencius 2A.1.
238 Analects 13.9 quoted from Slingerland.
239 Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, 143.
sustain a large population.\footnote{Mencius thus argues that for a regional ruler (i.e. someone who is not—yet—king), there are three treasures: territory, people, and affairs of state (but not pearls and jade) (Mencius 2A.3). See also Mencius 7B.28.} Moreover, as Mencius explains (amidst a positive assessment of the size of the state of Lu):

The territory of the son of Heaven is a thousand leagues squares. If it were not a thousand leagues, it would be insufficient to entertain the various lords [regional rulers] at his court. The territory of each of the various lords is a hundred leagues square. If it were not a hundred leagues, it would be insufficient to preserve the practices of their ancestral temples.\footnote{Mencius 6B.8 quoted from Van Norden.}

In other words, what this quote suggests is that a true king needs a large territory to sustain the court ceremonies and the ancestral sacrifices worthy of a state of many vassals. This is the first indication of the tight relationship between the economic base and the complex workings of a ritual-centered political realm which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Important as it is, however, territory is also the cause of a quintessential dilemma for statesmen. On the one hand, the strength of the state is dependent on the span of its territory and the size of its population. On the other hand, an increase in territory, by itself, does not compensate for the increase in mouths to feed, and sophisticated methods have to be devised for the extraction of resources and the administration of vast fields. This is an area that also concerns the early Confucians. Indeed, Mencius and Xunzi show, for example, a clear interest in the development of agriculture. The methods they espouse center on the avoidance of arbitrary interference in the spontaneous course of nature. For Mencius, the first step along the kingly way thus requires that the ruler “not interfere with the busy seasons in the fields,” “not allow nets with too fine a mesh to be used in large ponds,” and permit hatchets and axes to be used “only in the proper seasons.”\footnote{Mencius 1A.3.} Similarly, Xunzi’s proposals involve encouraging farming and
proscribing banditry,\textsuperscript{243} regulating farming according to the appropriate seasons,\textsuperscript{244} and closing and opening common territories (like mountains, forests, and lakes) according to seasons but imposing no taxes on their use.\textsuperscript{245}

One specific farming arrangement espoused by Mencius is the so-called well-field system.\textsuperscript{246} The well-field system is an idealized land tenure system of the Zhou requiring the division of public land among groups of eight families. Each family gets its own plot (all eight plots being equal), while the ninth plot is meant to be cultivated collectively, for the benefit of the regional ruler.\textsuperscript{247} The importance of this system is presumably the fact that it protects the livelihood of the peasants while also ensuring revenue for the ruler.\textsuperscript{248}

The well-field system gave way, during the Warring States period, to a more consolidated form of land ownership by peasants. This transformation was not unnatural, as one can identify in the well-field system the orientation towards small-scale farming that was characteristic of the period and that was a natural precursor to land ownership.\textsuperscript{249} Indeed, already in the \textit{Xunzi}, and even in a few passages in the \textit{Mencius} and in the \textit{Analects}, we find a discussion of taxes on land output, a sign of development towards land ownership. Xunzi thus wants to make sure that the rate of taxation on land does not surpass one in ten,\textsuperscript{250} which is also the rate favored by You Ruo,\textsuperscript{246} Mencius 3A.3.

\textsuperscript{243} Xunzi 12.6.
\textsuperscript{244} Xunzi 9.22.
\textsuperscript{245} Xunzi 9.16.
\textsuperscript{246} Mencius 3A.3.
\textsuperscript{248} Schwartz, \textit{The World of Thought in Ancient China}, 281.
\textsuperscript{250} Xunzi 9.16.
Confucius’ disciple encountered earlier.  

Mencius calls for a general decrease in all forms of taxation levied in grain and cloth, but also in labor.  

As for trade, both Mencius and Xunzi emphasize the freeing up of trade and exchange. Both want no taxes to be levied on borders and in markets so as to free the circulation of goods.  

Mencius spells out the textbook version of the importance of trade: “If people cannot trade the surplus of the fruits of their labours to satisfy one another’s needs, then the farmer will be left with surplus grain and the women with surplus cloth. If things are exchanged, you can feed the carpenter and the carriage-maker.”  

Xunzi’s account takes Mencius’ a step further, as he is specifically sensitive to what we call today “comparative advantage,” arguing that each region should provide the goods that it specializes in producing (horses and dogs from the north, feathers and copper from the south, etc.).  

Interestingly, despite their encouragement of trade, Mencius and Xunzi also want to regulate and limit the number of tradesmen.  

To understand the source of the suspicion against merchants, the following passage from the Mencius is revealing:  

In antiquity, the market was for the exchange of what one had for what one lacked. The authorities merely supervised it. There was, however, a despicable fellow who always looked for a vantage point and, going up on it, gazed into the distance to the left and to the right in order to secure for himself all the profit there was in the market. The people all thought him despicable, and, as a result, they taxed him. The taxing of merchants began with this despicable fellow.

---

251 Analects 12.9.  
252 Mencius 1A.5, 3A.3, 7B.27. In 3A.3, the suggestion is that the best mode of taxation is that which increases taxes on agricultural in times of plenty and alleviates them in times of need.  
253 Xunzi 9.16, Mencius 1B.7 and 2A.5.  
254 Mencius 3B.4.  
255 Xunzi 9.17.  
256 Xunzi 10.4 .  
257 Mencius 2B.10.
This account makes clear that merchants were suspected of abusing the workings of the market for their own, personal profit, hence the need to rein into them.

To sum up, it is crucial to remark on the nature of the Confucians’ favored economic policies: from the preceding, it is clear that the ruler does not micromanage the economy, nor does he distribute resources directly to the people. Instead, he works on the “basic structure” itself (by regulating the commons, removing obstacles on trade, etc.), thus ensuring the well-functioning of the socioeconomic system such that it works to everyone’s benefit.

It is also important to note the link between these economic policies and the theme of political order developed in this chapter: the aim of these policies is to promote the state’s productivity and thus provide for the common people’s basic needs. Only when this is achieved can the ruler be successful at winning the loyalty of the common people and thus at maintaining political order.

To conclude this section, the Confucians emphasize the welfare of the common people, and link it with the success of the ruler at governing. They advocate specific economic policies for ensuring the state’s productivity, and thus producing the conditions necessary for the possibility of a well-contended populace. Together with the use of strict but restricted punishments, the advancement of government officials on the basis of merit, the imposition of low taxes, and a foreign policy motivated by the avoidance of the constant use of force, these policies produce a well-ordered society. Crucially, these are all policies that rely on the regulation of institutions (the taxation system, the appointment system, tariffs, punishments, etc.), not on the exercise of virtue by the ruler.
Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the aim of Confucian government is neither to instill high virtue in the common people, nor to represent their needs and interests, but to promote political order. I have elicited the concern with order in the qualities expected of the common people, in the preference for hereditary succession, and in the approval of hegemons. I have also elaborated in the last section the main policies, primarily economic, which promote political order.

This aspect of Confucian political thought is largely independent of the Confucian concern with virtue and self-cultivation, and might indeed make Confucianism appear as much more similar to the hard-headed political realism of Legalism than is usually thought. Yet this chapter does not present the whole of the Confucian vision of government. It has mainly focused on what I have described as “basic” political order. As Xunzi says, “when speaking of government and order (zheng zhi 政治),” the gentleman “does not go below peace (an 安) and survival (cun 存).” This level of order is acceptable, but not ideal. In the following chapter, I turn to the more “exalted” level of political order favored by the Confucians. This is where some (though not all) Confucian ethical concepts come to have political import, and Mencius’ and Xunzi’s visions start to part ways. On the other hand, even in its more idealistic moments, Confucian political thought does not conform to the conventional view of it as consisting of a sage ruler beckoning his people towards virtue. Chapter 3 will show why.

---

258 Xunzi 8.25.
Political order, I argued in the preceding chapter, is the central motivating concern of Confucian political thought. I have only focused so far, however, on the most basic level of political order, which centers on welfare policies, consistent regulations, and the hereditary succession to the throne. When more ideal conditions obtain, the Confucians favor a more durable conception of order, which fosters not merely peace, but also harmony, in society. The difference between the two is somewhat akin to the difference between John Rawls’ *modus vivendi* and the just society, or the difference between Plato’s city of pigs and his ideal Republic: the first of the pair is acceptable, but it operates on the basis of the lowest common denominator among members of society, and does not fulfill the fullest possible potential of humans living together as the second does.

Although often associated with Confucianism, harmony (*he 和*), as I mentioned in the Introduction, is not actually a concept central to the early Confucian texts. It does capture, however, what is distinctive about this level of political order: effortless coordination among different members of society. This coordination rests on the development of certain ethical qualities among the members of society: the political and the ethical do come together at this level of political order. Importantly, however, neither is everyone expected to become virtuous, nor does government rest on the transformative power of an exemplary ruler. Government rests, I argue, on a set of institutional mechanisms, primarily rituals.

It is at this level of order that differences between Mencius and Xunzi sharpen, and they will be revealed in this and the following chapter: Mencius, who believes that human nature
should be left to its own devices to flourish, emphasizes the promotion of filiality through educational means, including the ruler’s role as a model. Xunzi, on the other hand, believing that human nature should be groomed, emphasizes rituals in all their varieties and leaves a symbolic role for the ruler to play. In other words, the conventional view of Confucianism more closely reflects Mencius’ politics than Xunzi’s, but even in Mencius’ case, the educational role of the ruler and of government more generally has been exaggerated, as I suggested in the previous chapter, and will continue to show in this and the next chapter.

This chapter will proceed as follows: in the first part, I locate the Confucian position within the political debates of early China, showing why they favored rituals and filiality over economic frugality, impartiality, and punishments, as mechanisms to regulate society. In the second part, I elaborate on the political importance of rituals, underscoring their role in clarifying everyone’s position in society, thus avoiding competition over scarce resources. Since Xunzi offers the most sustained conception of rituals, I will reverse the chronological order of presentation and focus on him first, and then conclude this second part of the chapter by explaining why Xunzi’s view of human nature led him to emphasize rituals more strongly than Mencius does. The third part will present Mencius’ view, which focuses on a subset of ritual propriety, namely filiality, as the springboard from which political dispositions like loyalty, diligence, and sincerity flow. As will become clear below, both Mencius’ and Xunzi’s positions can be found in rudimentary form in the *Analects*, while the latter does not advance a single, consistent view of government. The *Analects* will therefore not be discussed independently, but will be used to further illustrate both Xunzi’s and Mencius’ positions. Finally, in the conclusion of the chapter, I will turn to the question of the place left for a virtuous ruler in the Confucian vision of government.
I- The case against the Mohists and the Legalists

Before working out the nature of the complex conception of political order espoused by the early Confucians, it is helpful to understand what other contemporary philosophical ideas about the regulation of society were prevalent and why the Confucians rejected these. This approach helps locate the Confucian political vision within the philosophical debates of the time, while elucidating the reasoning behind their adoption of their vision rather than another.

First, consider frugality in government expenditures as a way to confine the use of the resources of the state to the fulfillment of people’s welfare needs. Frugality was the motto of Mozi (ca. 470-391 BCE), the originator of the fleeting school of thought in early China now known as Mohism. Like the Confucians, Mozi was worried about the chaotic state of his times, but he identified the source of the problem not so much in corruption and greed, but in the conflicting values and attitudes espoused in society. His solution was thus to find a universal principle for judging actions that everyone could agree to, and that was to be that actions should be judged according to the benefit (*li* 利) they bring to society.259

Consequently, Mozi argues that the government should only spend on what is beneficial for the people. He makes an analogy to clothing: the point of making clothes is to keep warm in winter and cool in summer. To add decorative elements is of no utility, and should therefore be avoided.260 The idea, then, is that governmental expenditures are to be countenanced only when

---

they bring benefit to the people.\textsuperscript{261} Particular emphasis is laid on repudiating the need for elaborate funerals. Mozi proposes to judge the arguments for and against elaborate funerals by evaluating the latter on four counts (within the broader emphasis on utility): whether they enrich the poor, increase the few, remove danger, and regulate disorder.\textsuperscript{262} He then suggests that elaborate funerals cannot but require great expenditures: for a regional ruler, they require several layers of coffins, jewels to ornament the deceased, and carts and horses to fill the grave.\textsuperscript{263} Elaborate funerals also require extended mourning periods during which the mourners are to retire from their official positions, their fields, or their handicrafts, and during which their health dwindles and they become emaciated—a required sign of grief—thus wasting revenue and labor force for the state.\textsuperscript{264} In short, elaborate funerals make the poor poorer, and by making people weak, obstruct population growth, produce disorder and undercut the state’s defenses. The conclusion is that they should not be undertaken.

It is hard not to read Mozi’s analysis as a rebuke to practices favored by the ritual masters, the \textit{ru}儒, from whose midst Confucius arose, and who sought to preserve the ritual vestiges of a fast-disappearing Zhou world. This said, Confucius himself, in the \textit{Analects}, is actually keen on stressing modesty in ritual. He thus argues that “With the rites, it is better to err on the side of frugality than on the side of extravagance; in mourning, it is better to err on the side of grief than on the side of formality.”\textsuperscript{265} Confucius appears to be worried about the same extravagant practices that annoyed Mozi. However, Confucius and Mozi were not totally in agreement on the importance of frugality. For example, Confucius praised former Emperor Yu not only for being

\textsuperscript{261} Mozi, Book VI, Chapter 2, section 4.
\textsuperscript{262} Mozi, Book VI, Chapter 6, section 3.
\textsuperscript{263} Mozi, Book VI, Chapter 6, section 4.
\textsuperscript{264} Mozi, Book VI, Chapter 6, section 4.
\textsuperscript{265} Analects 3.4. See also Analects 3.20 and 7.36.
modest in his daily clothes but also for “sparing no splendor in his robes and caps on sacrificial occasions.” \(^{266}\) The thought is probably that different standards for judging wastefulness apply in public ceremonies and in daily life; in other words, ornamentation might be necessary in public functions even if not in mundane ones. So not all extravagance is equally wasteful—a recognition not to be found in the *Mozi*. Though this thought is not repeated elsewhere in the *Analects*, it finds echo in the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*.

Unlike Confucius, Mencius does not emphasize the need for simplicity in daily life: in his encounters with King Hui of Xiang, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Mencius never called on the king to slash his indulgence in big parks, money, women, and popular music; the point was merely to share his enjoyment of them with the people. \(^{267}\) On the other hand, Mencius unsurprisingly agrees with Confucius on the necessity of ceremonial spending. This can be gleaned in the following anecdote in which he shows resistance to Bo Gui’s wish to lower taxes to one in twenty (his preference is for one in ten):

Bo Gui said, “How would it be if I were to reduce taxation to one part out of twenty?” Mencius replied, “Your Way is that of a primitive tribe like Mo. Could a state with ten thousand households make do with a single potter?” Bo Gui replied, “It could not. There would not be enough pottery.” Mencius continued, “The Mo do not grow all of the five types of domesticated grain but only grow hog millet. They have no cities, no large buildings, no temples and no ritual sacrifices. They have no lords [regional rulers], hence no silk gifts or ceremonial banquets. They have no official position, either. Hence, taxing one part out of twenty is sufficient. “But if one dwells in the Middle Kingdom, how could it be appropriate to abandon the human relationships and do without gentlemen? If one has few potters, one may not have a state. How much less so if one has no gentlemen! If someone wants to make the Way (of taxation) lighter than that of Yao and Shun, this is to be more or less the Mo tribe. If someone wants to make the Way heavier than that of Yao and Shun, this is to be more or less Tyrant Jie.” \(^{268}\)

---

\(^{266}\) *Analects* 8.21.  
\(^{267}\) See *Mencius* 1B.2, 1A.2, 1B.1, 1B.5.  
\(^{268}\) *Mencius* 6B.10 quoted from Van Norden.
In other words, while heavily taxing people is tantamount to acting towards them like a tyrant, taxing them lightly is akin to following the rudimentary ways of primitive tribes. For the amount of taxation is not only to be measured by the welfare needs of the people: resources are also needed to ensure that official decorum is observed in the treatment of other regional rulers, the performance of sacrifices, etc. Mencius does not consider ceremonial banquets to be wasteful, as Mozi would have. On the contrary, rituals and gifts and temples and banquets are all considered vital to the flourishing of the state.

As for Xunzi, his case for lavishness in public life is spelled out in the clearest possible terms. For Xunzi, there is no better way to ensure the obedience of the people than to cause them to be in awe of the ruler’s sumptuousness:

Hence, it is necessary that the great bell be struck, the sounding drums be beaten, the reed pipes and shawms be blown, and the zithers and lutes be strummed in order that their ears be filled. It is necessary that jade be carved and polished, metals be incised and inlaid, and fabrics be embroidered with the white and black axe emblem, the azure and black notched stripe, the azure and crimson stripe, and the white and crimson blazon in order to fill their eyes. It is necessary that they be provided with the meat of pastured and fattened animals, with rice and millet, with the Five Tastes, and with aromas and bouquets in order that their mouths be filled. Only when this has been done will the population multiply, officeholders become ample, all be influenced by commendations and incentives, and all be made to stand in awe of the penalties and punishments in order to keep their minds on constant guard.\(^{269}\)

Xunzi’s vision of funerals is also elaborate, but it falls short of the extravagance criticized by Mozi. For example, Xunzi wants the carriage to be buried with the dead, but not the horses. The carriage itself is also not wholly included: “its metal and leather fittings, reins and harnesses, are not included, to make clear that it is not intended for use.”\(^{270}\) Note that the reason he does not

\(^{269}\) *Xunzi* 10.12.  
\(^{270}\) *Xunzi* 19.16.
favor more elaborate burials has nothing to do with frugality but, as he says, to emphasize the
form of the articles buried, as opposed to their use, as befits of the treatment of the dead.

Xunzi’s defense of public display is also accompanied by a direct attack on Mozi’s
concern with the restriction of expenditure. In fact, for Xunzi, Mozi’s concern with “moderation
in expenditures” works counterproductively to cause poverty: having to put up with coarse
clothing and bad food, “with only hardship and grief when music and joy have been condemned,”
the people will feel deprived. When they are deprived, they will not have an incentive to work.
This will result in “a decreasing population, a diminishing number of officeholders, and the
elevation of toilsome and bitter efforts, with each member of the Hundred Clans having equal
responsibilities and tasks and equivalent efforts and toils. In such a situation, there is no awe of
authority; and where there is no awe, penalties will not work.”

In short, the three Confucians agree to a large extent that frugality is not only inessential
to government, but also detrimental to it. Some of the reasoning for their position is already
apparent, and it involves the importance of public ceremony for a civilized state, both in terms of
the aura it creates, and the incentives it inspires in its participants. I will further develop these
points below; for now the task is to mark the demarcation line between Confucianism and its
opponents. I will thus now turn to a second solution to political turmoil espoused by the Mohists
and rebuffed by the Confucians, namely the idea of impartiality.

The Mohists are famous for their notion of *jian ai* 兼愛, commonly translated as
“universal love” but which can more accurately be rendered as “impartial care” or “inclusive
care.” As mentioned above, Mozi identifies the source of the political mayhem of his day in
the conflicting values and attitudes people espouse in society, a consequence of which is the

---

271 *Xunzi* 10.11.
272 The latter is the translation favored by Fraser. See Fraser, "Mohism."
absence of mutual love (xiang ai相愛). He thus portrays a world in which fathers and sons work at cross purposes; younger brothers and older brothers do not care for each other; ministers cheat their rulers and rulers mistreat their ministers; regional rulers worry only about their own states, freely attacking those of others, etc. Suppose then, as Mozi proposes, that mutual love is the norm everywhere in the world, i.e. that people love others as much as they love themselves. Were this to be the case, says Mozi, no son will remain unfilial, no minister will be disrespectful, and people will generally care for each other. Even more, what place will there be for thieves in a society where everyone treats others’ families as one’s own, and what place for war in a world where everyone regards the countries of others as one’s own?273

Its usefulness for society, then, is again what recommends the notion of impartial care. Mozi answers objections to this notion, for example as to its impossibility/impracticability, responding by citing presumed historical precedent, and suggesting that the people are often made to do more difficult things than loving others equally, such as sacrificing their own lives.274 He also argues that, contrary to what may first appear, impartial care is in agreement with filiality: taking care of a friend’s parents like one’s own guarantees that the friend will reciprocate when needed, thus ensuring that one’s parents are cared for by others.

Mozi’s notion of impartial care swings uneasily between its two poles: care, and impartiality. The text sometimes shifts from impartiality to care tout court, as when Mozi applies impartial care to the ruler, arguing that it is more beneficial for the ruler to care for his people than not to, for if he does, the people will, in turn, stand by the ruler in times of need.275 Filiality is also defended at points to such an extent that it suggests that Mozi should be more willing to

273 Mozi, Book IV, chapter 1, sections 1-4.
274 Mozi, Book IV, chapter 2, section 4.
275 Mozi, Book IV, chapter 3, section 5.
allow preference to one’s own family than he seems to do.\textsuperscript{276} This said, what matters for my purposes here is that these subtleties were anyway lost on the Confucian opponents of the Mohists, who took the notion of “impartial care” at face value, as can be seen in Mencius’ vehement condemnation of it: Defending himself against the charge that he is “fond of disputation,” Mencius shifts the blame to those whom he takes to be responsible for the confusion of the times. He cites in this regard Yang Zhu, who advocated a philosophy of extreme egoism, and Mozi with his notion of impartial care. Mencius says that Yang Zhu’s motto of everyone for himself amounts to the denial of one’s prince, presumably because it entails that subjects will be unwilling to fight for their ruler. As for Mozi’s notion of impartial care, Mencius insists that it amounts to a denial of one’s father. He concludes that “To ignore one’s father on the one hand, and one’s prince on the other, is to be no different from the beasts.”\textsuperscript{277}

In other words, the crux of Mencius’ response to Mozi lies in his belief that the notion of impartial care is unnatural. This is different from the argument that impartial care is impractical or beyond human means: Mencius would likely not have accused Mozi of being an instigator of disorder if he merely found his ideas to be unachievable. Mencius’ fear of the impact of Mozi’s ideas is rather based on his belief that adopting these constitutes a clear attack on the basis of humanity and the thread that holds human society together. In one anecdote where Mencius confronts Yi Zhi, a Mohist disciple, Mencius identifies the source of the mistake in Mohist thinking in the fact that the Mohists give “two roots” for things when Heaven gave them only one.\textsuperscript{278} Mencius’ statement is interpreted by David Nivison to mean that the Mohists saw two sources for human action: the heart (which tells one to love one’s parents) and philosophical

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item For a discussion of these problems, see Fraser, "Mohism."
\item \textit{Mencius} 3B.9.
\item \textit{Mencius} 3A.5.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
doctrine (which tells one to love everyone equally) or, to put it more simply, emotion and reason. Contrary to this Mohist duality, Mencius believes, as we will see below, that the obligation to care for strangers has the same source (but a different form) as the obligation one has towards one’s own parents. Filiality is the basis of all concern for others.

Xunzi’s criticism of Mozi combines Mozi’s economy of expenditures and his doctrine of impartial care as a single target for attack. Xunzi condemns Mozi, as well as the fellow philosopher Song Xing, for focusing on merit, utility, and frugality while ignoring “distinctions of rank” (*cha de* 差等). The charge against Mozi is perplexing, since Mozi’s focus on merit naturally leads him to recognize, and encourage, gradations of rank and status: he thus says that the virtuous must be rewarded in three ways: they must enjoy high rank, receive a large salary, and have their orders be obeyed. To make sense of Xunzi’s accusation, consider the rest of the section: Xunzi continues that Mozi and Song Xing “are unwilling to admit that there are differences that must be explained and that there must be social distance between the ruler and his subjects.” To get a sense of the differences that Xunzi has in mind, we can turn to his description of how the ancient kings established the proper patterns to organize society: “On the one hand, they decorated the worthy and good so as to clarify differences of nobility and baseness. On the other hand, they decorated the young and old so as to make clear the difference between near (*qin* 親) and distant (*shu* 疏).” Since the differences between noble and base are actually highlighted in Mozi’s system, Xunzi’s accusation is presumably motivated, like Mencius’, by Mozi’s disregard of distinctions between the near and far. The reason why Xunzi’s

---

280 *Mozi*, Book II, Chapter 1, section 6.
281 *Xunzi* 6.4.
282 *Xunzi* 12.7.
target of accusation is not specified in this way might conjecturally be explained by the close connection Xunzi finds between the vertical distinctions (the more meritorious, the higher the rank) and horizontal distinctions (the closer the relationship, the more privileged the treatment). Though Xunzi is not explicit about this, he must have thought that the two are necessarily tied and that the destruction of even one of the two collapses the whole political order as he envisions it and which will be elaborated below.

The Mohists and the Confucians thus disagreed fundamentally on humans and human government: the former favored a return to the most basic of human needs and the most common denominator in human ties. The Confucians found them to misunderstand both the nature of humans (their preference for the near and dear) and the foundation of government (the need for public display). The vision of government offered by Mencius and Xunzi is inflected to a large extent by this disagreement.

Before turning to this vision, I will mention here a last line of disagreement that pitted the Confucians against another set of rivals, the Legalists, as a way to further elucidate the contours of the Confucian conception of government as it will be presented below. Han Feizi, who might have been a student of Xunzi, was to be associated with what was later known as “Legalism.” The advantage of identifying the corpus of writings on statecraft, to which Han Feizi was a significant contributor, as a distinct school of thought was precisely that it could be contrasted with Confucianism: the Legalists are thus portrayed as realists, in search of concrete policies and quick strategies to strengthen the government, while the Confucians are the idealists, tied up to the vestiges of the past and exclusively advocating moral development.283 My contention that the

---

283 This is the view suggested in Watson’s translation of *Han Feizi*, for example. Louie argues that it was the anti-Confucius movement of the early 70s that made much of the contrast (on all levels), between Legalists and
Confucians are concerned with political order is set in opposition to this sharp distinction between the supposedly ethically-motivated Confucians and their politically-motivated counterparts. And yet, I do not mean to completely fill the gap that keeps the two apart. Indeed, while the Confucians and Legalists agreed on the importance of politics, they disagreed on the best way to make politics work.

The key point of divergence concerns the application of $fa$ (法), which is often translated as “law” or “regulation” but can also be translated (depending on the context) as “model” or “standard,” and the related resort to rewards and punishments as a tool of government. Han Feizi jabs at the Confucians for solely relying on a benevolent and righteous ruler to govern. This, according to him, will never get the people to conform. As I show later in this chapter, Han Fei’s understanding of Confucian government is a simplistic one. Nonetheless, it allows him to bring out more fully the benefits of his own conception of government. Han Fei gives the example of a young man of bad character. Try as they might, his parents and teachers are unable to change him. “But let the local magistrate send out government soldiers to enforce the law ($fa$) and search for evildoers, and then he is filled with terror, reforms his conduct, and changes his ways.” As cynical as this quote might be, Han Feizi’s vision is actually more constructive than it first appears. For example, he argues that, in order for them to work, laws should be made consistent, public, and universal (the ruler is in principle exempted from their application, though in practice encouraged to follow them, to serve as a model for others).

The idea that the Confucians were totally against any resort to enforceable government regulations, basing their hope on the power of the ruler’s virtue to sway the people, is a
caricature. Yet what should be noted is that the Confucians preferred to keep the use of laws and punishments as a last resort. Thus, Confucius says,

In hearing litigation, I am no different from any other man. But if you insist on a difference, it is, perhaps, that I try to get the parties not to resort to litigation in the first place.\(^{285}\)

Also Confucius argues that penal laws and punishments are less efficacious than virtue and rites:

Guide them by penal laws (zheng 政), keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.\(^{286}\)

One can also find in the Analects the suggestion that the use of punishments is necessary so long as they do not “miss the mark.”\(^{287}\) Xunzi offers a similar reasoning, arguing that punishments only work as long as they are strictly applied, but as soon as they are slightly relaxed, the people will inevitably return to being disobedient.\(^{288}\) Xunzi considers their use to be appropriate only as a last resort, and even then, restricted to as few people as possible. One can take as an illustration of his vision his account of the ideal times of antiquity: “If there were any who did not follow commands, then and only then were punishments applied. Therefore, the rulers had only to punish one man and the whole world submitted.”\(^{289}\)

\(^{285}\) Analects 12.13.

\(^{286}\) Analects 2.3. I have followed Schwartz in the translation of zheng. Slingerland translates it as “coercive regulations” which is perhaps more accurate than Schwartz’s, but more awkward.

\(^{287}\) Analects 13.3.

\(^{288}\) Xunzi 16.2.

\(^{289}\) Xunzi 15.10 quoted from Watson. See also 10.15, 10.16 (suggesting that rewards and punishments are important, though not most important), 14.6, 14.10 (suggesting that benefiting the wayward is better than harming the worthy), 15.11, 16.2, 24.3, 25.18, 25.50, 27.68, and 28.3. 18.3 suggests, on the contrary, that punishments have to be harsh to engender order. It is however compatible with 15.10 where Xunzi suggests that the best way to apply punishments is to apply them harshly (such as capital punishment), but only to one man, in order to provide a model for others and thus to avoid having to punish more people. In 28.2, Xunzi relates that when Confucius was a prime minister in Lu
In short, the Confucians disagree with the Legalists on the place accorded to laws and punishments: As Xu Fuguan argues, “While the Legalists lay sole stress on the method of punishment, in Confucianism, the method of punishment … is only supplementary in government.” The Confucians’ acceptance of punishments as a last resort indicates, as Xiao argues, the recognition that there will always be people who will only be affected by the threat of force.

The question that arises from all of the preceding is as to the nature of the methods favored by the Confucians. If, for the Confucians, the regulation of society is not achieved primarily through the tightening of expenditures, the fostering of impartiality and mutual care among the people, or the application of laws and punishments, then how is it achieved? In the responses given by the Confucians to their Mohist rivals, and in the charges leveled by the Legalists against the Confucians, we can already glean the outline of a Confucian theory of political order: it is a theory that accepts partiality to the near and dear, that recognizes the importance of public display, and that takes it to be possible to regulate people without the constant use of force. The motivating idea behind this theory, as I will show, is that human inclinations and emotions must be tapped into—rather than opposed—in the construction of a durable political society. This cooptation of prevalent human tendencies can be described as a

---

(temporarily), the first thing he did was to execute Deputy Mao. His disciples ask him whether this did not make him lose the support of the people, and so he goes into a defense of the propriety of his action. As for Mencius, his case against the reliance on rewards and punishments in ruling can only be evidenced through the absence of any mention of these in the whole of the text that bears his name.

kind of “optimism”—Xunzi’s self-avowed pessimism notwithstanding—in the possibility of a harmonious society, despite the fact that virtue education is not open for all.

II. Rituals

As I said above, the Confucians only favored the use of force as a last resort. They believed that people could be encouraged to follow socially appropriate behavior without the threat or use of penal sanctions. The means to achieve this, as I will now explore, are rituals. Rituals, as socially prescribed, and publicly visible, patterns of behavior inherited through the generations, achieved two main, related, goals: first, they helped individuals deal with the major events of life by offering clear guidelines of behavior. Secondly, and relatedly, they ensured the regulation of society through the regulation of individuals’ behavior. I am concerned here with the second of these goals, but the role of rituals in social regulation cannot be clarified without explaining first how rituals affect the behavior of individuals.

The main example here is mourning rites. On the one hand, mourning is the time when one expresses one’s utmost devotion to one’s parents. In the words of Master Zeng, one of Confucius’ disciples, “I have heard from the Master that, even when a person has not yet been able to exert himself to the fullest, he will necessarily do so when it comes to mourning his own parents.” On the other hand, mourning rituals set standards for the appropriate amount both of emotional outpouring and of material spending to honor the deceased. Thus, Confucius himself

---

293 Another benefit of rituals for individuals, which I do not discuss below, is that they help achieve the correct balance between native substance (zhi 質) and culture (wen 文), in order to avoid “pedantry” and “churlishness” (Analects 6.18 quoted from Slingerland). The idea is that where culture “broadens” (bo 博), ritual “restrains” (yue 約) or in Lau’s translation, “brings back to the essentials.” (Analects 9.11, see also 6.27 and 12.15. A different thought is expressed in 14.12 where the gentleman is said to be acculturated precisely through ritual and music).
294 Mencius 4B.13, 7B.33, 7A.46, Xunzi 27.21.
295 Analects 19.17.
is reprimanded by his disciples, upon the death of his favorite disciple Yan Hui, for wailing beyond proper bounds.\textsuperscript{296} Confucius is also saddened by the fact that the other disciples gave Yan Hui, against their teacher’s wish, an inappropriate burial. He laments: “Hui looked upon me as a father, and yet in this case I was unable to treat him as a son.”\textsuperscript{297} The problem with the burials given for Yan Hui was that they were too lavish for someone of his modest social status. Similarly, two different anecdotes in the \textit{Mencius} are devoted to justifying Mencius against the charge that he violated ritual obligations by providing a more lavish coffin for his mother than for his father. In the first anecdote, the justification is based on the higher social status (counsellor) Mencius enjoyed at the time of his mother’s death;\textsuperscript{298} in the second, the argument is that fine wood for coffins is permitted to all segments of the population and that Mencius was simply unable to afford it when his father died.\textsuperscript{299}

Xunzi argues that rituals “will cause anyone born to the world to consider the long view of things and think of the consequences [of their actions], thereby protecting a myriad of generations.”\textsuperscript{300} The idea is that rituals promote the tendency people have to forgo short-term pleasures for long-term ones. Xunzi describes this tendency in the following way:

Now in real life, though a man knows how to raise chicken, dogs, pigs, and swine as well as oxen and sheep, when he eats he dares not have wine and meat. Though he has surplus knife- and spade-shaped coins and stores in cellars and storehouses, he does not presume to dress in silk. Though the miser has treasures deposited in boxes and trunks, he does not travel by horse and carriage. Why is this? Not that men do not desire to do this, but because, considering the long view of things and thinking of the consequences of their actions, they are apprehensive that they may lack means adequate to perpetuate their wealth. In this way, they, too, moderate what they expend and control what they desire, harvesting, gathering, hoarding, and storing up goods in order to perpetuate their wealth.\textsuperscript{301}

\textsuperscript{296} \textit{Analects} 11.10.  
\textsuperscript{297} \textit{Analects} 11.11.  
\textsuperscript{296} \textit{Mencius} 1B.16.  
\textsuperscript{299} \textit{Mencius} 3B.7.  
\textsuperscript{300} \textit{Xunzi} 4.13.  
\textsuperscript{301} \textit{Xunzi} 4.13.
How do rituals promote this tendency? One way to see how rituals can make people “take the long view of things” is to consider the way in which mourning rituals, in regulating the mourning period for example, permit people to restrict their grief with an eye to their various social duties and obligations. Sacrificial rituals (The Analects speaks of ancestor worship, the di sacrifice (a sort of ancestor worship), ceremonial dances outside ancestral halls, and the sacrifice to the sacred Mount Tai), on the other hand, involve literally sacrificing objects of momentary gratification (like meat) for future happiness. Rituals concerning eating, drinking, hunting and contacts between the sexes are also meant to restrict indulgence in short-term pleasures.

In short, rituals offer people the safety of tried, shared, and socially-guaranteed guidelines for action, providing them with an incentive to forgo quick gratification, and freeing them from the burden of deciding what to do in the face of new circumstances. In fact, this is precisely what distinguishes the ritual behavior of the sages from that of others: the sage, while conforming to rituals, also transcends them, in that, understanding their rationale, he knows when they should be followed and when they can be bent. The average person, on the other hand, merely conforms to ritual.

One can already surmise from the preceding discussion the second, and related, purpose of rituals: by regulating people’s behavior, they ensure the smooth running of society. This is the aspect of rituals I want to focus on in what follows. Rituals, on the one hand, bring people

---

302 See Analects 2.24.
303 Analects 3.10, 3.11.
304 Analects 3.1.
305 Analects 3.6.
306 Analects 10.8; Mencius 7A.46, 6B.1.
308 Xunzi 27.27.
309 Mencius 4A.17, Analects 20.1.
together on important occasions and thus foster communal bonds. On the other hand, they restrain desires by assigning social roles and distinctions, and making these visible to all, thereby preventing conflicts over scarce resources. By achieving all of this, rituals promote the state’s productivity and strength.

Communal bonds

Rituals were, as I mentioned in the Introduction, central to the Zhou political order, and though they lost some of their splendor with the weakening of the Zhou, they remained important in the world of the Warring States of early China. By targeting life’s important events, like marriages and deaths, rituals did not help individuals navigate these only by providing guidelines for action, but also by bringing the community together and thus fostering social bonds. Ancestral temples were thus the site of many communal gatherings: they hosted, for example, capping ceremonies for coming-of-age men. There is some indication that activities at these temples were not exclusive to noble families but were activities that commoners also engaged in. This is evidenced by the fact that the amount of revenue devoted to offerings in local shrines and village altars “corresponded to more than half the annual budget for one member of a [peasant] family.” Sacrificial routines at temples had clear non-spiritual social purposes. As Hsu and Linduff explain:

311 Sterckz reports that the “lushi chunqiu [Spring and Autumn Annals] insists that during the height of the farming season, one should not only avoid public works or mobilizing armies, but “commoners should not be permitted to perform the capping ceremony, betrothal, marriage, and sacrificial offerings.” See Sterckx, “The Economics of Religion in Warring States and Early Imperial China,” 860.
312 Sterckx, “The Economics of Religion in Warring States and Early Imperial China,” 851.
The services at ancestor temples, held several times a year, were not to pay homage to awesome spirits who existed beyond the human world. Rather, they were thought to be communal gatherings for both the deceased and the living. The brethren and the cousins, both close and remote, came there to reassure each other of their kinship bonds.\footnote{Hsu and Linduff, \textit{Western Chou Civilization}, 376.}

In short, even the religious function of rituals is overshadowed by their social function, in as much as rituals bring people together to express support for each other, thus strengthening communal ties.

\textbf{Restraining desires}

I mentioned above the importance of rituals for individuals in restraining their short-term desires in favor of long-term ones. I will now elaborate on the sociopolitical dimension of this role that rituals play in restraining the emotions, especially propounded by Xunzi. Basically, for Xunzi, restraining the emotions prevents conflicts in society. Thus Xunzi starts his chapter “On Rituals” with the premise that humans are “born with desires,” adding that the problem with these desires is that they are many, and resources are few, so that any attempt to satisfy them will lead to wrangling with others in society. The origin of rituals thus lies in the attempt on the part of the sage kings of antiquity to find a solution to this specific problem.\footnote{Note that the sage kings Xunzi thinks one should take as a model are the later rulers of the Zhou (and not so much emperors Yao, Shun and Yu). See \textit{Xunzi} 5.10.} Rituals were meant to ensure “that desires did not overextend the means for their satisfaction, and material goods did not fall short of what was desired.”\footnote{\textit{Xunzi} 19.1 quoted from Watson, 93.}
Xunzi positions himself against ideas prevalent in his time which sought to solve the problem of conflicting desires by eliminating or reducing these. For Xunzi, this solution is anathema to the basic nature of human beings: “Beings that possess desires and those that do not belong to two different categories—the categories of the living and the dead.” For him, the question of possession and non-possession of desires has nothing to do with the question of good and bad government, because the idea of the absence of desires is a non-starter: it is only relevant for the dead. Instead, the idea should be to regulate desires through rituals. By regulating eating and drinking habits, for example, rituals prevent excessive consumption on the part of any one person, and thus help avoid fights over food resources. What rituals also do, as I will explain in what follows, is to make standards of consumption and behavior relative to social position, and to make social positions clear, thereby regulating the interaction among members of society.

Social distinctions

While rituals promote social ties, they concomitantly mark social distinctions (fen 分), thus specifying what is owed to, and required of, each. One obvious example here is rituals of investiture involving gift-exchange to symbolize allegiance and obligation. Gifts varied according to rank and involved decorated clothing, but also and less frequently, chariots, flags, bows, and arrows. Whereas these exchanges were limited, during Zhou times, to the Zhou king and princes, they expanded to include lower rungs of society as social mobility increased with the fall of the Western Zhou. For a more mundane example of the way in which rituals set social distinctions, in one anecdote in the *Analects* Confucius disapproves of the behavior of a

---

316 Xunzi 5.10.
young boy, as he watches him sitting with adults, and walking with his elders, because the boy violates the standards of propriety reserved for the distinction between young and old.  

Marriage, mourning, and ancestral rituals also all emphasize the proper roles to be played by young and old, men and women, near and far, eminent and humble.

To appreciate the nature and importance for Xunzi of the social distinctions highlighted by rituals, one should understand the extent to which Xunzi takes the drawing of such distinctions to be a basic human propensity:

“What is it that makes a man human? I say that it lies in his ability to draw boundaries. To desire food when hungry, to desire warmth when cold, to desire rest when tired, and to be fond of what is beneficial and to hate what is shameful—these characteristics man is born possessing, and he does not have to wait to develop them. They are identical in the case of a [sage] Yu and in that of a [tyrant] Jie. But even so, what makes a man really human lies not primarily in his being a featherless biped, but rather in his ability to draw boundaries."  

The most important boundaries to be drawn, according to Xunzi, are boundaries between social classes. In turn, the most important way to draw such boundaries is through the use of ritual principles. Since the propensity to draw boundaries is a faculty of the intellect, one can say that it is the human intellect (or at least that of the sages) that creates rituals.

Another thing to note is the importance of merit, for our three Confucians, in the assignment of social ranks. The Confucian vision, like the Platonic one, is one where people are assigned to positions that suit their predilections, although it is not clear that such allocation takes place at birth, but rather as people distinguish themselves in life. Though the Confucians recognize, as I argued in the previous chapter, that the circumstances of the life one is born into

---

318 *Analects* 14.44. In Book X, we also learn of the proper demeanor (i.e. as exemplified by the Master himself) of responding when summoned by a ruler (*Analects* 10.3, 10.20), of bidding farewell to a guest (*Analects* 10.3), and of receiving a gift (*Analects* 10.23).
319 *Xunzi* 5.9.
320 *Xunzi* 5.10.
321 See Chapter 4.
greatly affect the possibility of meritorious achievement, yet when merit is indeed achieved, and capacities are developed, it is this that determines a person’s position in the social hierarchy. This is why, as Michael Nylan argues, “In the well-governed state … it is not just that each unit in society admirably fulfills its specific functions like cogs in a wheel. It is rather that the person experiences a zest for his profession, sensing that it is well suited to his capacities and predilections.”

Finally, it might be worth mentioning that the idea of social distinctions is one version of the concept of the rectification of names found in the *Analects*, and developed in the *Xunzi*. The *Analects* makes clear that the rectification of names involves the assigning of people to their right tasks: when the king acts as king, the minister as minister, the father as father, the son as son, etc. the realm will be well-governed.

**Public display**

One obvious way to make distinctions clear, which is crucial if everyone is to know their position in society, is to make them literally visible for everyone to see, hence the importance of public display. The *Analects*, as mentioned above, recounts approvingly of Shun sparing no sumptuousness in his ceremonial clothing. The importance of ceremonial clothing is also echoed in Xunzi’s detailed description of the attire befitting officials of different ranks:

Hence, the Son of Heaven wears the dragon robe of royal red with its ceremonial cap, the regional rulers wear the black dragon robe with its ceremonial cap, the grand officers

---

323 See, for example, *Xunzi* 22.4.
324 *Analects* 12.11. See also *Analects* 13.3.
wear a skirt with an ornamented border at the bottom and the appropriate cap, and knights wear a hat of skin with their clothes.\textsuperscript{325}

In short, the higher one is positioned, the more lavish should his attire and sponsored ceremonies be.\textsuperscript{326} Sumptuousness not only clarifies one’s position; it also legitimizes it: as Xunzi argues in the quotes cited earlier, the people are more likely to obey their ruler and have an incentive to be productive if they are “charmed” by the blowing pipes and the carved jade and the fattened animals and the various aromas displayed by the ruler.

Xunzi criticizes the argument, presumably Mozi’s, that the reason why robbery was less frequent in past times lies in the fact that the ancients gave humble burials, while presently people give lavish burials, causing much crime and disorder. For Xunzi, the cause of robbery has to be found not in its target but in its motive: people steal because they are not provided for. Public display has got nothing to do with it. For Xunzi, the assignment of people to their proper social position, which he takes to have been followed by the sage kings of antiquity, ensures that no one takes more than he needs: “Thus, robbers did not steal and thieves did not break in; dogs and pigs would turn up their noses at beans and millet; and both farmers and traders were able to give away from of their products and goods.”\textsuperscript{327}

The attention to sumptuousness and display in early Confucian political thought is reminiscent of Clifford Geertz’ seminal work on the Balinese states in which, as he puts it, “the interplay of status, pomp, and governance not only remains visible, but is, in fact, blazoned.”\textsuperscript{328} In its emphasis on status and pomp, the ideal Confucian state is indeed similar to the Balinese

\textsuperscript{325} Xunzi 10.3.
\textsuperscript{326} Different occasions also require different attires, as we learn from Confucius’ example in Analects 10.6.
\textsuperscript{327} Xunzi 18.7.
ones. But one important, and revealing, difference between the two systems is the through-and-through spiritual dimension of Balinese political life. Status in the Balinese states was arranged according to distance from divinity and the king was the “incarnation … of the Holy as such.”

Whether this spiritual dimension is to be taken at face value or not, the contrast with the Confucians remains stark: the explanation for ritual and splendor in the Confucian vision of government is not, as is clear from the preceding, tied to the workings of Heaven, but rather to the recognition of the secular challenge of collective life, given human passions and the vagaries of the material world.

Harmony

Rituals, by clarifying positions and social distinctions, contribute to the avoidance of conflict in society. Perhaps the best illustration Xunzi gives of rituals as constituting the basic frame that allows society to run properly is the idea of rituals as markers. In Xunzi’s words,

People who ford streams mark out the deep places to cause others not to sink into the waters. Those who govern men mark out the sources of disorder to cause the people not to fall into error. It is ritual principles that are the markers. The Former Kings employed ritual principles to indicate the causes of anarchy in the world. Those who have cast ritual principles aside have pulled up the markers. Thus, the people are beguiled and deluded and so sink into misfortune and calamity. This is the reason that penal sanctions and punishments are so very numerous.

This passage also reveals that Xunzi takes rituals to do much of the work, and better, than penal sanctions are meant to do. By dividing society into classes, based on distinctions of eminence, age and merit, rituals cause the people “to perform the duties of their station in life

---

329 Geertz, Negara, 124.
330 Xunzi 27.13. See also Xunzi 17.14.
and each to receive his due.” This prevents a situation where everyone feels entitled to the same things, or where uncertainty about the future drives people to focus on satisfying immediate needs. Xunzi concludes, “This indeed is the Way to make the whole populace live together in harmony (he 和) and unity.”

The idea of harmony is used in the *Analects* to convey the importance of rituals. Thus Confucius’ disciple Youzi says that “Of the things brought about by the rites, harmony is the most valuable.” Xunzi and Confucius often cite music alongside ritual, suggesting that the use of music, presumably in public ceremonies and rituals of worship, would imprint music’s own harmony on the people “in the temple, the household and the community.” Indeed, harmony is described as the climax of music:

What can be known about music is this: when it first begins, it resounds with a confusing variety of notes, but as it unfolds, these notes are reconciled by means of harmony, brought into tension by means of counterpoint, and finally woven together into a seamless whole. It is in this way that music reaches its perfection.

On Xunzi’s account, “Music unites that which is the same, and ritual distinguishes that which is different.” Another way to put this is to say that rituals draw boundaries between people, assigning them to different positions and tasks, while music entices them to feel part of a harmonious whole. Xunzi tellingly uses a concept that was to become central to Neo-Confucianism, namely *li* 理, which Willard Peterson and Stephen Angle translate as “coherence.”

---

331 Xunzi 4.14.
332 *Analects* 1.12. He continues by saying that it does not do to aim at harmony without “regulating it by the rites.”
333 Xunzi 20.2.
334 *Analects* 3.23.
335 Xunzi 20.9.
or jade,\textsuperscript{337} but he also employs it to refer to order in general,\textsuperscript{338} an orderly person\textsuperscript{339} and an ordered society,\textsuperscript{340} particularly in relation to ritual.\textsuperscript{341} Xunzi’s use of the concept suggests the idea that a properly patterned and ordered society conforms to underlying patterns in the world,\textsuperscript{342} revealing the beginnings of a metaphysical conception of order which took shape in Neo-Confucianism

\section*{Enriching and strengthening the state}

To return to the theme with which this chapter started, rituals, by encouraging people to take the long view of things, hedge against wastefulness and ensure increased productivity, thus contributing to the economic well-being of the realm. In other words, whereas, as pointed out earlier, economic success is necessary for rituals, rituals are also necessary for economic success. Xunzi explains the importance of moderation in the use of resources, achieved by rituals, as follows:

Such moderation in the use of goods will cause overflowing surpluses and allow the people to make a generous living. If the people are allowed to make a generous living, they will become rich. If the people are rich, their fields will be fat because they are well cultivated. If the fields are fat and well cultivated, they will bear a harvest a hundred times over. When the upper classes take from the harvest as provided by law and the lower classes moderate their use of goods according to ritual principles, the surplus will pile up to veritable mounds and hills so that it will seem on occasion that it must be

\textsuperscript{337} Xunzi 21.11, 22.5, 22.16, 26.1, 26.4, 26.5, 30.4.
\textsuperscript{338} Xunzi 3.9, 5.12, 5.17, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.13, 8.7, 9.18, 9.24, 10.20, 11.18, 11.21, 11.22, 15.3 (in reference to the army), 15.6, 17.13, 18.5, 18.9, 19.6, 21.15, 23.9, 23.14, 27.22, 27.61.
\textsuperscript{339} Xunzi 2.3, 7.5, 7.6, 8.12, 12.3, 15.3 (in reference to army conduct), 19.3, 19.15, 19.18, 21.8, 21.12, 22.11, 25.51, 27.78.
\textsuperscript{340} Xunzi 7.3 (hegemons do not attain it), 11.4 (hegemons do and do not use orderly principles), 12.8, 13.9.
\textsuperscript{341} Xunzi 19.8, 19.9, 20.10, 22.9, 23.6, 23.7.
\textsuperscript{342} In his translation of the \textit{Xunzi}, Knoblock translates \textit{li} as “natural order,” “rational principle,” “great ordering principle,” and “reason.”
burned to destroy what there is no more room to store. How could a gentleman face the calamity of having no surplus?\textsuperscript{343}

The rhetorical question here is clearly meant as a rebuke to Mozi whose teachings, according to Xunzi, “too narrowly worry about the problem of the world suffering from the hardship of inadequate supplies.” For Xunzi, if rituals are implemented, so that each person’s task is made clear and he becomes expert at it, and so that consumption is regulated and production increased, then the stage is set for a well-supplied society.\textsuperscript{344}

By regulating the interaction among people and engendering increased productivity, rituals ensure that the state is strong.\textsuperscript{345} Indeed, to quote one of the metaphors Xunzi is fond of using, to desire peace but still relinquish rituals is like “desiring old age and slitting one’s throat. No stupidity could be greater!”\textsuperscript{346} In another analogy, Xunzi compares forming a state to molding copper. Just as, once the mold is broken, one needs to remove the outer debris and sharpen with a whetstone to obtain a strong sword, so in the case of a state, one needs to instruct and unify before “breaking the mold” can produce a strong state. The sharpening with a whetstone in the case of the state involves the use of rituals: “Thus, just as the fate of men lies with Heaven, so too the fate of the state lies with its ritual.”\textsuperscript{347} The problem with the state of Qin (which was later to spearhead the unification of the Chinese empire) was precisely that it relied on military power and ignored ritual.\textsuperscript{348} According to Xunzi,

...
majestic authority. If they proceed in accordance with the Way of ritual principles, then they will succeed; if they do not, then they will fail.\textsuperscript{349}

As Schwartz says, rituals “might seem to many moderns to refer to trivial forms of ceremony rather than “fundamental” institutional matters.”\textsuperscript{350} My aim, however, has been to show how the Confucians took them to contribute to the smooth running of society. In my discussion so far, however, I have mainly mentioned \textit{Xunzi} and the \textit{Analects}. The question thus arises as to how Mencius views rituals. In what follows, I argue that rituals are a part of Mencius’ view of society but that he emphasizes them less than Xunzi does because of their different views on human nature.

\textbf{The question of human nature}

Mencius clearly assumes rituals to be an intrinsic part of social life. Indeed, of the four “hearts” Mencius identifies as being possessed by all humans and from which all moral dispositions spring, one is the heart of courtesy from which the observance of rituals arises.\textsuperscript{351} For Mencius, anyone who lacks these four hearts is a “lackey” of others.\textsuperscript{352} Mencius, however, does not say much to explain the importance (political or otherwise) of rituals, except for the lonely statement that they regulate and adorn the other three moral tendencies (\textit{ren}, rightness, and wisdom).\textsuperscript{353} On the encouragement of rituals in the populace, all Mencius says is that it

\textsuperscript{349} \textit{Xunzi} 15.8.  
\textsuperscript{350} Schwartz, \textit{The World of Thought in Ancient China}, 66.  
\textsuperscript{351} The others are the heart of compassion which is the sprout of \textit{ren}, the heart of shame which is the sprout of righteousness, and the heart of right and wrong which is the sprout of wisdom. See \textit{Mencius} 2A.6. In 6A.6, the observance of rituals is associated with the heart of respect (\textit{gong jing} 恭敬), rather than with the heart of courtesy and modesty (\textit{ci rang} 詫讓). Also in 6A.6, the four hearts are not described as the sprouts (\textit{duan} 端) of the virtues, but as the virtues themselves.  
\textsuperscript{352} \textit{Mencius} 2A.7 quoted from Van Norden.  
\textsuperscript{353} \textit{Mencius} 4A.27.
cannot be done when people are hungry,⁵⁴ and that the source of rituals lies with worthy men.⁵⁵

In short, though Mencius clearly does not question the place of rituals in society, he does not devote much consideration to them either. This is in stark contrast to Xunzi who, as should be clear from the above, discussed rituals at length. To understand this difference in focus between Mencius and Xunzi, one should turn to their conception of human nature.⁵⁶

Mencius argues that “human nature” (xing 性)⁵⁷ is good and only gets corrupted by society. The idea of the “four hearts” is effectively meant as an illustration of the natural goodness of human beings. This idea is first developed through a hypothetical example in Mencius 2A.6: Mencius asks us to imagine a situation in which a child is about to fall in a well. Who would not feel compassion and alarm at seeing this? One feels alarm neither “because he wanted to get in the good graces of his parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child.”⁵⁸ From this example, Mencius deduces the existence of a heart of compassion. He then continues to list the three other hearts (without offering proof for these).

Now, as commentators have pointed out, Mencius only claims that one is moved to pity by the sight of the child, rather than moved to action. D.C. Lau argues that this distinction

---

⁵⁴ Mencius 1A.7.
⁵⁵ Mencius 1B.16.
⁵⁶ Robert Eno argues that another reason for the difference (which is not unrelated to the differing opinions on human nature) concerns Mencius’ preoccupation with defending Confucianism against Mozi’s charges (which diminished in force by Xunzi’s time). He thus argues that “the defensive nature of the Mencius, its responsiveness to the Mohist challenge, and the frequent functional equivalence of yi and li adequately explain the diminished role of li in the text.” See Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 113.
⁵⁷ There is an important debate in the literature about whether “human nature,” for Mencius, is a cultural, biological, or ethical concept and how it compares to the idea of “human nature” in the Western tradition, but this is beyond the scope of my purpose here (which is to explain the difference between Mencius and Xunzi on ritual). For more on the debate, see Roger T. Ames, “Mencius and a Process Notion of Human Nature” and Irene Bloom, “Biology and Culture in the Mencian View of Human Nature,” both in Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 79-90, 91-102.
⁵⁸ Mencius 2A.6.
between our feelings and our actions actually saves Mencius’ argument from the charge of implausibility. Indeed, if humans, as Mencius himself seems to acknowledge, do bad things all the time, in what sense is it meaningful to say of them that they are naturally good? Lau explains that Mencius thinks that humans’ “heart of right and wrong” allows them to recognize their fault when they do wrong, and their “heart of shame” induces in them a gut feeling of shame when that happens.\footnote{Lau, “Theories of Human Nature in \textit{Mencius} and \textit{Xunzi},” 196.} This reaction is what justifies the description of human nature as good. But it is also of course more than possible for humans to actually act upon their natural tendencies, which only requires that they nurture their four sprouts. Once these sprouts develop “it will be like a fire starting up, a spring breaking through,”\footnote{Also see \textit{Mencius} 6A.2 for the idea that the human nature develops into goodness just like water naturally gushes downward.} and “they will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas.” On the other hand, if left undeveloped, “they will be insufficient to serve one’s parents.”\footnote{\textit{Mencius} 2A.6.} The difference between human beings as to whether they \textit{become} virtuous or not thus arises out of the fact that some people are allowed to develop their natural tendencies while others are not.\footnote{\textit{Mencius} 6A.6, 6A.8.} Indeed, most people fall short of nurturing their sprouts—a feat usually left for the sages.\footnote{\textit{Mencius} 6A.7: sages are “first to apprehend what our minds have in common,” namely “order and rightness.”}

What is important for my task here (which is to explain Mencius’ approach to ritual) is to note Mencius’ recognition of the importance of their environment for the development of people’s morality. I already alluded to this recognition in the previous chapter when I mentioned Mencius’ idea that the common people cannot be educated when hungry and toiling. On the other hand, it is not enough to be well-fed to become moral. As I suggested in that chapter, we can find in Mencius an echo of the Aristotelian idea that liberation from physical activities as
such is necessary in order to become a sage—which explains why the common people are far from attaining this goal.

Xunzi finds Mencius’ argument implausible: “One may sit down and propound such a theory, but he cannot stand up and put it into practice, not can he extend it over a wide area with any success at all. How, then, could it be anything but erroneous?”

For Xunzi, human nature is actually bad, and any good comes from the effect of conscious activity. According to him, humans are born with a desire for profit, feelings of envy and hate, and fondness for the indulgence of the senses. By contrast, courtesy and humility are contrary to natural feelings, and are only acquired through the conscious exertion of the intellect. For Xunzi, human nature is like “a warped piece of wood [which] must wait until it has been laid against the straightening board, steamed, and forced into shape before it can become straight” or like a “piece of blunt metal [which] must wait until it has been whetted on the grindstone before it can become sharp.” There is no talk here of patiently watering natural sprouts so that they flower into nice moral behavior. Another way to put the contrast is in terms of the role of the sages and the nature of morality. Xunzi explains that the straightening and the sharpening of human nature are the work of teachers and rituals.

As Lau puts it, since it was sages of antiquity who invented rituals, we can thus say that they invented morality. In contrast, the sages in Mencius’ view do not so much “invent” morality, as “awaken” people to the morality latent in them.

---

364 Xunzi 23.10 quoted from Watson.
365 Xunzi 23.1.
366 Xunzi 23.2.
367 Xunzi 23.6.
368 Xunzi 23.3 quoted from Watson.
369 Xunzi 23.3, 23.11.
370 Lau, “Theories of Human Nature in Mencius and Xunzi,” 208-9. Lau concludes from this that the real difference between Xunzi and Mencius lies in the thorny question of morality as such (whether morality is innate or acquired). Edward Slingerland describes the differences as one between “externalist” and “internalist” metaphors for self-
This said, beyond the apparent opposition, Xunzi is actually much in agreement with Mencius since he also ultimately believes that not only can some extraordinary people become good, but that everyone can: “The man in the street can become a Yu.” Indeed, Xunzi admits that all humans have the faculties necessary to understand ethical principles such as rightness and benevolence. It is only that, since these faculties are related to the intellect and learning and not to desires and emotions, he does not count them as part of human nature.

At the same time, however, Xunzi also says that though it is possible (ke yi 可以) for everyone to become a sage, it is not necessarily the case that everyone can be made to do so (ke shi 可使) or that everyone will be capable (neng 能) of doing so. Presumably, the thought refers to the significant amount of training necessary to attain sagehood, given the need to modify the direction which human emotions would take if left to their own devices. Put this way, the contrast with Mencius is made more apparent. For Mencius, moral training is non-interventionist: one has to leave people to their natural tendencies, by ensuring that their surrounding environment is not corrupting. For Xunzi, on the other hand, one works both on the environment and on the natural emotions. This, I think, is the reason why Xunzi lays much more emphasis on propounding ritual than Mencius does.

III- Filiality


373 Xunzi 23.15 quoted from Watson.
That Mencius does not emphasize rituals’ importance for the regulation of society does not mean that he leaves the ordering of society to the “subjective intentionality of noble men,” as Schwartz puts it.\textsuperscript{374} Indeed, in addition to the schemes of economic regulation mentioned in the previous chapter, and to some—albeit limited—role for ritual generally, Mencius focuses on the development of a specific type of behavior in society, which can actually be considered a subset of ritual, namely filiality. To understand the role of filiality for Mencius, it might be helpful to see, first, its place in the \textit{Analects}. In the latter, we get, by the second anecdote, a statement about the sociopolitical importance of filiality, spelled out by Youzi, a disciple of Confucius:

\begin{quote}
It is rare for a man whose character is such that he is good as a son and obedient as a young man to have the inclination to transgress against his superiors; it is unheard of one who has no such inclination to be inclined to start a rebellion. The gentleman devotes his efforts to the roots, for once the roots are established, the Way will grow therefrom. Being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of man’s character.\textsuperscript{375}
\end{quote}

The thought here is clear: the best way to get disciplined subjects who are not likely to defy the rules of their community is to start first by encouraging the development of proper attitudes in the family. This argument clarifies the meaning of Confucius’ statement that there is no need to “actively take part in government,” citing a passage from the \textit{Book of History} to the effect that to be a good son and brother is to exercise influence upon government.\textsuperscript{376} While this statement is alone in reducing all political engagement to family obligations,\textsuperscript{377} it can be interpreted as another way of saying that all correct political comportment is an extension of dutifulness at home.

\textsuperscript{374} See Schwartz, \textit{The World of Thought in Ancient China}, 290.  
\textsuperscript{375} \textit{Analects} 1.2.  
\textsuperscript{376} \textit{Analects} 2.21.  
\textsuperscript{377} More on the topic of political participation in Chapter 5.
This argument about the sociopolitical importance of filiality is echoed by Mencius.\textsuperscript{378} Mencius thus says, “There is a common expression, ‘The Empire, the state, the family’. The Empire has its basis in the state, the state in the family, and the family in one’s own self.”\textsuperscript{379} Making sense of the last of these connections, i.e. the connection between self and family, would take us off track, but it is worth mentioning here that fulfilling one’s family responsibilities, for both Confucius and Mencius, requires more than the material and physical support of parents; it also requires having the correct dispositions, like respectfulness.\textsuperscript{380} As for the idea that the state has its basis in the family, it is clearly another version of Youzi’s principle of “working on the roots.” Mencius clarifies the importance of filiality for society as a whole by arguing that if filiality is pursued, victory over contending states follows suit,\textsuperscript{381} and peace ensues.\textsuperscript{382} Indeed, for Mencius, filiality is so central that the disruption of family relationships is his favorite way of illustrating bad rulership.\textsuperscript{383} Here is one instance:

If he who is father and mother to the people makes it necessary for them to borrow because they do not get enough to minister to the needs of their parents in spite of having toiled incessantly all the year round, and causes the old and young to be abandoned in the gutter, wherein is he father and mother to the people?\textsuperscript{384}

But why should filiality be so central in the Confucian thinking about politics? I said above that Mencius argued against Mozi’s principle of impartiality, taking partiality to one’s family members to be so central to what it means to be a human being—it sets humans apart

\textsuperscript{378} It is also echoed in The Great Learning (Da Xue 大學), a text associated with Confucianism, and classified by Zhu Xi as one of the “Four Books” of Confucianism (in addition to the Analects, the Mencius, and the Doctrine of the Mean).
\textsuperscript{379} Mencius 4A.5.
\textsuperscript{380} See, for example, Analects 2.7. Similarly, in an answer to Zixia, Confucius says that “It is the demeanor that is difficult” and that filial piety consists in more than helping parents in their work or serving them food (Analects 2.8).
\textsuperscript{381} Mencius 1A.5.
\textsuperscript{382} Mencius 4A.11.
\textsuperscript{383} Mencius 1B.1. See also 7B.27.
\textsuperscript{384} Mencius 3A.3.
from animals—that he found it incongruous that people could love others’ parents as much as they love their own. As he puts it, “Since man came into this world, no one has succeeded in inciting children against their parents.”\(^\text{385}\) The naturalness of people’s filial sentiments is also suggested in Mencius’ account of the emergence of burials for parents:

> Presumably there must have been cases in ancient times of people not burying their parents. When the parents died, they were thrown in the gullies. Then one day the sons passed the place and there lay the bodies, eaten by foxes and sucked by flies. A sweat broke out on their brows, and they could not bear to look. The sweating was not put on for others to see. It was an outward expression of their innermost heart.\(^\text{386}\)

This naturalness of humans’ love for their parents is precisely what allows the child-parent relationship to be the basis of all other relations of care and respect in society. To see how this works, consider another anecdote where Mencius draws again a distinction between human and beast:

> Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it. Shun understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationships. He followed the path of morality. He did not just put morality into practice.\(^\text{387}\)

Bryan Van Norden quotes Zhu Xi as interpreting this passage thusly: “Benevolence [\text{ren}] and righteousness were already based in Shun’s heart, and all that he did came from them. It is not that he regarded benevolence and righteousness as fine things and only then forced himself to act.”\(^\text{388}\) Zhu Xi’s gloss follows from Mencius’ thought, cited above, that human action stems from one source (the heart), rather than two (a heart and a mind distinct from each other). This means that when one’s heart-sprouts develop and one acts morally, one can say both that one

\(^{385}\) Mencius 2A.5.
\(^{386}\) Mencius 3A.5.
\(^{387}\) Mencius 4B.19.
does the right thing and that one does it naturally. To nurture one’s moral sprouts so that one spontaneously exudes moral worthiness, what is a better way than to start with the spontaneous feelings of affection towards one’s family? In Mencius’s words,

What a man is able to do without having to learn it is what he can truly do; what he knows without having to reflect on it is what he truly knows. There are no young children who do not know loving their parents, and none of them when they grow up will not know respecting their elder brothers. Loving one’s parents is benevolence; respecting one’s elders is rightness. What is left to be done is simply the extension (da 達) of these to the whole Empire.389

Filiality thus seems to be the obvious springboard for developing a good character, and becoming, probably not, in most cases, a sage like Shun, but someone who exhibits loyalty and reciprocity in interacting with others in society. The process of “extension” is well illustrated in the story of Mencius’s meeting with King Xuan of Qi. Mencius tries to show the king that he has a heart of compassion because he decided to save an ox that was to be sacrificed. The king, the story goes, could not bear to see the ox “shrinking in fear.” To Mencius, the king’s reaction is the work of his heart of compassion.390 Hence his task is to convince the king to extend his compassion from animals to the people he governs:

all you have to do is to take this very heart here and apply it to what is over there. Hence one who extends (tui 推) his bounty can bring peace to the Four Seas; one who does not cannot bring peace even to his own family. There is just one thing in which the ancients greatly surpassed others, and that is the way they extended (tui 推) what they did.391

Thus, the idea is to start with things that one naturally loves, and to proceed to what one does not love as naturally.392 As Mencius puts it,
The gentleman loves living things without being ren towards them, and is ren towards the people without being affectionate. That he is affectionate towards his family is what allows him to be ren toward the people and loving towards creatures. 393

How is filiality promoted in society? Though it would help for the ruler to provide a model of filial behavior himself, this is not the only, or necessary, way that Mencius conceives for this task. Indeed he proposes two other ways: one is providing for the people, using the non-interventionist policies described in the preceding chapter, thus ensuring that young and old can support each other: “an enlightened ruler must regulate the people’s livelihood to ensure that it is sufficient, on the one hand, to serve their fathers and mothers, and on the other hand, to nurture their wives and children.” 394 The second is teaching the people about filial duties: in one passage Mencius mentions village schools in which some sort of education is given, and this is presumably where the inculcation of filial duties starts, so that “those whose heads have turned grey will not be carrying loads on the roads.” 395 In another, Mencius speaks of the appointment of a minister of education “in order to teach the people about human relations: that between parents and children there is affection; between ruler and minister, rightness; between husband and wife, separate functions; between older and younger, proper order; and between friends, faithfulness.” 396

Before closing this section, it might be worth discussing a central difficulty with the idea that learning to love one’s parents is the best learning ground for political obligations, namely the potential for conflicts of interest that frequently pit obligations to family against obligations to others in society. The Analects and the Mencius offer a few anecdotes that deal with such

---

393 Mencius 7A.45.
394 Mencius 1A.7.
395 Mencius 1A.3, repeated in 1A.7.
396 Mencius 3A.4.
conflicts, though mostly as they arise for the ruler rather than the average subject. One concerns Shun’s treatment of his brother Xiang who was cruel to him and plotted to kill him several times. Instead of simply banishing his bad brother, Emperor Shun enfeoffed Xiang. Wan Zhang complains:

Shun dismissed the Supervisor of Works to You Zhou and imprisoned Huan Dou on Mount Chong. He killed the rulers of the Three Miao in San Wei and executed Kun on Mount Yu. He punished these four and all the world submitted. This was because he was executing those who were not ren. Xiang was consummately lacking in ren, yet he gave him the territory in Youbi to administer. What crime did the people of Youbi commit? Is a ren person inherently like this? In the case of other people, he punishes them. In the case of his younger brother, he gives him a territory to administer. 397

Mencius’s answer is two-fold. On the one hand, he maintains the importance of family ties and the kindness one owes to one’s brother: “Ren people do not store up anger nor do they dwell in bitterness against younger brothers.” On the other hand, he qualifies the privileges given to Xiang in order to show that Shun actually recognized how bad his brother was and consequently tried to restrict his powers in the new fief, even to such an extent that his enfeoffment was akin to banishment: “Xiang did not have effective power in his state. The Emperor instructed officials to administer the state and collect tributes and taxes. Hence it was referred to as ‘banishment.’” 398 In short, Mencius tries to show that Shun was not partial towards Xiang to the extent that he reneged on his duties as a ruler. As Stephen Angle argues, this anecdote exemplifies the attempt to “harmonize” between conflicting values—in this case, three: brotherly affection, duty towards the people, and the fair treatment of criminals. 399

Another interesting story about Emperor Shun concerns his relationship to his father, the Blind Man:

397 Mencius 5A.3 quoted from Van Norden.
398 Mencius 5A.3.
399 Angle, Sagehood, 96.
Tao Ying asked, ‘When Shun was Emperor and Gao Yao was the judge, if the Blind Man killed a man, what was to be done?’
‘The only thing to do was to apprehend him.’
‘In that case, would Shun not try to stop it?’
‘How could Shun stop it? Gao Yao had his authority from which he received the law.’
‘Then what would Shun have done?’
‘Shun looked upon casting aside the Empire as no more than discarding a worn shoe. He would have secretly carried the old man on his back and fled to the edge of the Sea and lived there happily, never giving a thought to the Empire.’

As Shun is faced with the dilemma of fulfilling obligations both towards his father and towards the Empire, he decides to fulfill the former, though, importantly, by relinquishing his role as Emperor. Once he relinquishes his role as Emperor, he cannot be said to violate his duties towards the Empire in being partial to his father. Yet this is not really the end of the story since, Emperor or not, Shun is still violating the law. Interestingly, however, Shun takes his father away to the “edge of the Sea.” In other words, Shun removes his father from all extant political community, precisely because he violated its norms. This is akin to a form of self-banishing for both. On the other hand, Angle argues that one necessary reaction that a sage like Shun should have had in this situation and that Mencius left out of the picture is grief, i.e. grief for the harm done by his father. It is only with the expression of grief that Shun can be seen, according to Angle, as having honored all the relevant values in this scenario.

Finally, consider Confucius’s infamous response to the Governor of She who boasts of a man who testifies against his father for stealing a sheep. Confucius insists that the moral thing to do is to cover up for one’s father. In this case, one is to protect one’s parents but, differently from the anecdote above, one is not asked to withdraw from society. Two differences, however, distinguish this case from that of Shun above: first, the person concerned is not a ruler, so he is

---

400 Mencius 7A.35.
401 Angle, Sagehood, 102-4.
not expected to act as a model for others. Secondly, the man’s father did not kill anyone; he just stole a sheep. If we accept Angle’s suggestion that these anecdotes illustrate the attempt at the best possible harmonization of values on the part of the Confucians, then we can see how, in the given context involving a minor crime, harmonization tilts more towards the upholding of filiality.

In conclusion, what I have tried to show is that the Confucians are aware that the move from family obligations to political obligations is fraught with tension, but seem to believe that in situations where the tension arises, a course of action can be decided given the context of the situation and the choices available to the one facing it. While this course of action is typically one that holds firmly to the value of filiality, it is also one that tries to remain as faithful as possible to political obligations, thus attempting to “harmonize” between the two.

**IV- Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the institutional mechanisms favored by the early Confucius for the establishment and maintenance of an ideal orderly society. While the standard works on Confucianism talk about the importance of filiality for making a person moral, or the importance of ritual for self-mastery, I have discussed them in this chapter as necessary for making society stable and orderly.  

\[402\] Paul Goldin, for example, divides his work *Rituals of the Way: the Philosophy of Xunzi* into the following chapters: “Self-Cultivation and the Mind,” “Heaven,” “Ritual and Music” and “Language and the Way.” None of these chapters is framed explicitly as a chapter on politics. The chapter on “Ritual and Music” discusses politics, but not exclusively. In other words, Xunzi, with his “rituals of the way,” is not discussed primarily as a political thinker. See Paul Goldin, *Rituals of the Way: The Philosophy of Xunzi* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999). Michael Nylan also writes on rituals in the *Xunzi* in her article “On the Politics of Pleasure,” but as the name suggests, the article takes pleasure satisfaction to be a primary concern for Xunzi. My discussion of Xunzi, on the other hand, will locate Xunzi’s concern with pleasure satisfaction to be secondary to his broader political aim. See “On the Politics of
In her article on “The Politics of Pleasure,” Michael Nylan argues that the emphasis on “delayed pleasure-taking,” which she takes to be the basis for Xunzi’s ritual system, arose “when the vast scale and unprecedented scope of sociopolitical and economic changes occurring at the time drew attention to two issues: what form of equitable distribution would best serve as foundation for a stable state? and what methods of rule would allow the expanding states to integrate new populations?” I disagree with Nylan on the centrality she gives to the idea of “pleasure” (not all humans needs and desires, after all, are a form of “pleasure seeking”), but agree with her emphasis on the political importance of ritual. As Nylan explains, the Zhou political system was based on a system of distribution which its members considered as consistent and fair:

With each member of that elite sharing in the life-force contained within the sacrificial meats, each sacrifice serves as an outward visible sign of the inner commitments binding the partakers to the same clan or body politic, despite their potentially disparate interests.

With the decline of the Zhou clan, the weakening of hereditary prerogatives, and the rising importance of a whole new segment of society, new methods of government had to be devised to hold together the rising, warring states. Part of the concern was to ensure that the people were simply well-fed, consequently the Confucians discussed mechanisms for the regulation of the economy, such as the well-field system, discussed in the previous chapter. But political order clearly required more than economic regulation, for competition over material resources, however plentiful, was inevitable in a period of rising social mobility and the


weakening of long-established privileges. In other words, the concern was to ensure that people did not pursue their interests in a way that clashed with others’ in society. This is a familiar problem, perhaps best epitomized in Hobbes’ thought. What makes the Confucian solution special, however, was that, rejecting what they took to be artificial solutions propounded by the Mohists and the Legalists (they would have likely found Hobbes’ solution, based as it is on self-interest and the sanction of penal force, to be artificial too), the Confucians’ starting point was to take advantage of humans’ better features: their propensity to be social, to delay gratification of the senses (according to Xunzi), or to feel compassion towards others (according to Mencius). Rituals, broadly defined, were used to hone humans’ original dispositions, directing them towards the fulfillment of clearly defined roles in society.

In some sense, then, the pessimism described in the previous chapter about the potential of the masses to become virtuous is counterbalanced here by optimism about the possibility of turning human tendencies into qualities worthy of an orderly and diligent populace. While rituals cannot by themselves achieve moral perfection (they have to be linked with ren, rightness, trustworthiness, and wisdom⁴⁰⁵), they are to the common people what Confucian training in virtues is for the Confucian disciples. As Schwartz puts it, perhaps in more extreme fashion than I have,

It is, of course, true that Confucius speaks of “teaching” the people … what they are to be taught, however, is presumably no more than the rudiments of proper family relationships.⁴⁰⁶

The reliance on rituals as institutional mechanisms for the regulations of society also suggests an optimism of another sort: that society can actually be regulated without the presence

⁴⁰⁵ See Analects 3.3, 15.18, 15.33.
⁴⁰⁶ Schwartz, Confucianism in Action, 52.
of a sage king on top. For, in principle, once the frame is set, as when the sage kings of antiquity instituted the rites, the emergence of not-so-good a ruler should not necessarily disrupt the running of the system. Rituals are, in Schwartz’s words, the “cement of the entire normative sociopolitical order.” In other words, once filiality and rituals are set in motion, then the ruler and his virtue should take a back seat. The idea that what matters for government is the political structure itself, rather than the daily actions of the ruler, is suggested in the following saying by Mencius:

The gentleman should not be in the business of helping each individual cross the river, but should rather rely on the bridges to be built. If he wants to please everyone separately, he won’t have enough time to do so.

The emphasis on institutional mechanisms, in this chapter and the preceding one, contrasts with what I have described in the Introduction as the “conventional” view, which focuses on the centrality of a virtuous ruler in the Confucian conception of government. Kwong-loi Shun thus argues that Confucius and Mencius “regarded the transformative power of a cultivated person as the ideal basis for government.” The question that therefore arises is as to the basis of this view and how it fits with the picture I have been presenting.

First, there is no denying the many references in the early Confucian texts to the need for virtuous rulers. Thus, in the Analects, the qualities that distinguish rulers are ritual propriety (li 禮), trustworthiness (xīn 信), reverence (jīng 敬), the promotion of the worthy, and

---

408 Mencius 4B.2.
410 Analects 1.9, 2.3, 3.19, 4.13, 7.31, 13.4, 14.41, 15.33, 16.2.
412 Analects 1.5, 6.2. See also related ideas such as deference (rang 讓) in 4.13, respectfulness (gōng 恭) in 15.5 and dignity (zhuāng 莊) in 2.20 and 15.33.
413 Analects 2.19, 2.20, 12.22, 13.2. For a discussion of the promotion of the worthy, see Chapter 4.
impartiality. Mencius’ ruler is said to embody rightness (yi 義), which indicates the aptitude to apply the correct moral principles in different contexts, wisdom (zhi 智), and virtue (de 德) more generally. Xunzi’s ruler is also described as embodying rightness, and ritual propriety, in addition to being fair, and promoting the worthy.

We also find in the Mencius and the Xunzi, the idea of a ren ruler, and specifically in the former, the idea of a “ren government” (ren zheng 仁政). Ren is a complicated concept meant to capture an ideal of Confucian virtuousness, characterized by the aptitude to respond well to others, near and far. As Stephen Angle defines the concept, it is “not just caring, not just sympathy, but warm and compassionate concern that extends, in an organic fashion, to all related and relevant aspects of one’s context.” A wide controversy surrounds the translation of ren into English. Angle translates it as “humaneness,” Xiao, as well as D.C. Lau, as “benevolence,” Edward Slingerland as “goodness,” Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont as “authoritative conduct,” while others yet, like Benjamin Schwartz, prefer to leave it un-translated (like the latter, I leave ren un-translated). In any case, what I wish to point out here is that, however ren is defined or translated, it is not clear that it means the same thing as an attribute of government as when it connotes a more general virtue. While on the personal level it is unrelated to the idea of giving to

---

414 See above.
415 See Mencius 1A.1, 4A.20, 4B.5, 7B.12.
416 Yi differs from ren in that ren indicates an internal disposition to relate to others in a certain way, while yi denotes the application of external principles of proper behavior to given circumstances.
417 Mencius 1B.3, 2B.9, 4A.1, 4A.4.
418 Mencius 2B.2.
419 Xunzi 9.4, 9.5, 11.3, 11.8 15.3, 15.11.
421 See above.
422 Xunzi 9.4, 15.11. For a more complete discussion, see Chapter 4.
424 See Mencius 1A.5, 1B.11, 1B.12, 2A.1, 3A.3, 3A.4, 4A.1, 4A.14. Variations on this idea can also be found in Mencius 1A.7, 3A.3, 4A.1, 4A.7, 4A.9, 7B.4.
425 Angle, Sagehood, 78. Though Angle’s definition is related to the concept of ren in Neo-Confucian, rather than Classical Confucian, thought, it applies to the latter as well.
others, ren government is defined precisely as one that provides for the people in the way described in the previous chapter. Indeed, Mencius himself says that one could have a ren heart but still fail in benefiting the people, suggesting that the standard dimensions of ren are not sufficient for the purposes of governing. Another indication of a potential difference between the virtues of the ruler and the virtues of other individuals is that ren, rightness, and wisdom are not mentioned in relation to the ruler in the Analects.

These remarks are not sufficient to prove any significant dichotomy between the Confucian conception of the ideal ruler, and the conception of a virtuous person more generally, but they are suggestive. If Mencius indeed redefines a ren ruler as one who provides for the people, and who sets up a modicum of educational institutions for the teaching of lower-level virtues (like the ones adumbrated in the previous chapter: loyalty, reciprocity, etc.), then his swaying power does not arise from his acting as a model, but rather from the policies he pursues.

Xu Fuguan makes a similar point about Mencius when he argues, according to Honghe Liu, that “the ruler alone cannot constitute a good government; he needs fa [regulations] as the method of governing.” But Xu continues that “Fa cannot make itself effective; it needs men of virtue to

---

426 Part of the controversy about the translation of ren concerns whether the concept is universally connected to a notion of generosity, or providing for others, to warrant its translation as “benevolence,” which is its most common translation. For ren is only associated with material generosity when it comes to the depiction of the ruler in the Mencius. In the Analects, all we find is the idea that the exemplary person should provide for his parents, making sure they are well nourished and well clothed (See for example 2.8). Otherwise, in his dealings with others, he should mainly be trustworthy (xin 信), dutiful (zhong 忠), and should treat others with reciprocity (shu 恕), i.e. according to Confucius’ version of the Golden Ruler “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.” (See Analects 15.24. Also see, for the other qualities, Analects 1.6, 1.7, 2.22, 4.15). Nowhere is there any reference, in any of the three Confucian texts, to a general requirement to provide for the poor and help the needy, or even to be simply generous. This is the reason why “benevolence” is not an appropriate translation of ren. The requirement to provide for others is thus distinctive of the ruler (mainly of Mencius’ ruler), not part of the general definition of virtue or ren.

427 Mencius 4A.1.

428 See also Mencius 4B.16 where Mencius argues that one cannot subdue the people through goodness (shan 善), but can use goodness to provide for them.

429 Except if one takes Analects 12.22 as indicating that the ruler should be wise and ren, although the passage does not describe rulers as such (not even Emperor Shun and Prince Tang).
carry it into practice. Good government and good \textit{fa} follow in the wake of virtue.\textsuperscript{430} The problem with this latter argument is that hegemons, without being virtuous, institute good \textit{fa}.

One possible way to redeem the role of virtue is by arguing that rightness and wisdom make it more likely that the ruler will institute good regulations, and also that the people are more likely to follow the regulations instituted by a virtuous ruler. On the former count, the absence of guarantees that the ruler will follow proper policies leaves the ruler’s own virtue as the only guarantee of his good will. On the latter count, the common people are more likely to believe the efforts of a ruler who embodies virtue, in the sense that the policies he institutes are not arbitrary, or self-serving, but follow clearly from his qualities as a person. This would explain why, as the \textit{Analects} suggests, they would follow (\textit{cong} \textsuperscript{431}) him even without him giving explicit orders or threats.\textsuperscript{431} It is also possible that, given Mencius’ idea about educating the people about filiality, the ruler could actually serve an educational purpose by offering a model to be emulated. The crucial point remains that following the ruler largely means following his regulations, not simply being swayed by the force of his example.

Xunzi’s case is both more difficult and easier than Mencius’. It is more difficult because Xunzi is the one that assigns the highest virtues to the ruler, as can be seen from the summary above, while also offering a complex ritual order that seems even less in need of a virtuous ruler than Mencius’ educational vision does. On the other hand, it is easier to see the importance of a virtuous ruler for Mencius precisely because of this fully worked-out ritual system. As I will show in the next chapter, in Xunzi’s system, the ruler’s role is largely symbolic, but because he stands at the apex of a hierarchical, merit-based, sociopolitical order, it is important that it be seen that he, the person who occupies the highest political position, is worthy of it. Since he

\textsuperscript{430} Liu, \textit{Confucianism in the Eyes of a Confucian Liberal}, 82-3.
\textsuperscript{431} \textit{Analects} 13.6.
symbolizes the system as a whole, he has to be a symbol worthy of the name. This is what Xunzi means when he says that that “When a sage king occupies the highest position and responsibility and duties proper to each social class are observed by his subjects the majesty of his conduct will overawe the people like flooding waters,” removing the need for penal sanctions to maintain the system.\(^{432}\) Again, though, he does not govern through the power of his example, but through the ritual system that he sets into place.

Even in a fully worked-out ritual order, however, there are day-to-day tasks of government that need to be accomplished, such as appointing and supervising officers, responding to economic problems, and working out military strategy. In the chapter that follows, I will show that it is government ministers, not the ruler, who are in charge of these. I will also elaborate on the symbolic importance of the ruler in Xunzi’s ritual-centered vision of government.

\(^{432}\) Xunzi 24.2.
IV- Rulers and ministers

The ruler looms large in the conventional view of Classical Confucian political thought. He is after all the Son of Heaven (tian zi 天子), the magnet towards which all the actors and events of the realm are pointed.433 Echoing the conventional view, Edward Slingerland argues that Confucius inherited from the Zhou world the idea that “political order is properly brought about only through the charismatic, non-coercive power of Virtue.”434 This “Virtue” is typically thought to be embodied in the ruler.

As I suggested at the end of the previous chapter, this view is not entirely false, but it is misleading. It misconstrues the influence the ruler has on the workings of the realm. As I argued, the Confucian reliance on rituals as an institutional mechanism for political regulation suggests that the ruler has little role in determining the basic shape of society, especially as rituals are not of his creation but are inherited through the generations. In this chapter, I argue that the day-to-day administration of the realm is not the responsibility of the ruler either. It is rather the responsibility of government ministers, who thus emerge as the third key political player in Confucian politics (besides the ruler and the common people). The role of these ministers, and the division of labor between ruler and ministers, has usually been overlooked because of the conventional focus on the idea of a sage king and on the ethical dimension of Confucian government. If one looks closely at the details of the Confucians’ view of government, however, one is struck by the amount of attention they—especially Xunzi—give to the qualifications, appointment, and roles of ministers. I will also argue that the division of labor between ruler and

433 For example, Yuri Pines argues that for the Confucians, as well as for all other early Chinese thinkers, the “political system was intrinsically ruler-centered and … all institutional power was supposed to be in the monarch’s hands.” See Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 204.
434 Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, xviii.
ministers indicates the Confucians’ political realism insofar as they recognized that good ministers were easier to come by than good rulers, hence the choice to entrust them with the daily management of government.

The chapter will proceed as follows: first, as background for the importance of ministers in the Confucian conception of government, I discuss the question of merit in early China, explaining the sources and nature of the Confucian argument for the “promotion of the worthy,” which is the basis for the weight they give to the ministerial class.

The second, and central, part of the chapter focuses on Xunzi, since he offers the most sustained view of the role of ministers in government. This is partly due to the simple fact that Xunzi’s treatise, including its chapters on government, is the longest and most systematic. On the other hand, as I argued in the previous chapter, Mencius and Xunzi differ as to the importance they assign to rituals and to the role of the ruler in government, which explains some of the disparity in their emphasis on the role of ministers as well. I will show here that in Xunzi’s vision of a ritual-centered, patterned order, the ruler plays a symbolic role, hence the reason why it is ministers who are assigned the responsibility of running day-to-day government. I also show that a similar distinction between virtuous kings and hegemons applies in the case of ministers: while sage ministers are favored, meritorious ministers are also accepted. As with the discussion of hegemons in Chapter 2, I argue that this appreciation of less-than-virtuous ministers reveals Xunzi’s concern with political order, and his recognition that a basic level of order is all that can be achieved at times.

In the section that follows, I broaden the inquiry to the three Confucians and show that, even though the Analects and the Mencius do not share the same ideal vision of government offered by the Xunzi, all three texts share the thought that it is permissible, even obligatory, for
ministers to remonstrate against rulers. I conclude by asking how the *Analects*’ and the *Mencius*’ conceptions of the division of labor between ruler and ministers compare to Xunzi’s.

**I. Promoting the worthy**

The importance of government ministers in the Confucian vision of government cannot be understood without appreciating the extent to which the Confucians emphasized merit in their appointment. I have argued in Chapter 2 that, under non-ideal circumstances, the Confucians favored hereditary succession as the least disruptive method for the appointment of the ruler. This does not mean, however, that the Confucians did not recognize the importance of having meritorious men in government, even under such circumstances. Indeed, in the Confucian vision of government, hereditary succession for the ruler is counterbalanced by a strong emphasis on merit-based appointments for ministers who assist the ruler. As Herrlee Creel argues in relation to Confucius:

Confucius did not … demand that the hereditary rulers vacate their thrones. If he had, it is doubtful that he would have accomplished anything by it, and this teaching would probably have been suppressed. Instead, he tried to persuade the hereditary rulers that they should “reign but not rule,” handing over all administrative authority to ministers chosen for their qualifications.⁴³⁵

Creel emphasizes the practical concerns that justified Confucius’ program. I have argued instead, in Chapter 2, that a preference for hereditary succession to the highest position in the land was motivated by a principled concern with the orderly transition of power. In what follows, I show that the preference for vesting “administrative authority” in the hands of “ministers

---

⁴³⁵ Creel, *Chinese Thought, from Confucius to Mao Tsé-Tung*, 417.
chosen for their qualifications” was also not merely a practical preference on the part of the Confucians, but a principled commitment to the political importance of merit. In fact, this commitment had a long pedigree in early China, and was shared by other philosophical schools.

To illustrate this pedigree, a few words are in order about the historical precursors of the Confucian emphasis on merit, before I turn to distinguishing the Confucian position on merit from that of philosophical rivals. Three historical events are key: first, the regency of the Duke of Zhou; second, the development of a bureaucracy in the mid-Zhou period; and third, the rising importance of the shi 士 (scholar-officials) during the Warring States period.

I start with the precedence set by the Duke of Zhou. As I mentioned in the Introduction, two years after conquering the Shang (in 1045 BCE.), the Zhou leader King Wu died. According to precedence, King Wu’s son, Song (later known as King Cheng) was supposed to succeed, as sons had succeeded their fathers for the preceding two generations. However, King Wu’s younger brother, Zhou Gong Dan (otherwise known as the Duke of Zhou) argued that that Song was too young to rule and that he would thus act as his regent.436 This announcement sparked a failed attack against him by his brothers in the East, but it also gave rise to an argument between him and his half-brother and ally, Shao Gong Shi. Edward Shaughnessy, reconstructing the argument from two chapters of the Book of History, has presented it as the first instance of the “Minister-Monarch” debate in Chinese political philosophy.437 In Shaugnessy’s reconstruction of the argument, the Duke appeals to merit to justify his regency, citing historical antecedents whereby all previous great kings, including Kings Wen and Wu, relied on virtuous ministers to rule, and arguing that it is the Zhou as a collective which received the Mandate of Heaven. Shao

436 Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 311.
Gong Shi, on the other hand, insists that it is only kings who receive the Mandate, which is “freely given” to them rather than “earned,” and they alone can thus be said to be the legitimate rulers. 438 Whoever won the debate at the time, 439 the Duke of Zhou was remembered by posterity not as a usurper, but as a man of exemplary merit. This is clearly evoked in the Confucian fascination with the Duke. Thus Confucius laments, “How I have gone downhill! It has been such a long time since I dreamt of meeting the Duke of Zhou.” 440 And Xunzi, wanting to sing the praises of Confucius, says of him that “his virtue is equal to that of the Duke of Zhou.” 441

The second development paving the way for the emergence of a strong notion of merit in early China is institutional in character, arising as the Zhou responded to the heightened challenge of ruling over its expansive territories. For, when the Duke of Zhou was trying to establish his control over the large swaths of territory obtained in the aftermath of the conquest of the Shang, it was his own royal relatives that he sent to govern colonies in distant lands. By the time King Mu (r. 956-918 BCE) came to power, however, these family colonies were now ruled by later generations of royal descent who were much less attached to the king and his capital Luoyang. This prompted King Mu to reform his court, creating “professional” positions to oversee the realm, such as the posts of the Three Supervisors (of the Horse, of Works, and of Lands). These Supervisors became more powerful than the regional princes. 442 Writing (decisions, investitures, maps, legal verdicts, etc.) also became the norm in government, giving rise to a whole new class of court scribes. Shaughnessy argues that this emerging “bureaucracy,”

439 Shaughnessy argues that there is some indirect evidence to the effect that Shao Gong and King Cheng tilted the balance of argument against the Duke of Zhou, who then retired from government. Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 317.
440 Analects 7.5. See also 8.11 and Mencius 2A.1, 2B.9, 3B.9 and 4B.20.
441 Xunzi 21.5. See also 8.2 and 8.15.
442 Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 326.
requiring as it did appointments based on skill, inspired the “philosophical argument for
“honoring the worthy” (gui xian 贵賢) found in the writings of Confucius, Mozi, and many other
Eastern Zhou thinkers.”

Finally, the ruling structure of the different Zhou states also witnessed an important
transformation. Initially it had included three ranks: the qing 卿, dai fu 大夫, and shi 士. The
qing acted as the chief counsellors of each of the regional states making up the Zhou realm and
the dai fu acted as their assistants. Both posts were hereditary. The lowest-grade members of this
hierarchy were the shi: the shi started out as a warrior class, but as time passed, became mostly
dedicated to ritual and administrative functions. Two significant developments affecting this
structure occurred during the Warring States period (485-221 BCE): first was the increasing
importance of the shi class, evidenced by increasing references to its members in the historical
records, and accompanied by the dwindling importance of the traditional nobility (the
counsellors). Secondly, the period witnessed the rise of “newcomers,” commoners who swelled
the ranks of the shi.

What is important to note about this third historical development is that there were strong
linkages between the scholarly class, including the ru 儒 (much later known as Confucians), of
the Warring States period and the new shi (hence the common translation of the term shi as
“scholar-officials”). There is significant disagreement in the literature about the extent to which

---

443 Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 351.
444 Hsu, Ancient China in Transition, 8. See also Donald Munro, The Concept of Man in Early China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 10.
445 Munro, The Concept of Man in Early China, 10. Hsu summarizes these trends by stating that “what happened during the Zhan Guo [Warring States] period was the disappearance of the former social stratification, not merely freer mobility between strata.” Hsu, Ancient China in Transition, 8.
the schools were specifically geared towards training for public service, but there is clear overlap between the two social groups. Moreover, in the competition between the warring states of the period, the recruitment of wise men was not merely undertaken because of the benefits of their education, but also became a marker of state power. As Mark Edward Lewis puts it, “For the first time on record a state began to act as patron of scholarship out of the apparent conviction that this was a proper function of the state or as a means of increasing its prestige.”

In short, during the Warring States period, the scholarly class was to a significant extent involved in government service. It should come as no surprise then that the scholars of the period were great defenders of merit-based appointments and of the ministerial class more generally.

These three historical antecedents help explain why the promotion of the worthy was part of an almost universal discourse in early China—indeed, even a pact among hegemons of the period, spearheaded by Duke Huan of Qi, included it as one of its articles. The universality of the merit discourse notwithstanding, the Confucian position was not altogether lacking in distinctiveness. I will turn now to its similarities and divergences from its philosophical rivals.

As to the similarities, the Confucians, Mohists and Legalists all presented the promotion of the worthy as a political doctrine, meaning that they defended it for its contribution to success in governing, and not on grounds of moral desert per se. Put differently, meritorious appointment does not follow from any conception of what is owed, or what is good, for individual human

---

446 Slingerland argues, for example, that the skills of the ru (including their mastery of the Zhou Classics and of ritual techniques) were regarded as important in the fulfillment of the administrative functions of the shi. See Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, xxi. Mark Edward Lewis denies this. He criticizes Hsu Cho-yun for suggesting that the schools arose “to meet the demand for training the new administrative experts and strategists” (Hsu, Ancient China in Transition 100-103), insisting that the social and economic bases for the schools were independent from the state. See Lewis, Writing and Authority in Early China, 73-83. Yuri Pines, in turn, argues against Lewis, contending for a more expansive view of the state and state patronage. See Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 137-9.


448 Mencius 6B.7.
beings, but from a conception of good rulership. Thus, in the *Analects*, Confucius proposes the promotion of the worthy as a response to Duke Ai’s question about how to gain the allegiance of the people:

Raise the straight (*zhi* 直) and set them over the crooked (*wang* 歪) and the common people will submit (*fu* 服). Raise the crooked and set them over the straight and the common people will not submit. 449

In the same line of thought, Mencius says that “a state which fails to employ good and wise men will end by suffering annexation. How can it hope to suffer no more than a reduction in size?” 450 and Xunzi argues that failing to employ the wise results in the death of individuals and the destruction of countries. 451 Moreover, as I discussed in the previous chapter, for the Confucians—and this is clearest for Xunzi—promoting the worthy is a principal way to establish distinctions in society which, when clearly marked by rituals, promote political order. 452

Mozi also echoes the political importance of merit by arguing that rulers often fail in their quest for “their provinces to be wealthy, their people to be numerous, and their jurisdiction to secure order,” because they fail “to exalt the virtuous (*shang xian* 尚賢) and to employ the capable (*shi neng* 事能) in their government.” 453 Similarly, Han Feizi counts as “portents of ruin” for a state the use of bribery as a means to accede to official posts and the absence of tests of merit in official appointments. 454 In all of these arguments, the worthy are contrasted with dishonest ministers who delude the ruler, 455 flatterers who toady to the ruler’s self-aggrandizing

---

449 *Analects* 2.19.
451 *Xunzi* 32.6.
452 See *Xunzi* 9.1.
453 Mozi Book II, Chapter I, sections 1 and 2.
454 See Han Feizi Chapter 15 (points 7 and 16).
wishes,\textsuperscript{456} and ministers who are related to the ruler by blood\textsuperscript{457} (who are likely to eye the ruler’s position).

One distinguishing trait of the Confucians’ position on merit, however, is that, while it is true that they, like the Mohists and the Legalists, defend merit for its usefulness for government, they are also keen on exonerating lowliness of origins as such, on showing that humbleness of birth is no obstacle to moral and political worth. One would expect to find such an attempt in Mozi as well, given what historians conjecture of his origins: his unusual surname “Mo,” which means ink, is thought to refer to the tattoos slaves and convicts had to wear on their faces. But Mozi’s stiff writing style does not allow for straightforward expressions of sympathy with those of unlucky origins; the most we get from him is a hint of resentment in his wariness of the appointment of “the relations of the ruler, the rich without merit and the good-looking.”\textsuperscript{458}

The case is much clearer for the Confucians. Their identification with the underdog is illustrated by Confucius’ statement that he was ready to teach—where teaching involved preparation for public service to a large extent\textsuperscript{459}—anyone who offered him no more than a “bundle of dried meat as a present.”\textsuperscript{460} As for Mencius, he says of himself that, just like Emperors Yao and Shun, he was “the same as anyone else,”\textsuperscript{461} which is part of his general argument that anyone can become a sage and thus that anyone can be worthy of appointment to government.\textsuperscript{462} Even revered Emperor Shun, Mencius reminds us, “rose from the fields.”\textsuperscript{463} He continues,

\textsuperscript{456}Mencius 6B.13, Xunzi 11.9, 13.2, 25.7, Analects 13.15, Han Feizi Chapter 14.
\textsuperscript{457}Xunzi 11.9, 12.12, Mencius 5B.9, Mozi Book II, Chapter III, section 2.
\textsuperscript{458}See Mozi Book II, Chapter III, section 2.
\textsuperscript{459}See next chapter.
\textsuperscript{460}Analects 7.7.
\textsuperscript{461}Mencius 4B.32.
\textsuperscript{462}Also see next chapter.
\textsuperscript{463}In Mencius 2A.8, Shun is said to have been “a farmer, a potter and a fisherman.”
Fu Yue was raised to office from amongst the builders; Jiao Ge from amidst the fish and salt; Guan Zhong from the hands of the prison officer; Sun Shu Ao from the sea and Bai Li Xi from the market.\textsuperscript{464}

Fu Yue and Jiao Ge are ministers from the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE); Guan Zhong, Sun Shu Ao, and Bai Li Xi from the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE). Xunzi says of Fu Yue that he “looked like he had a fin emerging from his back”\textsuperscript{465} and that Sun Shu Ao “was bald with splotches of short hair, had a left leg that was too long, and was short enough to go under the upturning poles of a state carriage.”\textsuperscript{466} He describes Sun Shu Ao as humble\textsuperscript{467} and as a “meritorious minister.”\textsuperscript{468} Of Jiao Ge, we have a brief mention in the Mencius where he is described as a worthy minister to the tyrant Zhou Xin.\textsuperscript{469} Xunzi and Mencius concur that Bai Li Xi made Duke Mu powerful.\textsuperscript{470} In short, all these were accomplished ministers regardless of their humble origins. As Mencius says, the list shows that Heaven tests humans’ resolution before placing a great burden on them, shaking and waking and toughening and improving them.\textsuperscript{471} Lowly origins are thus not an impediment, but rather a contributing factor, to political achievement. In the same general line of thought, Xunzi argues that a man should not be banned from office just because his father or brother had been executed for committing a crime.

\textsuperscript{464} Mencius 6B.15.
\textsuperscript{465} Xunzi 5.5.
\textsuperscript{466} Xunzi 5.4. We know this only because Xunzi was interested in proving that virtue and physiognomy were not correlated (as his contemporaries must have believed).
\textsuperscript{467} Xunzi 32.4.
\textsuperscript{468} Xunzi 13.1. I will return to this category of the “meritorious minister” below.
\textsuperscript{469} Mencius 2A.1.
\textsuperscript{470} Mencius 5A.9, Xunzi 25.10. Xunzi uses the character (bo 伯), which can be understood to mean hegemon (ba 霸), in this case. Mencius, on the other hand, says that Bai Li Xi made Duke Mu “distinguished” (xian 顯), in the whole world.
\textsuperscript{471} Mencius 6B.15. In the same line of thought, see Mencius 7A.18: “It is often through adversity that men acquire virtue, wisdom, skill and cleverness …”
Criminality and virtuousness are not transferrable by blood, and one should be assessed according to his own worth, not according to the deeds of his family members.\(^{472}\)

Another difference that sets the three schools of thought apart in their conception of merit concerns the definition of merit itself. For Han Feizi, for example, merit is intimately connected to the accomplishment of the task one is assigned to. This is well illustrated in his infamous anecdote about Marquis Chao of Han:

Once in by-gone days, Marquis Chao of Han was drunk and fell into a nap. The crown-keeper, seeing the ruler exposed to cold, put a coat over him. When the Marquis awoke, he was glad and asked the attendants, "Who put more clothes on my body?" "The crown-keeper did," they replied. Then the Marquis found the coat-keeper guilty and put the crown-keeper to death. He punished the coat-keeper for the neglect of his duty, and the crown-keeper for the overriding of his post.\(^ {473}\)

As Han Fei puts it elsewhere, the rewards the ruler bestows are given for “meritorious services” and not for “acts of benevolence and righteousness.”\(^ {474}\) In other words, what matters, as Xiao says in his discussion of the Legalists, is that the “actual performance corresponds to the title,”\(^ {475}\) not that the act be virtuous as such. One can glean in the Legalist position a developing notion of expertise.\(^ {476}\) The Mohists, on the other hand, were still operating with a notion of merit as all-round goodness. Mozi thus describes the men whom he wants the ruler to appoint as versed in morality (\textit{de 德}), in righteousness (\textit{yi 義}), in wisdom (\textit{zhī 智}), as well as in rhetoric (\textit{yan tan 言談}) and statecraft (\textit{dao shu 道術}, literally the methods of the Dao).\(^ {477}\) The Confucians also define merit in terms of multifaceted goodness. For example, like the Mohists, they hold

\(^{472}\) Xunzi 24.3.
\(^{474}\) Han Feizi, Chapter XIV quoted from Liao, 129.
\(^{475}\) Xiao, \textit{History of Chinese Political Thought}, 397.
\(^{476}\) See Hsu’s discussion of “New Administrative Expertise” in Hsu, \textit{Ancient China in Transition}, 96-100.
\(^{477}\) Mozi, Book II.
Yao’s appointment of the sagely Shun as a precedent for exemplary appointment.  
But the Confucians also add to this a direct attack on specific expertise (not to be found in the *Mozi*). Thus Confucius says that “The gentleman is not a vessel” which is usually taken to mean that he is not a specialist, since vessels are used for specific functions. He also mocks the emphasis on particular skills, like archery or farming. Mencius and Xunzi similarly contrast such skills with those of Confucian gentlemen. This said, just as they accept hegemons, the early Confucians do not necessarily expect praiseworthy ministers to exhibit the full gamut of Confucian virtues. This is clearest in Xunzi’s distinction between “sagely” and “meritorious” ministers. I will elaborate on this point in the next part of this chapter.

Having presented the historical antecedents to the Confucian emphasis on merit, and the differences between the Confucian position and that of philosophical opponents, I now turn, before closing this section, to a brief discussion of the mechanics the Confucians propose to assess candidates to ministerial posts. This is particularly important in Mencius’ case because his view on this issue has given rise to varying interpretations. The anecdote of concern has Mencius telling King Xuan of Qi that the decision to promote men of low origins “should not be taken lightly”; he elaborates on this word of caution as follows:

> When those around you all say of a man that he is good and wise, that is not enough; when the counsellors all say the same, that is not enough; when the people (guo ren 國人) all say so, then have the case investigated. If a man turns out to be good and wise, then and only then should he be given office. When those around you all say of a man that he is unsuitable, do not listen to them; when the counsellors all say the same, do not listen to them; when the people (guo ren 國人) all say so, then have the case investigated. If the man turns out to be unsuitable, then and only then should he be removed from office.

---

479 *Analects* 2.12. See also *Analects* 5.4.
480 *Analects* 9.2.
481 *Analects* 13.4.
482 *Mencius* 3A.4, *Xunzi* 11.5.
This passage is sometimes taken to indicate the democratic leanings of Mencius, since he grounds government appointments in the supposed opinion of “the people.” But it is easy to exaggerate the significance of Mencius’ statement to this effect. For the statement mostly reads as an admonition to employ all means possible to verify the competence (or incompetence) of the candidates for office: the ruler needs to make sure that the maximum number of people approve of the candidates. Indeed, D.C. Lau simply translates guo ren as “everyone,” which suggests that, on his reading of the passage, what is stake is not so much a view about the importance of the people’s opinions, but a view about the necessity of putting candidates through as many circles of examination as possible. This becomes even more evident as Mencius’ counsel does not end there: for he argues that once universal approval is secured, then investigation is appropriate. In other words, universal approval is not the ultimate step in the process. Finally, in the last part of the passage, Mencius argues that a similar procedure should be pursued before a man is put to death, adding that this will ensure that “it will be said, ‘He was put to death by the whole country.’” This suggests that enlisting the opinions of others does not only help in making a good decision, it also disperses responsibility so that harsh decisions are not seen as emanating from the ruler alone.

All of the above should show that Mencius envisions no “democratic” mode of appointment to government posts. Moreover, the idea that the people must be consulted about decisions on appointments to ministerial positions has no significant echo in the Mencius, or

---

483 See, for example, Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 208.
484 The Chinese character usually translated as “the people” is min. Pines, in contrast, translates guo ren 國人 as “all the dwellers of the capital.” Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 51.
485 The closest we get to this idea is Mencius 1B.11 where it is said that its people should be consulted before the appointment of a ruler for the state of Yan is made. But this is also a lonely statement in the Mencius.
anywhere else in the other Confucian texts. On the other hand, the idea that the people’s opinions are like signposts is akin to the idea explored in Chapter 2 of the people acting as a gauge of competence by inclining towards the competent ruler and moving away from the incompetent one. It is also echoed in the Analects where Zhong Gong, a steward to the Ji family, asks Confucius about the way to recognize men of talent. Confucius answers, “Promote those you do recognize. Do you suppose others will allow those you fail to recognize to be passed over?” Again, the thought here is that the people around him will signal to the ruler the presence of competent men because, alone, he cannot survey the vast terrain of candidates available.

As for Xunzi, though it is true that he claims that the good ruler attracts worthy scholars merely by projecting his own virtue, just like light attracts locusts, the rhetoric should not hide the fact that, for Xunzi too, the most important phase of selecting men to office is that of actually assessing their competence. Instead of developing the idea of other people’s opinions as indicators of worthiness, however, Xunzi develops the “investigation” part of the inquiry. And a rigorous investigation it is for Xunzi. For its purpose is for the rulers to test the ability of ministers to respond well to situations of success and situations of adversity:

They alternately promote and dismiss them, transferring them from position to position so as to assess their ability to respond to change. They bestow ease and comforts on them so as to observe their ability to avoid wayward and abandoned conduct. They expose them to music and women, power and benefits, indignation and anger, misfortune and adversity, and observe their ability not to depart from moral integrity.

486 Pines himself makes this point. Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 208.
487 Analects 13.2.
488 Xunzi 14.5.
489 Xunzi 12.11.
Xunzi continues that the distinction between those who have this ability and those who do not will be as stark as the distinction between black and white. Thus, just as the so-called Bole, master horseman, cannot be deceived about horses, so the gentleman cannot be deceived about men. Another important part of the selection method is the idea of impartiality in appointment: as mentioned above, Xunzi is against the ruler appointing his kin and favorites to office. As he puts it, “the intelligent ruler, when he has personal affection for a person, expresses these affections with gifts of gold, gems, pearls, and jade. But he does not express personal affection for others through appointment to office or by assignment of duties and responsibilities.”

II- Xunzi’s vision

Having explained the origins and nature of the Confucian emphasis on merit, I now turn to the government duties of meritorious ministers and how these differ from those of the ruler. I devote this section to Xunzi because, as I mentioned above, he is the only one among our three thinkers who actually offers a full-fledged account of the distinctive role of ministers in government. I argue that, in Xunzi’s vision, the ruler’s role is largely symbolic, while ministers are responsible for the administration of the realm. Xunzi’s view is summed up in the following statement:

Rulers without worthies are like blind men without assistants. How aimlessly they wander about!"
Indeed, in Xunzi’s vision, much of the business of government can only be undertaken with the help of competent ministers chosen through the rigorous method of selection described above. To see this, note their role in the division of labor envisioned by Xunzi: the farmers and common people are responsible for the cultivation of the soil, the “leaders of men” are responsible for ensuring that people labor according to the seasons and that they fulfill their duties appropriately, Heaven is responsible for preventing floods and droughts,

As for the responsibility to be impartial (jian 兼) and protect the people, to be impartial and love them, to be impartial and regulate them, to ensure that the common people do not suffer the misfortunes of cold and hunger even though the year has been marked by calamities, natural disasters, floods and droughts, then it belongs to the sage ruler (sheng jin 聖君) and the worthy minister (xian xiang 贊相).492

We thus get a recounting of the duties of government described in Chapter 2, here specified as the responsibility not of the ruler alone, but also of his worthy minister. But how is this shared responsibility negotiated between ruler and minister? Consider first the official duty of the ruler alone:

Thus, for ruling a state, there is a way, and for the ruler, there is an official duty. As for ruling on detailed matters over many days, or resolving each day’s minutiae, these can be performed by the various minor officers and bureaucrats and are not worth sacrificing the pleasures of excursions, amusements, ease and repose. When it comes to deliberating and then selecting a minister to have universal authority to lead the government, this will ensure that all of the officials, down to the most minor ones, will abide by the way, face in the proper direction and serve the government. This is the official duty of the ruler.493

The ability to appoint officers to handle their affairs for them is indeed, in Xunzi’s view, what characterizes rulers: “Ability in the ruler consists in appointing men to office; ability in a commoner consists in doing things himself.”494 For the ruler to take on additional tasks himself is to exceed his capacities, exhausting himself so much that even a servant would not wish to

492 Xunzi 10.9.
493 Xunzi 11.12.
494 Xunzi 11.13.
exchange positions with him. On the other hand, the delegation of tasks allows the ruler to be concerned with the near, the clear, and the essential, rather than the far, the obscure, and the detailed. Hence the reason why the ruler’s main task is the appointment of an appropriate minister, and it is the minister’s task to handle government affairs. As Xunzi sums this division of labor up: “The way of the ruler lies in knowing men; the way of ministers lies in knowing affairs of state.”

Xunzi goes so far as to argue that “the ability to appropriately employ one individual” (neng dang yi ren 能當一人) would lead to gaining the empire, but to lack this ability is to endanger the state.” “Forsake this principle and nothing else is worth trying,” he adds. Xunzi also argues that it is theoretically impossible not to be able to use one such individual, but to able to employ a hundred or a thousand of them. Though he does not elaborate on this claim, it seems to consist in more than a statement of logical evidence to the effect that one who is able to use a hundred persons can also use a single one. Given the importance Xunzi imparts on the “one individual” (yi ren 一人), it is more likely that what he means by his claim is that a single minister is necessary for leading the hundred or thousand officials in government. This

---

495 Indeed, Xunzi says of ruling alone that it is “the way of the menial laborer that Mozi advocates” (Xunzi 11.13). What is strange about this statement is that Mozi actually agrees with Xunzi on the need for delegating tasks to ministers. Indeed, he offers a sustained account of the division of labor (involving the Son of Heaven, ministers, regional rulers and local officials) needed to govern the empire. See his chapter on “Identifying with One’s Superior” in Watson. I thank Stephen Angle for alerting me to this issue.

496 Xunzi makes a somewhat contradicting statement when he argues that it is better to be concerned with small matters because, as small matters accumulate over the days, they become of greater significance, whereas major matters become of minor significance as they accumulate. “Thus one who is good at day-to-day matters will become king, one who is good at seasonal matters will become a hegemon, one who only repairs leaks will be endangered and one who is totally negligent will perish.” For Xunzi, while large quantities are important in property and goods, wealth and treasures, the opposite is true when it comes to government and instruction, accomplishment and reputation (Xunzi 16.7). This statement, however, does not need to imply that the ruler will himself take care of everyday small matters, but that his government should be attentive to day-to-day affairs, in which case it is his chief minister who would mainly be in charge of them.

497 Xunzi 27.73.
498 Xunzi 11.19.
499 Xunzi 11.19. For the importance of ministers, see also Xunzi 24.5.
500 Xunzi 11.19.
supposition is supported by Xunzi’s account of the responsibilities of this leading minister which clearly revolve around organizing the work of government officers:

As for the minister, he is responsible for evaluating the officers of the hundred bureaus and assessing the hundred tasks, for elaborating responsibilities of the officials down to the most minor ones, measuring their achievements and assessing their rewards, so that by the end of the year their achievements could be brought to the attention of the ruler. Those who performed well would stay and those who didn’t would be dismissed.\textsuperscript{501}

In another passage where Xunzi details the duties of the many officials, including the master of titles, the minister of the horse (i.e. of war), the chief director of music, the minister of the works, the administrator of the fields, hunchback shamanesses and crippled shamans, the director of markets, the minister of justice etc., he specifies the duties of the prime minister to include to a large extent the administration of the affairs of the lower officials:

To lay the foundation of governmental education, see that the laws and regulations are upright, receive reports and proposals and review them at fixed times, judge the merits of the lesser officials, and decide what rewards or punishments are to be meted out, attending to all matters carefully and at the proper time, so that the minor officials are encouraged to do their best and the common people do not dare to be slack—these are the duties of the prime minister.\textsuperscript{502}

In the same passage, Xunzi describes the duties of the king in a way that suggests that they are more abstract and exalted than those of the prime minister: he is “to complete the Way and its virtue, establish the highest standards, unite the world in the fullest degree of order \((li \)理\), overlooking not the smallest detail, and causing all men in the world to be obedient and

\textsuperscript{501} Xunzi 11.21.
\textsuperscript{502} Xunzi 9.24.
submissive.” He sets the duties of the other high officials (*bi gong* 辟公)\(^{503}\) to involve the reform of the rites and music. He finally concludes by saying:

> If the affairs of government are in disorder, it is the fault of the prime minister. If the customs of the country are faulty, it is due to the error of the high officials. And if the world is not unified and the regional rulers are rebellious, then the heavenly king is not the right man for the job.\(^{504}\)

It should be clear from this account that the business of day-to-day government, which includes the administration of the government bureaucracy with its many officials—which was sophisticated even at the time of Xunzi’s writing, as I argued above—is the prerogative of the prime minister. On the other hand, the ruler upholds public morals and the ritual order, described in the previous chapter as one which, were it to run smoothly, would ensure the unification of the ruler’s world. As Edward Machle says of the importance of the ruler in Xunzi’s vision:

> In Xunzi’s view of administration, the sage-king attracts the people into orderliness by his DE [virtue], the winsome power of his moral perfection, but the administration of the state is in the hands of his ministers.\(^{505}\)

Machle’s formulation underscores, first, that the ruler’s virtue is not transformative: it does not make the people virtuous, but it rather induces them into orderliness. On my account, the ruler does so not merely by providing a model of good behavior, but more specifically by conferring legitimacy on the hierarchical system and thus encouraging the people to abide it. People will find the hierarchical system legitimate if it is indeed organized according to merit and if it is indeed the case that the highest position is filled by one who is worthy of it. When the

---

\(^{503}\) Watson explains that he takes these to be the grand tutor, the grand protector and the director of music who are responsible for everything related to manners and moral education, though he says that others take *bi gong* to refer to the feudal lords (or “regional rulers,” as I have been referring to them).

\(^{504}\) Xunzi 9.24.

ruler is virtuous, his ceremonial standing at the apex of the political hierarchy ensures its successful functioning.

The only exertion the ruler needs to make is in finding the suitable individual to employ, after which he can be at rest: “Thus the ruler labors at finding him, but is at ease in employing him (gu jun ren lao yu suo zhi, er xiu yu shi zhi 故君人勞於索之，而休於使之).” Once this minister is found, the ruler

will unify the whole world and achieve a reputation comparable to that of Yao or Shun. He restricts himself to the basics yet tasks are carried out in detail. His undertakings are done with ease yet they result in achievement. He can let the lower and upper garments hang down and not get up from his seat on the mat, yet all the people within the seas will long to have him as king. This may be called being restricted to the essentials. No pleasure is greater than this.

The image of the ruler comfortably seated on his mat, calmly surveying his well-ordered realm, is evoked numerous times in the Xunzi. Fond as he is of contrasts, Xunzi compares it to the portrait of the ruler obsessed with power and influence, who fails to employ the appropriate minister and then, toil as he might, his realm remains disorderly and his reputation shameful. Xunzi cites a supposed saying of old: “Undertaken with ease, yet well-ordered; restricted to essentials, yet carried out in full detail; not involving trouble, yet resulting in achievement—this is the perfection of government.” As for the inevitable historical illustration, Xunzi provides the example of emperor Shun who did not get involved in government affairs and proclamations,

---

506 Xunzi 11.21 and 12.1.
507 Xunzi 11.12.
508 Xunzi 11.19.
509 Xunzi 12.1.
510 Xunzi 16.6. Note that Xunzi argues that a minister’s actions are not toilsome either, although he knows things in detail. He manages affairs with ease and reaches the ultimate of what is enjoyable. This is why the ruler treats him as a treasure (Xunzi 11.15). He also admonishes the minister “When your responsibilities are heavy, do not presume to carry them on your own” (Xunzi 7.5).
yet they were brought to completion.\footnote{Xunzi 27.73.} It must be recalled that Shun was assisted by no other than the sage, soon-to-be-emperor, Yu.

This said, the ease with which the ruler rules when assisted by a worthy minister should not be confused with the lack of substance of his role. Xunzi continues the anecdote about Shun with the statement that, though a farmer be skilled in working the land, it would be inappropriate to make him director of the fields.\footnote{Xunzi 27.73.} Although Xunzi extends the argument to artisans and merchants only, it is clear that he means to apply it to ministers as well: though a minister handles the affairs of the state, he need not also be suitable for the position of ruler. The ruler has to be able to assume the removed aura of an overseer, which does not necessarily follow from the ability to handle the business of government. Xunzi even says that the talents of the prime minister and those of the ruler’s assistants, which include exalting rituals, welcoming scholars, loving the people, maintaining constant principles so as to unify customs, honoring the worthy, encouraging the primary occupations, knowing not to quarrel with inferiors over minor profits, understanding standards and regulations and evaluating things and appraising their functions, “do not attain the Way of the ruler.” And what is this Way of the ruler that cannot be matched? Xunzi:

To be able to identify these three grades of talent [i.e. of lower officials; scholar-officials and grand officers; and the prime minister and the ruler’s assistants] and not to miss the proper rank may be called the Way of the ruler. When this is so, the ruler will be personally at ease but the country will be well-ordered, his accomplishments great and his reputation enhanced. He could be a true king at best, and a hegemon at the least.\footnote{Xunzi 12.14.}

Though Xunzi does not make this point explicitly again, it is not surprising that he argues for the distinctive importance of the ruler, conceiving him as he does as the apex, and guarantor, of the ritual order with its manifold distinctions. One should remember, however, Xunzi’s
admonitions, reported above, that the ruler cannot really achieve anything without the help of a competent minister upon whom the success of government depends. If the ruler is indispensable on the symbolic level, the minister is indispensable on the practical level. Xunzi’s intricate system of division of labor cannot run when any of its parts is absent.

My account of Xunzi’s vision of government has remained so far at the ideal level: it has involved virtuous ministers assisting virtuous rulers. The importance of a virtuous ruler stems from his position at the apex of a hierarchical, merit-based order. The importance of virtuous ministers stems from their responsibility for the daily administration of government. What I wish to argue now, following upon arguments I have made in Chapter 2 about hegemons, is that, though it is preferable for the ruler and the ministers to be virtuous, there is also a level at which their performance is acceptable though they fall short of virtue.

The idea that the minister-ruler relationship is significantly qualified by the true king-hegemon distinction introduced in Chapter 2 transpires from the last quote above. The quote is actually not the only instance when, in speaking of the inevitable success accruing to the ruler from the appointment of a worthy minister, Xunzi says that this would enable him to be “a true king at best, and a hegemon at the least (shang ke yi wang, xia ke yi ba 上可以王，下可以霸).” This statement is illustrated by the usual historical examples: at the level of sage kings, Tang made use of Yi Yin, King Wen made use of Lü Shang, King Wu employed Shao Gong Shi (the half-brother of the Duke of Zhou encountered above), and King Cheng made use of the Duke of Zhou. At the level of hegemons, Xunzi cites Duke Huan of Qi who “spent his time in

514 Xunzi 11.19 and 12.1.
515 Though not otherwise cited in the Confucian texts, he is known in Chinese tradition for his patient fishing during eighty years with a hook-less rod, believing that the fish would come to him of their own volition when ready. A master strategist (his patience has a big role in this), and a former minister of Zhou Xin’s against whom he turned, he was appointed by Duke Wen as prime minister and given the title of “The Grand Duke’s Hope” (tai gong wang 太公望).
the inner palace in suspending musical instruments and in excursions and amusements,” and yet was able to unite and order the world, and assemble the regional rulers in allegiance to him. The secret to his success is none other than his employment of Guan Zhong.\footnote{Xunzi 11.19.}

The idea that a ruler who employs a worthy minister will become “a true king at best, and a hegemon at the least” can be understood to suggest a distinction between a sage ruler who, with the assistance of a good minister, is able to raise himself to the position of a true king, and another, less capable one, who can only raise himself to the position of a hegemon even while relying on similar assistance.\footnote{This is the view suggested in the Mencius where Mencius is encouraged to take up an official post with the argument that he can turn the ruler either into a king, or at least into a hegemon, suggesting that what matters is the character of the ruler, not that of the minister. See Mencius 2A.2 and 3B.1.} On the other hand, the ministers themselves can be of different calibers: in addition to ministers who follow rituals and rightness, Xunzi mentions ministers who are merely “correct” (duan 端), “sincere” (cheng 誠), “trustworthy” (xin 信) and “complete” (quan 全), and ministers given to expediency and opportunism.\footnote{Answering a question about what makes a person a minister, Xunzi lists the following qualities: “to use ritual principles in serving the ruler, to be loyal, obedient and not lazy (Xunzi 12.3). Though rituals are listed here, rightness is not. Moreover, the other qualities listed are more akin to orderly conduct than to virtuousness.} Xunzi calls the first sage (sheng 聖) ministers and the second meritorious (gong 功) ministers. He explains that meritorious ministers are able to unify the people within and overcome difficulties outside. The people love them and the scholars trust them. They are, in turn, loyal to the ruler and love the common people. The examples of meritorious ministers include Guan Zhong, but also a certain Uncle Fan of Jin and Sunshu Ao of Chu (encountered above on Mencius’ list of able statesmen).\footnote{Xunzi 13.1.} One could also cite Bai Li Xi, mentioned above, who made Duke Mu one of the five hegemons.\footnote{Xunzi 25.10.} As for the sage ministers, they too honor their ruler and love the people. In addition, however, they

\footnotesize
\begin{flushright}
516 Xunzi 11.19.
517 This is the view suggested in the Mencius where Mencius is encouraged to take up an official post with the argument that he can turn the ruler either into a king, or at least into a hegemon, suggesting that what matters is the character of the ruler, not that of the minister. See Mencius 2A.2 and 3B.1.
518 Answering a question about what makes a person a minister, Xunzi lists the following qualities: “to use ritual principles in serving the ruler, to be loyal, obedient and not lazy (Xunzi 12.3). Though rituals are listed here, rightness is not. Moreover, the other qualities listed are more akin to orderly conduct than to virtuousness.
519 Xunzi 13.1.
520 Xunzi 25.10.
\end{flushright}
are also able to instruct the people, to adapt to changing circumstances, and to draw inferences from similar cases to respond to cases for which a standard of response is unavailable. In short, sage ministers exhibit wisdom and virtue that is not attained by the meritorious ministers and that enables them to understand the rationale for certain regulations and policies, and thus choose when and how to apply them.

Assisted by a sage minister, a ruler can either become a true king, or a hegemon, depending on his own qualities. On the other hand, if the minister employed is less than a sage, though good enough, then the ruler can either value (gui 肄) him and become a hegemon, respect (jing 敬) him and merely survive, or neglect (man 慢) him and perish. To become a sage king he would need to honor (zun 尊) a sage, not merely value a worthy.\(^{521}\)

To conclude, there are two ways to understand the significance of ministers for Xunzi: On the one hand, whether sage assistants to sage kings, or meritorious assistants to powerful rulers, ministers are always responsible for the business of daily government and of running the state bureaucracy. It is not true, as Yuri Pines argues, that the importance of ministers only kicks in when the ruler himself is not good enough.\(^{522}\) Indeed, though Pines recognizes the crucial role ministers play in Xunzi’s vision of government, he insists that the delegation of powers to ministers is a “practical” solution to the problem of having bad monarchs.\(^{523}\) This allows him to maintain that Xunzi believes, like all other thinkers of the Warring States period, that “the power of the monarch should be theoretically limitless.”\(^{524}\) But nowhere does Xunzi suggest this. On the other hand, when in fact an average ruler arises, ministers’ responsibility simply increases, as

\(^{521}\) *Xunzi* 24.5.
they work to ensure his becoming a hegemon, i.e. someone who can enforce order and unite the country. In other words, at the level of “suboptimality,” ministers are themselves the guarantors of political order. This is made evident by the references to King Huan of Qi, Duke Mu, and the ruler of Chu in the three Confucian texts, given that they are all references to the effect that they were assisted by Guan Zhong, Bai Li Xi, and Sun Shu Ao, respectively. Indeed, in order to show the Confucian support for hegemons in Chapter 2, I had to resort to a discussion of Guan Zhong, not Duke Huan, precisely because more was said about the former than about the latter.

III- Insubordinate ministers

I have elaborated in the preceding part of the chapter on Xunzi’s vision of government, arguing that ministers are assigned the practical task of government administration. The importance of ministers, however, goes further than this: not only are they the government’s enforcers, but they also check the ruler’s potential mistakes and abuses. They do so by remonstrating against the ruler when he fails to fulfill his duties or makes decisions harmful to the country. In other words, not only do they rule in an administrative sense, but also in a more ambitious political sense, with an eye to ensuring that political order is maintained in their societies. This further explains the importance of their being virtuous, or at least meritorious. This feature of Xunzi’s thought, namely the political independence of ministers from rulers, is also shared by Confucius and Mencius. I start with Xunzi:

Desiring to reply with the right feelings
Even when his words are not heeded,
He fears he will endure the difficulties of [Wu] Zixu.\textsuperscript{525} Who went forward in remonstrance, but was not heeded So his throat was cut and he was put in a sack Thrown away in the Yangtze.\textsuperscript{526}

The fear of a fate similar to Zixu’s notwithstanding, Xunzi admonishes ministers to remonstrate. But the call to remonstrate is not merely a blank call on the part of Xunzi. It is a layered, conditional, and qualified call. Firstly, obedience and disobedience are both dependent on benefiting the ruler (not personally, but rather in his pursuit of political order). So when a minister follows the commands of the ruler for the ruler’s benefit, this is “obedience,” but contravening the ruler’s commands, when this is also done for the benefit of the ruler, would also count as “loyalty.” On the flip side, following a ruler’s commands even though they do not benefit him is called “flattery,” and contravening his commands for the minister’s personal benefit is “usurpation.” Finally, not to care about the ruler’s honour and disgrace or about the state’s fate, and to be concerned only with one’s own revenue and relations, is tantamount to being “a threat to the state.”\textsuperscript{527}

Secondly, contravening the ruler’s wishes, even when undertaken for the benefit of the ruler and the state, is not of a single genus, and succumbs to Xunzi’s fondness for categorization:

If the ruler has wrongful plans and undertakings, and if there is a fear that the country will be imperilled and its altars destroyed, then if, as a grand official or a senior advisor one has the capacity to enter the court and address the ruler and if, when one’s advice is heeded, then one is satisfied with it but when not, then one leaves, this would be called “to remonstrate.” If one has such capacity but while being satisfied when one’s advice is heeded, one kills oneself when it is not, this would be called “to contest.” To have the capacity to join strength with the wise, to lead ministers and officials, and to compel and

\textsuperscript{525} A famous protagonist of Chinese myth, he became a minister in the state of Wu during the Spring and Autumn period. Upon the ascendancy of a new king, he lost favor and the king offered him a sword to cut his own throat with.
\textsuperscript{526} Xunzi 25.43.
\textsuperscript{527} Xunzi 13.2.
correct the ruler, then even though one’s ruler is insecure, incapable and will not listen, the country will be saved from the great calamity and delivered from a great injury, and one is able both to show honour to the ruler and to keep the country safe. This would be called “to assist.” To have the ability to go against the commands of the ruler, to use the ruler’s power without permission and to oppose the ruler’s undertakings in order to secure the state against danger and to save the ruler from disgrace, and to have one’s accomplishments and military achievements result in great benefit for the state, this is called “to oppose.”

Note that the above categories are all meant to be positive, for Xunzi continues that those who “remonstrate,” “contest,” “assist,” and “oppose” are the treasure of the ruler, deserving of deference and generosity. He also says that they “ensure impartiality in the court, and the safety of the country.”

On the other hand, it is not easy to see what classification principle is at use to distinguish these four praiseworthy categories of ministers. Remonstrating and contesting seem to be related to giving advice, while opposing and assisting seem to be related to taking action. But this should not make them mutually exclusive categories: presumably, a remonstrating minister whose advice is not heeded is still called upon to assist and oppose in order to save the state. Furthermore, the difference between assisting and opposing is not straightforward: it seems to turn on the use of persuasion in the case of assisting, and the use of force in the case of opposing—not mutually exclusive categories either.

Though historical examples follow the four categories to illustrate them, it actually seems as if the categories are based on the historical examples themselves, rather than the other way round—which would explain the absence of an evident classification principle. The examples of remonstrating ministers are Yi Yin (the worthy assistant of Tang) and Jizi, a minister to the tyrant Zhou Xin. The examples of contesting ministers are Wu Zixu (with whom I started this

---

528 Xunzi 13.2.
529 Xunzi 13.3.
section) and Bigan, another minister to Zhou Xin’s. Bigan and Jizi are cited in an account by Xunzi about the Duke of Zhou, who justifies his attack on Zhou Xin by reference to the fact that the latter disemboweled Bigan and imprisoned Jizi, presumably because they criticized him.\footnote{See Xunzi 8.15.}

The example of assisting is the ruler of Pingyuan and that of opposing is the ruler of Xinling. The ruler of Pingyuan, a minister in the state of Zhao, defended his state against the siege imposed by the state of Qin. He sought the help of his brother-in-law, the ruler of Xinling, who was a minister in the state of Wei. Having set on helping Zhao, the ruler of Wei later retreated, feeling threatened by Qin, so the ruler of Xinling decided to go to the rescue on his own. His alliance with the states of Zhao and Chu crushed Qin.\footnote{Thus—if the account is accurate—postponing the Qin imperial unification for a few decades.} While it is not clear in what way the ruler of Pingyuan went against the ruler of Zhao, the ruler of Xinling is clearly a good example of an opposing minister. Indeed, Xunzi mentions him again as one characterized by “comprehensive loyalty (tong zhong 通忠),” i.e. one who contravenes his ruler’s commands only when good outcomes are at stake and braves death even when not fending for his own self.\footnote{Xunzi 13.11.}

Notwithstanding his characterization of the ruler of Xinling and his positive assessment of the different kinds of remonstration, Xunzi also offers a three-tier ranking of loyalty in which remonstration is actually given an inferior position. According to him, loyalty at the highest degree is to use the Way to protect and transform the ruler. Loyalty at a second degree is to use one’s virtue to conciliate the ruler and assist him. Loyalty at a third degree is to use right to remonstrate against wrong and, in so doing, anger the ruler. There is finally the category of one who is a threat to the state, concerned with one’s personal, rather than public, welfare.\footnote{Xunzi 13.7.}

The ranking seems to depend not only on the qualities of the minister, but also on the dispositions of
the ruler: given a ruler who is open to persuasion, remonstration is neither necessary, nor advisable. It is better to resort either to the transformative effect of the Way or, in the case of a ruler with less potential for virtue, to conciliation. The example Xunzi gives for the second degree of loyalty is that of Guan Zhong in relation to Duke Huan (which is somewhat baffling, because Guan Zhong is never otherwise mentioned as relying on “virtue” in assisting Duke Huan). The example given for the third degree of loyalty is Wu Zixu, who was killed for remonstrating against the new king of Wu. On one level, Guan Zhong ranks higher than Wu Zixu simply because he happened to serve a ruler more open to advice than the ruler served by Wu Zixu. On the other hand, another reading of the ranking of these two is possible, which relies on asking about the results of the actions of both ministers. What is the consequence of Wu Zixu’s action, however virtuous it might have been? To get him killed without having effected any change in the ruler. What is the consequence of Guan Zhong’s assistance to King Huan, however lacking in morality his motives might have been? To help Duke Huan become one of the leading hegemons of his time, thus ensuring security and order in his state. A comparison of both results would explain why Guan Zhong is more praiseworthy, and thus higher on the scale of loyalty, than Wu Zixu. This reasoning would also make sense of Xunzi’s statement that though one should remonstrate and contest against an average ruler, one should not seek to oppose or correct a cruel one, for futile morally-motivated actions are sometimes less good than efficacious actions that are lacking in moral motivations.  

That the obligation to remonstrate should be sensitive to the consequences of such remonstration is also made clear in Xunzi’s account of a supposed encounter between Duke Ai

534 Xunzi 13.4. On serving a cruel ruler, Xunzi says: “Like driving unbroken horses, like caring for an infant, like feeding a starving man, one should avail oneself of his fears to modify his excesses, use his distress to acquaint him with its causes, use his pleasures to get him to enter the Way, use his wrath to get rid of those who bear him animosity—these are the indirect ways to achieve the goal” (Xunzi 13.5).
of Lu and Confucius. The Duke asks the Master whether a son is filial who follows the commands of his father, and whether a minister acts with integrity who follows the commands of his ruler. Confucius does not respond but later on puts the question to Zigong who answers in the affirmative. Confucius retorts:

Ci, you are a petty man! You do not get the point! In the past, when a state with ten thousand chariots possessed four contesting ministers, the borders were not destroyed. When a state of a thousand chariots had three contesting ministers, the state was not imperiled. When a state of a hundred chariots had two contesting ministers, its ancestral shrine was not overturned."

What Confucius’ answer shows is that the minister’s contestation does not necessarily have to have a purely moral motivation in the way that a filial son’s does. For the ministers’ contestation is not said to have led to the ruler undertaking a virtuous act or refraining from committing an immoral one. What it has engendered is rather the security of the state. In other words, the minister opposes and disobeys when he knows that the ruler’s decisions jeopardize good government. The standard of good political conduct, as I showed in chapter 2, is intimately tied to the preservation of political order. This is not an ideal of virtuous ministers opposing the demands of realpolitik. It is an ideal of competent ministers who understand what it takes to maintain a state and protect its people. This is, again, why Guan Zhong ranks higher than Wu Zixu.

Turning now to the Analects, the principle it proposes for organizing the relationship between ruler and minister is the conventional idea that “The ruler should employ the services of his subjects in accordance with the rites. A subject should serve his ruler with loyalty.”

---

535 Xunzi 29.3.
536 Analects 3.19.
said to be a gentleman because of his respectful deportment and his caring for the people, but also for being “reverent in the service of his superiors.”\footnote{Analects 5.16.} This said, not all superiors deserve the same reverence. For example, Zilu and Ran Qiu are called “place-holders” (\textit{ju chen} 具臣)\footnote{See Ames and Rosemont, trans., \textit{The Analects of Confucius}.} or in Lau’s translation, “ministers appointed to make up the full quota.” Their failure does not so much stem from a lack of loyalty, but rather from a misplacement of loyalty, since they are in the service of the Ji family (the usurpers of Zhou prerogative). Because of their perseverance in serving rulers who will not follow advice that accords with the Way, Confucius refuses to give them the title of “great ministers,” which he defines as ministers “who serve their ruler according to the Way and who, when this is no longer possible, relinquish office.”\footnote{Analects 11.24.}

We can already see, in this definition of great ministers as ones who should not serve when it is no longer possible to advise on the right path, that the ministers of the \textit{Analects} are not supposed to always follow the commands of their rulers—withstanding the language of “loyalty” and “reverence.”\footnote{Analects 13.23: “The gentleman harmonizes (\textit{he} 和) with others without agreeing (\textit{tong} 同) with them” is taken by Slingerland, based on a story from the \textit{Zuo Commentary}, to indicate the attitude ministers should have towards the ruler.} Indeed, even Zilu and Ran Qiu are said not to be wiling to obey the ruler if asked to do something as outrageous as killing their own father.\footnote{See also \textit{Analects} 11.24 where it is said that they would also not kill their ruler (i.e. the ruler of Lu), presumably if asked to do so by the Ji family.} But moving away from such an extreme example, consider the importance of remonstration. Asked about a saying that can lead a state to ruin, Confucius answers:

\begin{quote}
There is a saying amongst men: ‘I do not at all enjoy being a ruler, except for the fact that no one goes against what I say.’ If what he says is good and no one goes against him, good. But if what he says is not good and no one goes against him, then is this not almost a case of a saying leading the state to ruin?\footnote{Analects 13.15.}
\end{quote}
On the flip side of this advice to rulers, Confucius advises Zilu on the way to serve a ruler: “Make sure that you are not being dishonest with him when you stand up to him.” Clearly, then, the necessity of remonstration is enshrined both in the duty of the ruler to maintain the state, and in the responsibility of the minister to do his best to help the ruler achieve this duty.

Two anecdotes from the *Analects* illustrate the duty of the minister. One anecdote revolves around Confucius himself: Upon hearing the news that Chen Chengzi assassinated Duke Jian of Qi, he bathes himself ceremonially (as is required before a minister meets the ruler) then reports the news to Duke Ai of Lu, asking him to punish the perpetrator. The king asks him to report it instead to the heads of the three important families in the state of Lu. Confucius says: “Holding rank below the Counsellors, I did not dare not to report this. Now you tell me: ‘Report it to the Three.’” When the Three refuse his request, Confucius repeats the same statement: “Holding rank below the Counsellors, I did not dare not to report this.” As it stands, this anecdote suggests a rather subdued form of remonstration, where Confucius seems to merely go through the motions, so to speak, reminding his ruler of his duty to avenge a wrongful crime, without the insistence characteristic of Xunzi’s remonstrating minister. Remonstration takes a more pronounced form, however, in the second anecdote: Ran Qiu and Zilu complain to Confucius that the Ji family whom they serve (and who de facto rules the state of Lu) is preparing to attack Zhuanyu, a small dependent state located inside the state of Lu. Confucius asks about the reasons for the attack, and Ran Qiu answers “It is what our master wishes. Neither of us is in favor of it.” Confucius scolds Ran Qiu—the most senior of the two, saying:

---

543 *Analects* 14.22.
544 *Analects* 14.21.
545 Slingerland explains that the ruler of Zhuanyu was appointed by the Zhou King to serve the altars of the state of Lu, a fact which the Ji family resented.
Qiu! There is a saying of Zhou Ren’s which goes: let men who have strength to display join the ranks, let those who lack the strength give up their places. What use to a blind man is the assistant who does not steady him when he totters or support him when he falls. Moreover, what you said is quite wrong. Whose fault is it when the tiger and the rhinoceros escape from their cages or when the tortoise shell and the jade are destroyed in their caskets? Ran Qiu said, ‘But Zhuanyu is strongly fortified and close to Bi [a Ji family stronghold]. If it is not taken now, it is sure to be a source of trouble for the descendants of our master in the future.’ Confucius said, ‘Qiu, the gentleman detests those who, rather than saying outright that they want something, can be counted on to gloss over their remarks … you and Zilu have not been able either to help your master to attract the distant subjects when they are un submissive or to preserve the state when it is disintegrating. Instead, you propose to resort to the use of arms within the state itself. I am afraid that Ji Sun’s worries lie not in Zhuanyu but within the walls of his palace.’

In an exemplary move, Confucius shifts the locus of responsibility from the Ji family to the ministers themselves. When the rhinoceros escapes from his cage, one cannot blame the rhinoceros himself. The guardian is to be blamed. In language reminiscent of Xunzi’s, Confucius admonishes the two ministers to take on their duty as brave assistants and remonstrate against the ruler’s bad decision, fulfilling what Schwartz describes as “ministerial initiative” in the Analects.

This said, it is not obvious that ministers will necessarily be successful in their attempts at persuading a bad ruler, especially if he is cruel like a Zhou Xin. In this case, means other than persuasion are in order: the Master of Wei had to leave Zhou Xin, the Master of Ji became a slave because of him, and Bigan got killed. As Slingerland explains, the responses of the three “ren men of Yin,” as Confucius calls them, differ because their situations differ: the Master of

---

546 Analects 16.1.
547 Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, 114.
548 Analects 18.1
549 Analects 18.1.
Wei, as the eldest son of the previous Shang ruler, felt that he had a duty to maintain the sacrifices in the family’s ancestral temple, and thus fled in order to do so. The Master of Ji, on the other hand, was the eldest uncle of Zhou Xin, and seeing that his remonstraion came to naught, feigned madness to get enslaved. He wanted to preserve his life because he felt that, as the senior uncle, he might have important official roles to fulfill in the future. Finally, Bigan was a younger uncle and a minor official, and thus felt less bound to family and official obligations, and freer to engage in forthright remonstration (and get himself killed for it). The fact that Confucius approves of these three ministers shows that candid remonstration against all odds is not the Confucian ideal of ministerial conduct. Instead, remonstration is to be thought of in relation to family and political obligations.

Like Xunzi and Confucius, Mencius offers a conception of independent-minded ministers, but he focuses more on the rulers’ need to heed their ministers’ advice, than on the duty of the latter to remonstrate: he offers an analogy to the master carpenter and the jade cutter: if the king wants to build a big house, he expects the master carpenter to find timber for it. Similarly, if the king has a piece of uncut jade, he entrusts it to a jade-cutter, however expensive it is. Now, when it comes to the government of your state, you say, ‘Just put aside what you have learned and do as I tell you.’ In what way is this different from teaching the jade-cutter his job?

The thought here seems to be that the aptitude required to advise on matters of government is a skill like carpentry and jade-cutting. However, this does not necessarily mean, when Mencius says of the person entrusted with a ministerial position that he “spent his childhood in acquiring knowledge, naturally wishing to put his knowledge to use when he grows

---

551 *Mencius* 1B.9.
up,\textsuperscript{552} that this refers to a specialized kind of knowledge and training. A more generalist education is more probably what Mencius means here, as explained at the beginning of this chapter. In any case, the point is that the ruler should listen to those who understand affairs of state. Special courtesies are even due for the ones whose advice benefits the people.\textsuperscript{553}

This is at the level of how the ruler should respond to a worthy minister. As to how ministers should treat their ruler, this strongly depends on how they are treated by him: if he treats them as his “hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a stranger. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy.”\textsuperscript{554} To see how this works, consider an example of a minister being treated like horses and hounds. The example involves Zi Si who kept receiving gifts in the name of Duke Mu and, according to protocol, had to bow every time he did. Zi Si became indignant. As Mencius explains, “to make him bob up and down rendering thanks for the gift of meat for the tripod was hardly the right way to take care of a gentleman.”\textsuperscript{555} To see how Zi Si preferred to be treated, we can refer to Mencius’ recounting of a conversation between Duke Mu and Zi Si, where Duke Mu asks: “How did kings of states with a thousand chariots in antiquity make friends with scholar-officials (\textit{shī} ±)?” Zi Si does not like the question. Mencius explains Zi Si’s reasoning: “In point of position, you are the prince and I am your minister. How dare I be friends with you? In point of virtue, it is you who ought to serve me. How can you presume to be friends

\textsuperscript{552} Mencius 1B.9.  
\textsuperscript{553} Such as escorting him out of the country when he decides to leave and not confiscating his land before three years (Mencius 4B.3).  
\textsuperscript{554} Mencius 4B.3.  
\textsuperscript{555} Mencius 5B.6.
with me?” Mencius continues that if a ruler cannot presume to be friends with a scholar, then he surely cannot feel free to summon him.556

We thus get to the key idea in Mencius on the relationship between rulers and ministers, mentioned in Chapter 2, namely that of “ministers who cannot be summoned” (suo bu zhao zhi chen 所不召之臣).557 This idea is expounded in an anecdote involving Mencius himself: One day, while Mencius was getting prepared to go to court, he receives a message from the king saying that that he wanted to go see him, but feeling sick, prefers that Mencius comes to him the next day instead. Mencius, feigning illness, replies that he won’t be able to make it. Avoiding a doctor sent to him by the king, Mencius spends the night at the Jing Chou’s. Jing confronts Mencius with the stipulations of the rites: “When summoned by one’s father, one should not answer, I am coming [but go immediately]. When summoned by one’s prince, one should not wait for the horses to be harnessed.” Mencius answers with a supposed saying by Zengzi: “They may have their wealth, but I have my ren; they may have their exalted rank but I have my rightness. In what way do I suffer by comparison?” He adds that, among the three things that people value (rank, age and virtue), having only one (i.e. rank) is no excuse to treat others with condescension, especially that, though rank is important at court, and age in the village, virtue (de 德) is ultimately most valuable for government. Mencius concludes with the idea that “a prince who is to achieve great things must have officials he does not summon.”558

556 Mencius 5B.7.
557 I translate chen 臣 here as “minister,” while I have translated it in the Xunzi passages as “official” because Xunzi also uses the term xiang 相 which can be better rendered as “minister.”
558 Mencius 2B.2. This said, Mencius seems to qualify his idea of ministers who cannot be summoned in his answer to Wan Zhang’s claim that Confucius (contrary to Mencius himself) answered the summoning of his prince without waiting for his horse to be harnessed. This is how Mencius justifies Confucius’ behavior: “Confucius was in office and had specific duties, and he was summoned in his official capacity” (Mencius 5B.7). This answer thus suggests that only scholars who do not hold official positions can resist the ruler’s summoning (In which case, one could translate, with Lau, 所不召之臣 as “subjects who cannot be summoned” rather than as “officials who cannot be
Mencius’ vision is to some extent more idealistic than Xunzi’s: it involves, as the foregoing reveals, virtuous men refusing to submit to the mere prerogative of rank when devoid of virtue. This said, what is striking about the historical examples Mencius uses to illustrate the idea of ministers who cannot be summoned is that he cites Guan Zhong. I have already discussed, in Chapter 2, Mencius’ clear ambivalence about Guan Zhong, which is evident in his statement that if “even Guan Zhong could not be summoned, much less someone who would not be a Guan Zhong.” Ambivalent as he might be, the fact is that Mencius cites Guan Zhong as an example of a minister who cannot be summoned, and a minister from whom Duke Huan learnt, helping him to “become a leader of the regional rulers without much effort.” In a sense, then, notwithstanding his virtue talk, we find in Mencius echoes, albeit faint, of Xunzi’s position that what makes the position of a minister who stands up to the ruler important is not necessarily that he stands up for morality against vice, but also that he stands up for successful government against weakness and disorder. This would presumably be particularly important in the absence of a sage king.

**IV- Conclusion**

In Chapters 2 and 3, I argued that the early Confucians were concerned with the promotion and maintenance of political order. In this chapter, I zoomed in on the government summoned”). But this goes counter to the historical examples Mencius provides, which involve two ministers, Yi Yin and Guan Zhong, who were not to be summoned by their respective rulers, Tang and Duke Huan. It is therefore likely that Mencius’ statement about Confucius being warranted in rushing to meet his prince is part of Mencius’ general attempt to find exceptions for Confucius’ behavior.

\[^{559}Mencius\ 2B.2.\]
agents responsible for the production of this order: in Xunzi’s vision, it is government ministers who administer the realm, while ceremonial kings have the task of appointing these ministers and, more broadly, of providing the legitimacy for society’s ritual order.

In the final section of the chapter, I argued that Mencius and Confucius agree with Xunzi that kings should heed their ministers’ advice and that, when they do not, ministers not only can, but should, remonstrate with them. This does not, however, necessarily imply that Confucius and Mencius share Xunzi’s view of a ceremonial ruler overseeing a realm largely run by his leading minister. The Mencius and the Analects are actually far from explicit about the division of labor between the ruler and his assistants. I will try in this conclusion to infer their views on this subject.

In the Analects, one does find an account of the ruler very similar to Xunzi’s. Here are, for example, pieces of a portrait of sage Emperors Yao and Shun:

How lofty Yao and Shun were in holding aloof (bu yu 不與) from the empire while they were in possession of it.\(^{560}\)

Great indeed was Yao as a ruler! How lofty! It is Heaven that is great and it was Yao who modeled himself upon it. He was so boundless that the common people were not able to put a name to his virtues. Lofty was he in his successes and brilliant was he in his accomplishments.\(^{561}\)

If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action (wu wei 無為), it was, perhaps, Shun. There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south.\(^{562}\)

\(^{560}\) Analects 8.18. On Heaven as a model of effortless rule, since it does not spell out its orders (“Heaven does not speak”), see Analects 17.19 and Slingerland’s commentary on it.

\(^{561}\) Analects 8.19.

\(^{562}\) Analects 15.5.
Slingerland writes that two interpretations have been proposed for the notion of *wu wei* mentioned in the last citation. It either refers to the idea that the ruler does nothing after filling all the ministerial posts or, alternatively, it suggests that, because he rules through virtue, he effortlessly transforms those around him.\(^563\) In the previous chapters, I have already argued against the latter interpretation, showing that Confucian government is much more complex than the idea of the persuasive power of a virtuous ruler suggests. Only the first interpretation advanced by Slingerland can therefore be correct. This said, it might be misleading to think that, after choosing his ministers, the ruler does “nothing” at all. Though he does not actively intervene in the workings of his realm, it is still his exalted presence at the apex of the ritual order that ensures its continuation.\(^564\)

In addition to this vision of a lofty ruler, Confucius also offers a conception of ministerial responsibility in the absence of a worthy ruler similar to Xunzi’s. For example, in one relevant anecdote, Confucius speaks about the licentiousness of Duke Ling of Wei. Ji Kangzi asks how he never lost his state. Confucius answers: “Zhongshu Yu was responsible for foreign visitors, Priest Tuo for the ancestral temple and Wangsun Jia for military affairs. That being the case, what question could there be of his losing his state?”\(^565\) The ministers mentioned by Confucius are all lacking in virtue: Though Zhongshu Yu (also known as Kong Wenzi) is said to be fond of learning and to be accepting of inferiors’ advice, Slingerland explains that Confucius defends him thusly precisely because he is otherwise known to be a dissolute person.\(^566\) Priest Tuo, on the

---

\(^{563}\) Slingerland argues that Zhu Xi combines both interpretations.  
\(^{564}\) In *Analects* 16.2, Confucius says, “When the Way prevails in the Empire, the rites and music and punitive expeditions are initiated by the Son of Heaven.” I take it that this means that the ruler has to be symbolically presiding over rituals, music and attacks for them to go through. This does not imply that he actively makes decisions on the shape of rituals to be enacted or military policies to be pursued.  
\(^{565}\) *Analects* 14.19.  
\(^{566}\) *Analects* 5.15.
other hand, is known for his glibness\(^{567}\) and Wangsun Jia for going against the demands of ritual.\(^ {568}\) Morally deficient as they are, these three ministers appropriately fulfilled their ministerial duties. They might not have propagated virtue, but they certainly maintained order and security for the state. Here, like in the Xunzi, we find ministers stepping in, in the absence of sage rulers, to uphold political order themselves.\(^ {569}\)

Mencius, on the other hand, neither portrays an aloof and lofty ruler nor talks about ministers as frequently as Xunzi and Confucius do. He argues, as mentioned above, that rulers should honor ministers and listen to them, but this does not imply that ministers are left to run the daily business of government. Add to this two particularities of Mencius: as we saw in Chapter 3, Mencius both emphasizes the importance of a ruler’s virtue, and secondly, does not stress rituals as much as Confucius and Xunzi do, focusing instead on filiality. Filiality is encouraged through the insurance of the people’s welfare and their education, both of which the ruler can play a role in. Concerning welfare, although, as we saw in Chapter 2, Mencius’ ruler is admonished to “refrain” from imposing large taxes and interfering in trade, farming, etc. this does not mean that there is nothing left for him to do, for he still has, if the role of ministers is discounted, to determine and impose taxes, regulate common land, punish offenders, open borders to facilitate trade, etc.\(^ {570}\) Secondly, the emphasis on education in filiality leaves room for

\(^{567}\) Analects 6.16.

\(^{568}\) Analects 3.13. The passage is complicated and can either be read to suggest Wangsun Jia’s prioritization of food over ritual, or his suggestion that he should be consulted as the real wielder of power in Wei, not the ruler of Wei himself. On this, see Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, 22.

\(^{569}\) Pines argues that it is only Xunzi among our three Confucians who equates, like his student Han Feizi, the ministerial role with the preservation of the political realm (rather than of the moral Way). As is clear from the above, Pines is not entirely correct about this, as Confucius and Xunzi also understand ministers as stepping in to defend the state (rather than virtue as such). See Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 175-9.

\(^{570}\) This argument applies to Confucius’ and Xunzi’s conception of governmental tasks as well. Presumably, it is the ministers for these two thinkers who deal with the tasks listed above.
the ruler to offer himself as a model of good behavior. In short, Mencius leaves a much bigger room for the ruler to play a significant role in government than Xunzi and Confucius do.

The second point that I wish to stress in this conclusion is the way in which the argument I make in this chapter concerning the responsibilities of ministers fits with my overall thesis about the sensibility of the early Confucians to political realities (in contradistinction to the view that sees them as primarily morally idealistic and distant from politics). There are two ways to see this: first, I argued, in Chapter 2, that the Confucians favored hereditary appointment for the rulers. The reasoning was that hereditary succession provided the most orderly and secure avenue for succession, given the rising competition over the highest political office and the dangerous conflicts that ensued from it. But hereditary succession means that it is difficult to guarantee the virtuousness of the ruler. This is why it is important to insist on merit as the standard for appointment to all ministerial positions, which are less coveted but can have a serious influence on the workings of the realm. Moreover, it is much more likely that Confucian disciples can make it to the position of minister rather than the position of ruler.

Secondly, as I have shown above, even when the ministers are not fully virtuous, they can at least be effective, brave, and resolute like Guan Zhong, or more generally, correct, loyal, and caring for the common people. This allows them to guarantee political order, propping up their rulers as hegemons. For our three Confucian thinkers, this is an achievement worthy of note, regardless of its moral pedigree.

But does this mean that the Confucians recommend that their own disciples take up positions in the courts of corrupt or incompetent rulers, with the hope of making some improvement on government? In other words, how do their assessments of historical cases of minister-ruler relationships translate into a view of personal obligation? Is there an obligation to
take part in politics? Under what conditions does the obligation hold? Should we describe this obligation as moral, political, or both? These are the questions that I will turn to in the chapter that follows.

**V- Appendix**

Before closing this chapter, I wish to address one complication, mentioned in Chapter 2, which relates to Mencius’ approval of hereditary emolument (shì lù 世祿) for ministers, a point which conflicts with his emphasis, presented in this chapter, on the promotion and rewarding of the worthy, regardless of their origins. Indeed, asked by King Xuan of Qi about kingly government, Mencius cites to him, by way of recommendation, the methods employed by King Wen. These include, among others, the fact that “descendants of officials received hereditary emolument.” On another occasion, when asked by Duke Wen of Teng about government, Mencius, in the midst of recommendations such as land demarcation, taxation, and education, says, clearly approvingly, that “hereditary emolument as a matter of fact is already practiced in Teng.”

Xiao argues, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, that Mencius’ position can be explained by reference to historical context: I have described above how, during the Warring States period, officials were less and less drawn from noble ranks and more and more through competition among commoners for the high positions of power. According to Xiao, this competition turned into “an unprincipled race for the spoils of success.” Especially since the men chosen in this race were not necessarily always more competent than their Zhou forerunners, Mencius must have

---

571 *Mencius* 1B.5.
572 *Mencius* 3A.3.
thought it better to hold on to the stability and historical legitimacy offered by the system of hereditary offices. In Xiao’s words, “if it becomes impossible to maintain the respect for virtue, then, as Mencius saw it, it would be better to maintain the hereditary principle as an aspect of ritual propriety.”

The problem with this argument, however, is that it goes in the opposite vein to what Mencius says in his conversation with King Xuan of Qi cited above: “A state of established traditions,” Mencius says, “is so called not because it has tall trees but because it has ministers whose families have served it for generations.” Then he points out that the king is lacking of trustworthy ministers because all those he promoted had already deserted him. So the king asks Mencius how to ensure the appointment of competent men. Mencius begins his answer as follows:

> When there is no choice (ru bu de yi 如不得已), the ruler of a state, in advancing good and wise men, may have to promote those of low position over the heads of those of exalted rank and distant relatives over near ones.  

Though this statement reveals that Mencius prefers hereditary appointment over the promotion of men of lowly origins (which should be resorted to only “where there is no choice”), it is not clear that this preference is motivated by fast-changing historical realities as Xiao has it. For what the passage suggests is that a corollary of the unstable political environment of Mencius’ and Duke Xuan’s time is actually the difficulty of keeping ministers whose families

---

574 *Mencius* 1B.7.  
575 Creel argues that the explanation for Mencius’ reluctance to support the advancement of men of lowly origins must be either practical (to avoid upsetting long-established lineages of ministers), or personal (Mencius himself was of relatively noble origins). See Creel, *Chinese Thought*, 79. Neither of these possibilities is convincing: on the one hand, Mencius shows no worries elsewhere about the consequences of upsetting men of noble origins (or about being “practical” more generally). On the other hand, he insists, as I argued above, that lowly origins are no impediment to achievement which indicates that, even if he were indeed of noble origins himself, he was not keen on defending these.
have served the state “for generations,” not the difficulty of bringing in men of unknown descent. The passage also suggests that what Mencius prefers as a matter of principle is the hereditary method of appointment for ministers (which makes for “a state of established traditions”), not appointment based on merit. This interpretation clearly stands in tension with Mencius’ argument, as mentioned above, that lowly origins make for able statesmen. I see no obvious way to resolve this tension. While Xiao’s interpretation is an attempt to avoid this tension, it is not validated by the text. We are thus left with the thought that, though Mencius welcomed the rise of worthy men of unknown descent, he still preferred, perhaps because of his attachment to the decaying Zhou world, the hereditary transfer of ministerial positions.
V- Political involvement

In the previous chapter, I delineated the responsibilities of ministers vis-à-vis rulers. This chapter deals with the ministerial question again, but from a different, more personal, angle. It asks whether the Confucians saw the pursuit of ministerial positions as a corollary to their teachings, and what limits, if any, they imposed upon such a pursuit. Is involvement in government a duty? If it is a duty, is it a moral one, flowing from the Confucian conception of personal virtue, or a political one, following upon what I have presented as the Confucian concern with political order? Is it permissible, let alone advisable, to seek an official position in the court of a debased ruler?

The question of when it is proper to take up an official post is greatly discussed in the early Confucians texts, especially in the Analects and the Mencius. Robert Eno has offered the only systematic account of the Confucian view on this question. He argues for a view of Confucian “purism” and idealism which effectively isolated “the ritual community of early Confucians from the political hazards of a chaotic era and endowed a style of social withdrawal with the ethical status of conscientious objection.” 576 In other words, his interpretation is that the early Confucians linked political involvement to the availability of “moral government,” and given the unavailability of such government at the time, “the functional message which these doctrines conveyed to disciples was to enter and persist in Ruist [Confucian] training for ideal political opportunities, while avoiding involvement in actual government.” 577

I will argue, in this chapter, against Eno’s reading, revealing the Confucians to be strongly in favor of political engagement, even in troubled times. The chapter will proceed as

576 Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 1.
577 Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 44-5.
follows: I start out with some historical preliminaries about the Confucians’ own political activities. I then turn to the question of political involvement on the ideal level, i.e. to showing that political involvement follows from the Confucian conception of virtue. In the third section, I show, contra Eno, that the duty of political involvement holds even in troubled times, and that it is justified through a concern with political order. Finally, since the issue of political involvement is linked, in the Confucian texts, with the distinction between what humans can achieve and what is outside of human control (the realm of tian 天, usually translated as “Heaven”), I address the question of how the Confucians conceptualized tian, emphasizing its role in legitimating involvement in politics.

I- The Confucians in history

Recall from the Introduction that the early Confucians went from one state to another hoping to obtain a ministerial position that would allow them to counsel rulers. Confucius managed to obtain a junior position in his native state of Lu, but one which he eventually lost, causing him to travel to the states of Wei, Song, Chen, and Cai hoping to obtain another. Mencius also travelled around, and the text of the Mencius reports encounters between him and the rulers of the states of Liang and Qi, suggesting he might have taken on some advisory role in these. Finally, Xunzi seems to have made a stop in the state of Qi, which was endeavoring to attract scholars, and eventually held a position as a magistrate of the region of Lanling in the state of Chu.

While this biographical data suggests that the early Confucians personally sought to take part in government, it is also true that it is difficult to ascertain the exact motivation behind, and
significance of, this quest and the positions they obtained. Eno thus argues that while Confucius’ quest is “generally taken to demonstrate that Confucius’ commitment to political activism remained undiminished,” another way to interpret it is as revealing Confucius’ “unwillingness to be flexible about the conditions under which he would seek office,” thus suggesting that it was not that the opportunities were lacking but that Confucius’ ethical standards were “too high to seize them.”

Also in line with his argument that the early Confucians shunned political activism, Eno points out that Mencius only sought political experience as an old man, and that he was not so much a “frustrated politician” as much as an “aging philosopher hoping to use the leverage of his reputation as a wise man to break into politics at the highest levels.” He also describes Mencius’ position in Qi as an “advisory position without administrative duties.”

He suggests that the post that Xunzi took up in the state of Qi might have been taken under pressure, or at least reluctantly, and that it was an office that did not present the possibility of much political influence anyway, warning that this post “should not lead us to portray the man as an office seeker, or to view the philosophy of the Xunzi as springing from the motivations of political ambition.”

The historical evidence alone is not sufficient to determine the exact nature of Mencius’ and Xunzi’s official positions, and the opportunities that were in fact available to Confucius. Given that most of what we know about Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi comes from the respective texts associated with their names, it is ultimately our understanding of their philosophical project as presented in these texts that affects our interpretation of their

---

581 Edward Machle, for example, argues that one would be hard pressed to describe Xunzi’s position in Chu as a mere “sinecure.” In his formulation, “few experienced city officials will believe that Xun’s office as “magistrate of Lanling” was a sinecure.” See Machle, *Nature and Heaven in the Xunzi*, 192-3 (fn 9).
biographical history, rather than the other way round. Indeed, Eno says that his interpretation of Confucius’ quest relies on “the evidence of the Analects.” If one disagrees with him on his reading of the Analects—as I do—then one will also disagree with Eno’s view of Confucius’ involvement. Similarly, if one reads the Mencius as emphasizing the necessity of political participation, then one will likely take Mencius to have appreciated its importance not merely when he was “aging,” and thus to interpret his actual political pursuits as more than a desperate attempt in old age to leave a mark on the world.

Finally, Eno argues against the view of “political activism” offered by Frederick Mote who contends that Confucian students and their descendants historically dominated the market for government positions. While I will also offer a view of “political activism” below, it will not rely on any evidence of Confucianism’s historical role, but rather on the Confucians texts’ content, to which I now turn.

II- The virtue of political involvement

When interpreters speak about the relationship between ethics and politics in early Confucianism, they often speak of the notion of “inner sageliness outer kingliness” (nei sheng wai wang 内聖外王), i.e. the notion that the inward development of virtue makes one properly suited for the position of king. This notion is in fact not of Confucian provenance. As Stephen Angle explains, some scholars have traced it to the shamanic Chinese kings of antiquity, while the actual slogan comes from the Daoist Zhuangzi. Angle points out, however, that it was “widely used by the Neo-Confucians to express the intimate relation, or even identity, that they

582 Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 45.
saw between inner moral cultivation and external, political action." As I argued in the Introduction, Neo-Confucian developments, starting with Zhu Xi (1130-1200), are often read back into early Confucianism, and I have questioned, throughout this dissertation, the argument about the “identity” between ethics and politics in Confucianism by questioning the dependency of politics on ethics. I will continue doing so in this chapter as I show that many of the political actions recommended by the early Confucians do not conform to the ethics of self-cultivation. This said, there is truth to the flip side of the equation: as I argue in this section, the domain of ethics is itself dependent on the domain of politics insofar as one cannot become fully virtuous in isolation from all political involvement.

I presented in Chapter 3 the Confucian view, especially expounded by Mencius, about how qualities important for the ruler and the people alike, like loyalty, reciprocity, and kindness, are first learnt at home; in other words, how political virtue develops from personal and family ethics. What I wish to emphasize here is the fact that the Confucians view this extension of virtue, from the realm of the family, to the wider realm of society, to be necessary for the full-fledged development of virtue itself. As Angle puts it,

sagehood is not just a matter of personal ethics: on any traditional Confucian’s view, it is intimately involved in shaping one’s broader community both unofficially and through participation in government. In other words, to aim at sagehood is to aim at some sort of political involvement and impact.

584 Angle, Sagehood, 182.
585 Angle, Sagehood, 179. Enno argues that the Confucian texts link ethical cultivation (he specifically focuses on “ritual mastery”) and political activism in three ways: sequential (“self-cultivation precedes political action”), predictive (“the man whose virtue has been cultivated through ritual education is supremely competent the oversee the restoration of political order, either as a ruler, or as the administrator of enlightened policy”), and proscriptive (“being a moral, the Ruist sage or junzi will not participate in corrupt government, lest he set a bad example, needlessly expose himself to danger, become himself corrupted, or legitimize corruption by his presence. Instead, he will bide his time, perfecting himself, until the proper opportunity for political action presents itself. This is the doctrine of “timeliness” (shí)”). I agree with Enno on the first two links, but disagree about the third. See Enno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 44.
The political aspect of sagehood is exemplified through the paragons of virtue the early Confucians constantly cite. These are Yao, Shun, and Yu, from the largely mythical Tang, Yu, and Xia Dynasties, respectively (24th-16th centuries BCE), Tang and Yi Yin, from the Shang Dynasty (16th-11th centuries BCE), and then Kings Wen and Wu, and the Duke of Zhou, from the Zhou Dynasty (1045-770 BCE). While all these figures were political figures, when they are given as models, the suggestion is not simply that they were good rulers or ministers, but rather that they exhibited all-round virtue, of which their political performance is a manifestation. This is clearest in the case of Shun. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Shun is cited both for his unwavering filial piety (which he maintained even as his parents and brother conspired to kill him), and for his accomplishments as a ruler. Indeed, Yao gave his daughter in marriage to Shun even while the latter was still a commoner, presumably on account of his filial reputation, and then raised him to the position of regent to the throne before he died. In this position, and in line with the idea that the ruler is primarily responsible for choosing good ministers—see Chapter 4—Shun is said to have appointed Yi in charge of fire, Yu in charge of rivers, and Xie in charge of education, exhibiting an acute concern with “the affairs of the people” and bringing order to the realm. Both his filial piety and his political acumen are thus interrelated manifestations of Shun’s core virtuous disposition.

The other figures are mostly cited for being great rulers and ministers, but it is also clear that they exhibit the central Confucian virtues. Mencius thus describes Yao, as well as Shun, as

---

586 In Mencius 6B.2, Yao is mentioned alongside Shun as exhibiting filiality: “The way of Yao and Shun is simply to be a good son and a good younger brother.”
587 Mencius 5A.1, 5B.6.
588 Mencius 3A.4.
589 As Mencius describes this core, “Shun understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationships. He followed the path of morality. He did not just put morality into practice” (Mencius 4B.19).
embracing *ren* and wisdom, and refers to them, along with Kings Tang and Wen, as sages.

In one anecdote in the *Analects*, Emperor Yu is described as modest and devoted in his undertaking of ancestor sacrifice, in addition to exhibiting splendor in ritual and energy in public works. Xunzi tellingly says that what made Yu a Yu was his use of “*ren*, rightness, regulations (*fa* 法), and standards (*zheng* 正).” He says of Kings Tang and Wu that they “cultivated the Way, carried out rightness (*yi*), caused whatever benefited the empire in common to flourish, and removed whatever did harm to the whole world, so that the empire offered allegiance to them.” In other words, these Confucian exemplars exhibit a combination of personal and political qualities, which suggests a connection between the two.

Personal and political qualities are also bundled up in passages in the early Confucian texts that offer descriptions of what a Confucian gentleman (*junzi* 君子) is like. For example, when asked by Zilu about being a gentleman, Confucius replies:

> ‘He cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence.’
> ‘Is that all?’
> ‘He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men.’
> ‘Is that all?’
> ‘He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to the people. Even Yao and Shun would have found the task of bringing peace and security to the people taxing.’

Commenting on this and similar passages in the *Analects*, Sor-hoon Tan argues that “many aspects of the exemplary person’s way … are sociopolitical.” But do they have to be?

For one might agree that there is a sociopolitical dimension of Confucian virtue, but disagree that

---

590 See *Mencius* 7A.46. In 7A.30 and 7B.33, Yao and Shun are said to possess a virtue that is not specified, but most commentators agree that it should be *ren*.
591 *Mencius* 7B.38.
592 *Analects* 8.20.
593 *Xunzi* 23.14.
594 *Xunzi* 18.2.
595 *Analects* 14.42.
596 Tan, *Confucian Democracy*, 129. Tan cites *Analects* 1.7, 5.16, 19.10 and 20.2, in addition to 14.42. All these passages describe the *junzi* as undertaking political tasks.
it is more than a contingent manifestation of inner virtue. The fact that the Confucian sages were also all kings and ministers might simply be a chance element, attributable to the fact that historical records usually preserve the accomplishments of men at the top, thus preventing any sages of antiquity with no official roles to make it into the Classics of antiquity, and thus into the Confucian worldview. Similarly, it might be the case that the political tasks attributed to the gentleman in the early Confucian texts are simply supererogatory, rather than a necessary part of virtue. This is in fact suggested in the following passage from the Analects:

Someone said to Confucius, ‘Why do you not take part in government?’
The Master said, ‘The Book of History says, “Oh! Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers a man can exert an influence upon government.” In so doing a man is, in fact, taking part in government. How can there be any question of his having actively to “take part in government”? ’

This passage suggests that the fulfillment of family duties produces a positive influence on government, presumably through its effects on society, and that therefore there is no need to actually participate. The view presented in this passage is, however, a lonely one, and the idea that political duties are supererogatory is hard to sustain given the many discussions in the early Confucian texts dealing with whether, when, and how, it is appropriate for the Confucians and their disciples to take part in politics. It seems therefore more plausible to see these latter discussions as acting as a bridge between the purely ethical and intellectual discussions of virtue (what being ren consists of, how to treat one’s parents, whether rightness is externally imposed or an internal quality, what learning requires, etc.), and the political discussions. They act as a bridge insofar as they define a duty for Confucian disciples, as individuals, to participate in politics. This duty can, moreover, be understood to have two dimensions: it is a duty that stems

---

597 Analects 2.2.
598 See, for example, Analects 2.18, 4.14, 5.6, 6.1, 6.8, 6.14, 11.17, 11.24, 11.25, 11.26, 13.20, 19.13, Mencius 7B.29, Xunzi 27.93, 27.94.
from the Confucian understanding of virtue itself, and it is a duty that stems from their concern with politics. These two ideas can be culled from Benjamin Schwartz’s statement of the importance of political cultivation for the early Confucians:

The superior man can achieve complete self-realization only in his public vocation. It might indeed be stated that a commitment to public service—even when such service is unattainable—forms one of the basic criteria distinguishing the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation from some competing ideals in the Chinese world. Conversely, society can be harmonized and set in order only when men who have approached the ideal of self-realization are in public office. 599

Self-realization and the harmonization of society are thus two goals that political involvement helps achieve. Concerning self-realization, Confucius says that virtue “is never solitary. It always has neighbors.” 600 There are many ways to understand this claim: it could be that virtuous persons entice others around them to become virtuous, or that virtuous people are naturally attracted to one another. But another interpretation is that it is necessary to be around others to become virtuous, that, except perhaps for wisdom (zhi 智), the Confucian virtues (ren 仁, rightness (yi 義), trustworthiness (xin 信), ritual propriety (li 礼), dutifulness (zhong 忠), reverence (jing 敬)), are all qualities that we can only have in relation to others. We can of course limit our relations to family and friends, as is suggested in the passage from Confucius cited above where he describes caring for parents and brothers as akin to participating in government, but this passage finds no echo anywhere else, and seems to suggest less a rejection of political involvement than an emphasis on the importance of family. To limit oneself to family relations is in fact to limit the range of possible relations we could have, and thus the range of

599 Schwartz, Confucianism in Action, 52.
600 Analects 4.25.
proper dispositions we could develop. It is to fail, as Mencius argues, to “extend” our moral dispositions to apply them to less personal relationships, including political ones.\footnote{It might be worth noting here that though virtue involves a necessary political manifestation, the relationship does not hold the other way round. In other words, a person’s ability to take on a political position is not necessarily a sign of inner virtue. See \textit{Analects} 5.8. That a proper political disposition does not imply all-round virtue lends support to my claim that there is an obligation to take part in politics that is not ethical in kind, which therefore explains why a proper attitude towards politics (a concern with effectiveness, for example) does not indicate a more full-blown sense of virtue. I will turn to this claim in the next section.}

One should keep in mind the unavailability for the early Confucians of the range of political careers one can envision in the modern world. To engage in politics for the early Confucians is to take up an advisory or official position at a ruler’s court, and the two central political relationships are ruler-subject and ruler-minister. Confucius’ disciple Zilu makes the point about the importance of the former starkly:

Not to enter public life is to ignore one’s duty. Even the proper regulation of old and young cannot be set aside. How, then, can the duty between ruler and subject be set aside? This is to cause confusion in the most important of human relationships simply because one desires to keep unsullied one’s character. The gentleman takes office in order to do his duty. As for putting the Way into practice, he knows all along that it is hopeless.\footnote{\textit{Analects} 18.7.}

The passage almost overstates the case for the duty of political participation. It presents the duty as absolute, regardless of the prevailing political situation, including the character of the ruler. As we will see below, the Confucians are actually concerned with both the potential for sullying one’s character or, more accurately, derailing one’s ethical pursuits, and for putting the Way, or at least some lower-level version of it, into effect. What this passage underscores, however, is the extent to which the duty to participate is central to the Confucian vision of the good life. As Mencius puts it, “A Gentleman takes office as a farmer cultivates his land.” Mencius also cites the historical records as saying that “When Confucius was not in the service of a ruler for three months, he became agitated” and Gongming Yi comments that “In ancient
times when a man was not in the service of a ruler for three months he was offered condolences."

If the concern with self-cultivation creates the motivation to participate in politics, another part of the motivation stems, as mentioned above, from the concern with the good of society. Recall from Chapter 3 that the Confucian ideal society is hierarchically organized, where hierarchy ideally tracks merit, and from Chapter 4 that merit, especially in ministerial positions, is defined as all-round virtue. This system is reflected in a revealing passage where Xunzi associates gradations of virtue with gradations of rank, arguing thus that the most virtuous ru [Confucians] can become rulers or one of the three highest officials while the lesser ru can become regional rulers, grand officers, or scholar-officials. This means not only that the virtuous Confucian disciples are most suited to ministerial positions in society, but also that the regulation of society depends on their willingness to assume their positions in the hierarchical system.

A question arises here as to the nature of the incentive that encourages the virtuous to take up official positions for the sake of the regulation of society at large. This question will become even more poignant below as I discuss non-ideal circumstances where the good of society conflicts with the good of the individual. The answer to this question cannot be found in a utilitarian outlook, where the concern is with the maximization of benefits for the larger number of people, since neither utility nor maximization is emphasized by the Confucians. Instead, the answer lies in the Confucian view of individuals as socially-embedded. One way to elicit this view is through the Confucians’ rejection of recluses. These were men who had shunned the world and had gone on to live isolated, self-sustaining lives with their families (they

---

603 Mencius 3B.3.
604 Xunzi 8.24.
plowed their own lands, wore unwoven clothes, etc. prompting Mencius to condemn their lack of appreciation for the principle of division of labor.\footnote{Mencius 3A.4.} Confucius, defending himself against two recluses’ charge that it would have been better for him to shun the world altogether than to simply shun bad men, replies: “A person cannot flock together with the birds and the beasts. If I do not associate with the followers of men, then with whom would I associate?”\footnote{Analects 18.6 quoted from Slingerland.} Confucius thus suggests that it is part and parcel of being a human being to want to associate with other human beings; as Brooks and Brooks point out, in a language somewhat foreign to the Confucians themselves but clarifying nonetheless: “Humankind, such as it is, is all that human beings can validly labor for.”\footnote{E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, The Originals Analects: Sayings of Confucius and his Successors (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 174.} It is presumably this natural tendency to associate with, and care for, other humans that also creates the motivation for wanting to improve society. In other words, analogously to the argument presented in Chapter 3 for the Confucian recognition of an obligation to care for one’s family that stems from the naturalness of family relations, the motivation and obligation to improve society stems from the definition of being human itself, which involves being part of society.

Of course, the obligation to care for society, like the obligation to care for one’s family, can be analytically reduced to the concern for one’s self, since this self is, on the Confucian view, part and parcel of family and society, and thus benefits from the improvement of the latter. But such analytic reduction is, on the one hand, not the way that the Confucians themselves present the importance of family and society. On the other hand, it is useful to keep distinct the straightforward concern with self-cultivation, and the concern with the improvement of society, even if, in the long run, the latter can be equated with a concern for the possibilities of a good life.
for one’s self. Indeed, as we will see below, these two concerns are often in tension (at least from a short-term perspective).

III- Dilemmas of political life

I have argued so far that the Confucians identify a duty to participate in politics that derives, on the ethical level, from the Confucian conception of self-cultivation and, on the political level, from the Confucian conception of a harmonious society. But the Confucians are aware, perhaps all-too aware, that ideal conditions do not exist in the actual world: precisely because their conception of virtue is relational, other parties to social relationships might not exhibit the same concern with self-cultivation that the Confucian gentleman shows. Moreover, the argument that one contributes to the ordering and harmonization of society by assuming one’s proper role is rendered moot by a deeply disordered society where positions are not typically filled by the worthy. Robert Eno argues, as I mentioned above, that the Confucians’ response to a disordered world is an “idealistic” one, since they recommend, according to him, withdrawal as a way to fend off corruption and to maintain ethical purity.\textsuperscript{608} What I will show is that, to the contrary, the Confucian attitude to less-than-ideal political situations is not idealistic in the way Eno suggests.

Confucius says that the gentleman is not invariably for or against anything, but instead follows what is right.\textsuperscript{609} Gongquan Xiao concludes from this that “Confucius did not hold unalterably either to the view that one must serve in office or to the view that one must be a

\textsuperscript{608} Eno, \textit{The Confucian Creation of Heaven}, 31.
\textsuperscript{609} \textit{Analects} 4.10.
But the question remains as to what sorts of considerations led the Confucians to sometimes advise, or seek themselves, official positions under a corrupt ruler, and to sometimes reject doing so. What I will elicit below are two central considerations: first, the extent to which one is likely to have to compromise on one’s ethical duties, but secondly, and less obviously, the extent to which one is likely to actually influence the ruler. As Sor-hoon Tan puts it, “Withdrawal from the public life is not just to preserve one’s life and limb. The point is to serve only where one could make a difference.”

To make a difference need not mean to turn a corrupt ruler into a virtuous ruler. Rather, the Confucians recognize that it is sometimes possible, and sufficient, to influence the ruler to undertake policies favorable to the common people, and thus to peace and political order. I start with Mencius since he offers the most extended discussion of political involvement, then turn to the Analects, and finally to Xunzi.

1. Mencius

- Propriety and need

Mencius lays out three conditions for taking, and relinquishing, office. The first condition stipulates that the gentleman should be “sent for with the greatest respect, in accordance with the proper rites,” and that he should be “told that his advice would be put into practice.” In this case, and even while the courtesies are still observed, Mencius argues that leaving office is justified when the gentleman’s advice is “not put into practice.” The second condition is a diluted version of the first: Mencius removes the requirement of having one’s advice put into practice, arguing

---

611 Tan, *Confucian Democracy*, 129.
that one should take up office as long as it is offered according to the proper rituals, and leave when the rituals are no longer observed. The third condition stipulates that even the lack of observance of proper ritual form can be overlooked in case of dire economic need. He thus argues that though “poverty does not constitute grounds for taking office … there are times when a man takes office because of poverty.” Given the sequence of the passage, where the third conditions is a dilution of the second and the second a dilution of the first, it is plausible to read them as moving from the most ideal scenario to the less ideal. In other words, it would be better if one could be employed both according to ritual and also with the hope of being listened to, but the observance of ritual propriety alone is sufficient in some cases, and in others poverty is enough of a reason to take up office.

I will discuss the concern with having one’s advice heeded in the following section. In this section, I simply elaborate on the requirement of ritual propriety. This requirement is one that should be fulfilled by both the one seeking office and the one offering it. On the first count, Mencius likens those who seek office inappropriately to young people who bore holes in the walls and climb over them to meet without the consent of their parents. For Mencius, though marriage is not only desirable but also obligatory, one should not use improper ways to arrive at it. The same goes with public office. Mencius does not elaborate on what ways of seeking office count as improper, but he illustrates some of the ways in which an offer could be made improperly. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Mencius gives the example of how Duke Mu repeatedly made gifts of meat to Zisi who, in accordance with ritual, had to knock his head on the ground twice after receiving each gift. Mencius comments that in Zisi’s view, making him

---

612 Mencius 6B.14.
613 Mencius 5B.5.
614 Mencius 3B.3.
“bob up and down” to give thanks to the gift of meat was not the right way to take care of a gentleman. Instead, the ruler should have provided for him and employed him, just like Yao did with Shun.615

The issue of the propriety of taking office is part of the more general issue of the propriety of accepting remuneration and gifts in the Mencius. The question whether the Confucians allowed for profit, broadly conceived, as a reason to pursue office is not merely a theoretical, but also an historical, one. Mark Edward Lewis has argued that the scholars of the Warring States period were not dependent on the different states for revenue. He contends that they ensured their living through teaching, technical jobs (medicine, astronomy, divination), the provision of ritual expertise, such as for ceremonies of noble households, and patronage.616 As I mentioned in the Introduction, Lewis argues that “the ru [Confucians] and the technical experts, in contrast to other wielders of texts [such as court scribes], enjoyed a bipolar character—able to move between the courts and local society, between public service and private retirement.”617 Yuri Pines, on the other hand, disagrees with Lewis. He argues that teaching did not ensure sufficient revenue, and that official posts were more economically lucrative than any other,618 concluding that “many, probably most” Warring States scholars “sought careers primarily for economic and social reasons.”619 Edward Slingerland points out that, because the Confucian training consisted in large part of the “mastery of the Zhou classics and traditional ritual

615 Mencius 5B.6. In Mencius 2B.10, Mencius is also critical of the king’s willingness to provide him with a house and a pension but not to employ him, arguing that it is not wealth that he is after.
616 Patronage, according to Lewis, is no sign of alliance between states and scholarly traditions, because it was not exclusive to rulers, as regional rulers and high-ranking officials also acted as patrons, and because patronage was not based on necessity, but merely on prestige. Mark Edward Lewis, Writing and Authority in Early China, 75-8.
617 Lewis, Writing and Authority in Early China, 83.
619 Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 141.
etiquette,” it was particularly valued for state officials, and thus led many to seek it in order to acquire the post.\textsuperscript{620}

As I said above, it is hard to resolve these kinds of questions on the basis of the historical record alone, and it is the texts themselves that can enlighten us on this point. In one entry in the Analects, Confucius is said to remark that “It is not easy to find a man who can study for three years without thinking about earning a salary,”\textsuperscript{621} suggesting the ubiquity of this trend but also, more importantly, his opposition to it. When Yuan Si asks him about what is “shameful,” the Master responds that “It is shameful to make salary your sole object, irrespective of whether the Way prevails in the state or not.”\textsuperscript{622} In many other passages, Confucius’ emphasis is on showing that the pursuit of virtue should never be sacrificed for the pursuit of riches.\textsuperscript{623} Mencius similarly argues that one should not accept any position, however attractive the salary associated with it, when it is not properly offered:

Here is a basketful of rice and a bowlful of soup. Getting them will mean life; not getting them will mean death. When these are given with abuse, even a wayfarer would not accept them; when these are given after being trampled upon, even a beggar would not accept them. Yet when it comes to then thousand bushels of grain one is supposed to accept without asking if it is in accordance with the rites or if it is right to do so. What benefit are ten thousand bushels of grain to me? [Do I accept them] for the sake of beautiful houses, the enjoyment of wives and concubines, or for the sake of the gratitude my needy acquaintances will show me?\textsuperscript{624}

As for his inescapable metaphor on the topic of preferring profit over morality, Xunzi, defending Zilu’s preference to wear clothes that looked like “hanging quails” over serving a ruler

\textsuperscript{620} Slingerland (trans.), Confucius: Analects, xxi.
\textsuperscript{621} Analects 8.12.
\textsuperscript{622} Analects 14.1.
\textsuperscript{623} See Analects 1.14, 4.5, 6.11, 7.12, 7.16, 15.32, and 15.38.
\textsuperscript{624} Mencius 6A.10. On the topic of when it is appropriate to accept a gift or food (when given according to ritual, and when there is a justification for it), see Mencius 2B.3, 5B.4, 5B.6, 6B.5.
that treats him arrogantly, says that to prefer the opposite “is like obtaining something no bigger than a flea’s armor but losing your hand.”  

What I want to emphasize here, however, in line with my view of the Confucians’ “realism” and sensitivity to the vagaries of life and of the political world, is that they only reject profit when profit competes with virtue. They otherwise have no compunction as such about receiving salary in exchange for their counsel. As Slingerland writes, “The quest for riches and honor, which is associated with holding the office, is entirely legitimate and acceptable, but it should be subordinate to the moral imperatives of the Way.” The clearest instance of the Confucian acceptance of riches and honor is *Mencius* 3B.4, where Mencius answers Peng Geng who asks whether “it is not excessive to travel with a retinue of hundreds of followers in scores of chariots, and to live off one feudal lord [regional ruler] after another.” Mencius first repeats that the pursuit of office should be in accordance with the Way, but then he argues that there is nothing wrong with the Confucians’ accepting remuneration for the advice they give to rulers. The argument rests on the notion of division of labor, wherein the Confucian gentleman, like the carpenter and the carriage-maker, has something special to offer to society: “he can make the prince secure, rich and honoured, and, if the young men come under his influence, he can make them dutiful to their parents and elders, conscientious in their work and faithful to their word.” This contribution should earn him a living, just like the carpenter and carriage-maker make a living off of their work. Indeed, the Confucians do not simply argue that gentlemen are allowed to take remuneration, but that they should do so. Xunzi thus criticizes Prince Fa for refusing to take a reward on the basis of his success during a military expedition. While the latter finds it

---

625 *Xunzi* 27.101.  
627 *Mencius* 7A.32.
inappropriate to use the achievements of his soldiers for the sake of a personal reward, Xunzi says that the proper regulation of society requires that the worthy be rewarded, since this is a central way in which ranks and distinctions are maintained.628 Similarly, Confucius criticizes the disciple Yuan Si for declining a salary of nine hundred measures of millet in return for his services as a steward. “Could you not use it to aid the households in your neighborhood?” Confucius asks.629 Yuan Si was famous for being extremely fastidious (juan 簡) or, in Lau’s translation “over-scrupulous,” a character aberration that Confucius tellingly equates with being “undisciplined” (kuang 狂) as second-best (he prefers moderation).630

Finally, to return to his third condition for taking office, it is clear that Mencius is not even absolutist about virtue trumping need, recognizing the constraints of dire poverty and the necessity to compromise when one has no other option. Part of Mencius’ recognition stems from his rejection of ascetism as a viable way of life, even when it is a sign of protest against a corrupt world, for to live on grass and fruit is to live like an “earthworm” and not like a human being.631 The other part stems from the idea of flexibility mentioned above in relation to Confucius, i.e. the idea that what is right to do might be different in different circumstances. Thus, in a response to Gaozi about whether it would be right to break the rules of propriety to get food when one is starving, Mencius responds that this would generally be right, but that it would not be right, for example, to twist one’s brother’s arm and snatch food from his hand for this purpose.632 It should also be mentioned that Mencius advises that the person who accepts a position because of extreme hunger should opt for a low-ranking office, with a small salary. The thought seems to be

---

628 Xunzi 16.3.
629 Analects 6.5 quoted from Slingerland.
630 Analects 13.21.
631 Mencius 3B.10.
632 Mencius 6B.1.
that such an office is further away from the position of power, and thus associated with a lesser responsibility for “putting the Way into effect.” He gives as examples the positions of a gate-keeper and that of a watchman. He also mentions Confucius’ attitude when he was a minor official in charge of stores (“All I have to do is to keep correct records.”) and in charge of cattle (“All I have to do is to see to it that the sheep and cattle grow up to be strong and healthy”), suggesting that Confucius considered these positions to provide limits on what he was supposed to do, and therefore on what he could be held accountable (or hold himself accountable) for, as a virtuous gentleman in office.633

To recapitulate, for Mencius, accepting an official post is dependent on it being offered in proper fashion, and the lure of a financial reward should not take priority over such propriety. On the other hand, financial gain is not an unacceptable pursuit when a post has been offered and received in proper ways. This said, extreme need does trump the requirement of propriety, though the post one accepts in the case of need should be a lowly one, in which accountability is minimal.

Before closing this section, I want to touch on a final aspect of the issue of the propriety of a job offer which will allow me to introduce the subject of the next section. This aspect concerns Mencius’ argument that one who holds no official post is not required to assist the ruler at all, even if summoned appropriately. He cites in this regard Duangan Mu who climbed over a wall and Xie Liu who bolted his door to avoid a meeting.634 It is unclear whether Mencius actually approves of their extreme behavior,635 but he repeats in other passages that one who

633 Mencius 5B.5.
634 Mencius 3B.7.
635 Lau translate Mencius’ comment on these two figures’ acts (shi jie yi shen 是皆已甚) as “Both went too far.” Irene Bloom’s translation agrees with this reading. Bryan Van Norden translates it instead as “these two had to be pressed very hard before the rulers could meet them.”
holds no official post need not answer the summoning of a ruler. In one of these, he argues that a commoner is required to answer a call for service but not one for counsel, since a ruler who wants the advice of a wise man should go see him himself. The emphasis here, as discussed in the previous chapter, is on the way a ruler should seek and treat a potential minister, rather on the need or duty of one who holds no official post to stay away from political involvement. The emphasis shifts, however, when the case involves Mencius himself, who is faulted for failing to try to influence the government during a famine in the state of Qi:

“The people all thought that you, Master, were going to bring about another distribution of grain from the Tang granary. I suppose there is no hope of that happening?”

To do this, said Mencius, “is to do a “Feng Fu”. There was a man in Chin by the name of Feng Fu. He was an expert at seizing tigers with his bare hands, but in the end he became a good scholar-official. It happened that he went to the outskirts of the city, and there was a crowd pursuing a tiger. The tiger turned at bay and no one dared to go near it. On seeing Feng Fu, the people hastened to meet him. Feng Fu rolled up his sleeves and got off his carriage. The crowd was delighted, but those who were scholar-officials laughed at him.”

As Van Norden comments, Mencius’ point is that an official should not be in the business of chasing tigers. Similarly, in his own case, since he holds no official position, it is not his job to bring about an end to the famine. But the analogy is not very plausible. There are clear reasons, relating to the proper fulfillment of one’s role and to the need for a division of labor, for public officials not to chase tigers, but it is not clear why the mere fact of not holding a position should prevent, let alone obligate, Mencius not to try to exert influence on the ruler to open the state’s granaries. While it is plausible to argue that political obligations are higher, and more straightforward, for someone in an official position, it does not follow that one who holds no official post is exempted from the obligation. This is especially so if the argument I presented in

---

636 Mencius 5B.7. See also Mencius 7A.8.
637 Mencius 7B.23.
the first part of this chapter about the Confucian conception of political involvement as an ethical duty is true. As with the impropriety of certain job offers, certain reasons might outweigh this duty, but the question is: what reasons? As I will show more fully in the next part of this chapter, there are two potential candidates here: either political involvement in this case would jeopardize Mencius’ personal integrity (perhaps because the ruler of Qi is corrupt) or he simply knows that the ruler would not listen to him in this case and that it was therefore futile to try. I will show below the different ways in which Mencius balances these two out. Suffice it to point out here that what Mencius couches as an issue of propriety ultimately relies on different sorts of consideration.

In a different anecdote, the men of Qi are again angry at Mencius, this time for pressuring Chi Wa, who was made Marshal of Guards in Qi, to offer advice to the king. Mencius convinces Chi Wa that his decision to take up this post was right precisely because the position “offered opportunities for giving advice,” and that Chi Wa had therefore a duty to avail himself of these. Chi Wa therefore advises the king, and when his advice is not heeded, resigns from his post. The men of Qi comment: “Mencius gave splendid advice to Chi Wa but we have yet to hear of him giving as good advice to himself.” When this is reported to Mencius, his response is as follows:

I have heard that one who holds an office will resign if he is unable to discharge his duties, and one whose responsibility is to give advice will resign if he is unable to give it. I hold no office, neither have I a responsibility for giving advice. Why should I not have plenty of scope when it comes to the question of staying or leaving?638

Here Mencius justifies, not so much his unwillingness to give advice, but rather his willingness to stay in Qi even when his advice is not heeded (more on Mencius and the ruler of Qi below). In other words, he uses the distinction between holding and not holding office to

---

638 Mencius 2B.5.
justify the opposite behavior from what he is criticized for in the previous anecdote. This further
confirms the suspicion that Mencius presents the distinction ad-hoc, and that the motivation
behind his decision to stay or to leave stems from considerations other than propriety. I turn to
these in what follows.

- Ethical versus political pursuits

I suggested at the end of the previous section that issues of propriety in the Mencius
quickly raise deeper issues of personal integrity and effectiveness. My aim in this section is to
elicit these two considerations in Mencius’ assessment of different personages, and to argue that,
for Mencius, integrity does not always trump effectiveness, as Eno suggests.639

First, it should be noted that, in the case of serving a virtuous ruler, these two
considerations are at play, but there is no tension between them. The two, in addition to the
consideration about propriety discussed above, are thus revealed in the story of how virtuous Yi
Yin came to serve virtuous King Tang, which is worth quoting in its entirety:

Yi Yin worked in the fields of the ruler of Xin, and delighted in the Way of Yao and
Shun. If it was contrary to what was right or to the Way, were he given the Empire he
would have ignored it, and were he given a thousand teams of horses he would not have
looked at them ... When Tang sent a messenger with presents to invite him to court, he
calmly said, "What do I want Tang’s presents for? I much prefer working in the fields,

639 In commenting on Mencius 3B.1, Van Norden explains that Mencius uses three kinds of justification to explain
his unwillingness to advise the ruler: deontological (it is intrinsically wrong to do so), virtue ethics (it corrupts one’s
caracter), and consequentialist (it will not do any good). That there is a deontological strain in Mencius is a
questionable claim, since, as suggested above, Mencius follows Confucius in arguing that there is nothing that is
intrinsically wrong to do: it all depends on the situation. But Van Norden is right to point out, as I will explain more
fully below, that Mencius appeals both to an argument from effectiveness and to an argument from virtue. See Van
Norden, trans., Mengzi, 77.
delighting in the way of Yao and Shun.” Only after Tang sent a messenger for the third time did he change his mind and say, “Is it not better for me to make this prince a Yao or a Shun than to remain in the fields, delighting in the way of Yao and Shun? Is it not better for me to make the people subjects of a Yao or a Shun? Is it not better for me to see this with my own eyes? Heaven, in producing the people, has given to those who first attain understanding the duty of awakening those who are slow to understand; and to those who are the first to awaken the duty of awakening those who are slow to awaken. I am among the first of Heaven’s people to awaken. I shall awaken this people by means of this Way. If I do not awaken them, who will do so?’ When he saw a man or woman who did not enjoy the benefit of the rule of Yao and Shun, Yi Yin felt as if he had pushed them into the gutter. This is the extent to which he considered his responsibility. So he went to Tang and persuaded him to embark upon a punitive expedition against the Xia to succor the people. I have never heard of anyone who can right others by bending himself, let alone someone who can right the Empire by bringing disgrace upon himself. The conduct of sages is now always the same. Some live in retirement, others enter the world; some withdraw, others stay on; but it all comes to keeping their integrity intact.”

This anecdote shows how Yi Yin was concerned with self-cultivation and the pursuit of the Confucian Way, how he was summoned to court in a respectful manner (he was invited three times, with presents), and how he recognized a duty to heed the invitation that was based both on his ability to keep his integrity intact (as Mencius says in the concluding sentence) and on his ability to bring about effective political results (he would be able to “awaken” the people to the rule of Yao and Shun by ensuring their welfare; I return to Heaven’s role in Yi Yin’s awakening in the conclusion of the chapter).

Mencius’ view becomes less straightforward when he approves of serving corrupt rulers, since the values of propriety, integrity, and effectiveness are not bundled up in the same way in this case as they are in the case of serving a virtuous ruler. In fact, even Yi Yin appears in a different light when Mencius quotes him as saying: “I serve any prince; I rule over any people. I take office whether order prevails or not.” This statement is presumably based on the historical record’s account of Yi Yin as having been sent by Tang to serve the tyrant Jie five times (Jie

---

640 Mencius 5A.7.
641 Mencius 5B.1.
kept rejecting him) before becoming minister to Tang when the latter finally overthrew Jie and founded the Shang Dynasty. Yi Yin’s behavior is not too dissimilar from that of Liuxia Hui, an official in the state of Lu, who:

was not ashamed of a prince with a tarnished reputation, neither did he disdain a modest post. When in office, he did not conceal his own talent, and always acted in accordance with the Way. When he was passed over he harboured no grudge, nor was he distressed even in straitened circumstances. When he was with a fellow-villager he simply could not tear himself away. “You are you and I am I. Even if you were to be stark naked by my side, how could you defile me?”

On the other hand, the opposite behavior is exemplified by Bo Yi who “was such that he would only serve the right prince and rule over the right people, took office when order prevailed and relinquished it when there was disorder.” Bo Yi “would not take his place at the court of an evil man, nor would he converse with him,” for this would be like “sitting in mud and pitch wearing a court cap and gown.” He “could not bear to remain in a place where the government took outrageous measures and unruly people were to be found,” and even when one of the regional rulers “made advances in the politest language, he would repel them” because he felt it was beneath him to serve them. As Van Norden explains, Bo Yi was the son of a ruler during the last period of the Shang Dynasty who abdicated in favor of his brother when his father died, following what he believed to be his father’s wish. Bo Yi admired King Wen but refused loyalty to King Wu, Wen’s son, because the latter attacked tyrant Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang Dynasty, of whom Bo Yi was a subject. Bo Yi died from starvation as a recluse.

642 See Mencius 6B.6.
643 Mencius 5B.1. See also Mencius 2A.9 where Mencius adds that Liuxia Hui “stayed when pressed, simply because it was beneath him to insist on leaving.”
644 Mencius 2A.2.
645 Mencius 2A.9.
646 Mencius 5B.1.
647 Mencius 2A.9.
Mencius approves of the behavior of all of these differently disposed individuals. He describes them as “sages” (sheng ren 聖人), the highest term of praise the Confucians bestow on individuals.\(^648\) Yi Yin is the sage who accepted responsibility (ren 任), Liuxia Hui is the sage who was accommodating (he 和),\(^649\) and Bo Yi is the sage who was pure (qing 淸).\(^650\) In a different passage, Mencius argues that the different behaviors of Bo Yi, Liuxia Hui, and Yi Yin all partake of ren 仁.\(^651\) On the other hand, Mencius criticizes Bo Yi for being too “constrained” (ai 隘) and Liuxia Hui for not being dignified enough (bu gong 不恭), adding that the gentleman will not follow either.\(^652\) The model Mencius ultimately recommends is that of Confucius who “would take office, or would remain in a state, would delay his departure or hasten it, all according to circumstances.”\(^653\) Mencius describes Confucius’ actions as timely (shi 時).\(^654\)

The questions that the preceding raises is why Mencius approves of these different types of behavior, and what makes Confucius’ model better than the other three.\(^655\) Concerning the first question, Mencius says that Bo Yi, Yi Yin, and Confucius have an important thing in common:

Were they to become ruler over a hundred leagues square, they would have been capable of winning the homage of the regional rulers and taking possession of the Empire; but had it been necessary to perpetrate one wrongful deed or to kill one innocent man in order to gain the Empire, none of them would have consented to it. In this they were all alike.\(^656\)

---

\(^{648}\) It is important to note that Mencius uses the term much more freely than it is used in the *Analects.*

\(^{649}\) Lau translates the adjective as “easy-going” and Van Norden as “harmonious.”

\(^{650}\) *Mencius* 5B.1. See also 7B.15.

\(^{651}\) *Mencius* 6B.6.

\(^{652}\) *Mencius* 2A.9.

\(^{653}\) *Mencius* 2A.2.

\(^{654}\) *Mencius* 5B.1.

\(^{655}\) For a discussion of why the idea of sagehood applies to all of the figures above, see Angle, *Sagehood,* 16.

\(^{656}\) *Mencius* 2A.2. In 7A.28, Mencius even says that Liuxia Hui “would not have compromised his integrity for the sake of the three highest offices in the state.”
What this quote suggests is that even when Yi Yin and, by implication, Liuxia Hui, accept to serve corrupt rulers, they do so without ever agreeing to commit wrongful acts themselves. This perhaps explains why these two served many (different types of) rulers in their lifetime (i.e. because they had to abandon a ruler whenever he asked them to do anything wrongful). Moreover, as the quote above about Liuxia Hui suggests, it must be the case that they did not believe that the mere association with corrupt rulers necessarily affects their character. On the other hand, there must also be some harm accrued from such association that is not accrued by Bo Yi (otherwise, the latter would not rank at the same level as the other two). One potential interpretation is that, though association with corrupt rulers does not corrupt, perhaps it distracts ministers from other worthy pursuits of a more purely ethical nature, like learning, caring for parents and friends, etc. Applying the same logic, there must be something that Bo Yi loses and Yi Yin and Liuxia Hui gain; in other words, it must be that some good follows from serving corrupt rulers that does not follow from refusing to serve them. The best candidate for such a good is the possibility of influencing the ruler to implement policies that promote the welfare of the common people or, to put it in terms of the argument of my dissertation, to bring about political order. This was one of the motivations that led Yi Yin to serve King Tang, but it was also presumably the—principal—motivation for him serving Tyrant Jie. If all this is true, then Confucius’ flexibility amounts to weighing the good of ethical relationships versus the good of political order based on the context of particular rulers and the opportunities they offer. Indeed, speaking of Confucius in a different passage, Mencius explains how he “took office sometimes because he thought there was a possibility for practicing the Way, sometimes because he was

---

657 See also Mencius 4B.4: “When an innocent Gentleman is put to death, a Counsellor is justified in leaving, when innocent people are killed, a Gentleman is justified in going to live abroad.”

201
treated with decency, and sometimes because the prince wished to keep good people at his court.\(^{658}\)

This kind of weighing is evident in Mencius’ account of Boli Xi. Mencius’ aim in the account is to refute the claim that Boli Xi gained the attention of Duke Mu of Qin by selling himself into slavery as a cattle keeper in the state of Qin. As argued above, Mencius believes that the taking of office cannot be done through improper ways. He argues that selling oneself into slavery is one such improper way, and that this was not the route that Boli Xi actually followed. The more relevant aspect of Mencius’ account for my discussion here is Mencius’ explanation for why Boli Xi accepted to advise the ruler of Qin, but not the ruler of Yu. Mencius reports that the ruler of Yu had accepted gifts in exchange for letting the state of Jin use Yu’s territory to attack the state of Guo. Boli Xi refused to give advice (it is not clear from the story whether he enjoyed any official post at the time) and left for Qin. Mencius says that Boli Xi’s refusal stemmed from his belief that “the ruler of Yu was beyond advice.” When he left for the state of Qin, on the other hand, he did agree to help Duke Mu. Boli Xi believed that, unlike the ruler of Yu, Duke Mu could be influenced for the best. As Mencius concludes about Boli Xi:

Can he be called unwise when he remained silent, knowing that advice would be futile? He certainly was not unwise when he left in advance, knowing the rulers of Yu to be heading for disaster. Again, can he be said to be unwise when, after being raised to office in Qin, he decided to help Duke Mu, seeing in him a man capable of great achievement? When prime minister of Qin, he was responsible for the distinction his prince attained in the Empire, and posterity has found him worthy of being remembered. Was this the achievement of a man with no ability?\(^{659}\)

Boli Xi’s example shows how it is permissible to advise less-than-virtuous rulers in some cases but not in others. Boli Xi did not make Duke Mu into a virtuous ruler, but he turned him

\(^{658}\) *Mencius* 5B.4.  
\(^{659}\) *Mencius* 5A.9.
into a hegemon, a ruler able to maintain a basic level of political order and provide for his people. This justifies his willingness to help him. When it came to the ruler of Yu, however, he did not see any possibility of influencing him, and so preferred to divert his attention towards a more worthy pursuit (in this case, advising a different, more promising, ruler). Mencius actually uses Boli Xi’s example to show the political utility of wise men for the state. Chunyn Kun asks:

In the time of Duke Mu of Lu, Gongyizi was in charge of affairs of state, and Ziliu and Zisi were in office, yet Lu dwindled in size even more rapidly than before. Are good and wise men of so little benefit to a state?

Mencius answers: ‘Yu was annexed for failing to employ Boli Xi, while Duke Mu of Qin, by employing him, became hegemon. A state which fails to employ good and wise men will end by suffering annexation. How can it hope to suffer no more than a reduction in size?’

What is revealing in this exchange is that it glosses the benefit of wise men not as promoting virtue, but as ameliorating the state’s defenses, presumably by improving its internal workings. Like Guan Zhong, who helped Duke Huan of Qi become a hegemon (see Chapter 2), Boli Xi allowed Duke Mu of Qin to become a hegemon. Recall that hegemons’ acceptability to the Confucian stems from their ability to produce political order through security and welfare-oriented policies. In other words, this passage reveals that political order is the benefit which gentlemen can bring to the state, even when they are employed by men less wise than them, and which therefore justifies these men’s willingness to be so employed.

Similar considerations can be elicited in Mencius’ willingness to advise all sorts of rulers. A prominent one among these is the ruler of Qi, who was no exemplar of virtue. Yin

---

660 Mencius 6B.6.
661 There are numerous anecdotes in the Mencius that involve Mencius giving advice to a king: 1A.1, 1A.2, 1A.3, 1A.4, 1A.5, 1A.6, 1A.7, 1B.1, 1B.2, 1B.3, 1B.4, 1B.5, 1B.6, 1B.7, 1B.8, 1B.9, 1B.10, 1B.11, 1B.12, 1B.13, 1B.14,
Shi comments that if Mencius “did not realize that the King could not become a Tang or a King Wu, he was blind, but if he came realizing it, he was simply after advancement.” He also criticizes Mencius for taking too long to leave when his advice was not needed, which is contrary to his stated principle of taking leave when one’s counsel is not put into practice. Instead of giving the not-so-convincing answer, relayed above, that one who holds no official post is free as to the question of staying or leaving, Mencius responds here that he was hoping that the king would change his mind, specifically that he would offer Mencius a proper position. Two sentences in his response are worth noting. First, he says that if the King had employed him, “it would not simply be a matter of bringing peace to the people of Qi, but of bringing peace to the people of the whole Empire as well.” Then he also says, “I am not like those petty men who, when their advice is rejected by the prince, take offence and show resentment all over their faces, and, when they leave, travel all day before they would put up for the night.” In other words, the emphasis here is on attempting to improve the political situation in the Chinese world by pressuring its less-than-worthy rulers, but also on persevering in such an attempt, without being derailed by every rejection. This goal, however, is in tension with Mencius’ attempt above to justify his unwillingness to help solve the famine in Qi. It is clear from the discussion so far that Mencius is not worried about associating with the ruler of Qi per se. The alternative interpretation is that he simply had no power to influence the ruler on the issue of the famine. In other words, while he felt able, or at least hoped to be able, to be employed by the ruler to promote peace and unity, he could not, as merely an office-seeker, influence the rulers on matters of policy-making, and did not want to be held accountable for these.

1B.15, 2B.2 (Mencius was about to go to the court of King Xuan of Qi), 2B.8 (Mencius gives advice to a high minister in Qi), 3A.1, 3A.2, 3A.3, 3B.6 (he gives advice to a minister of Song).  
662 Mencius 2B.12.
There remains, however, the difficulty of understanding how long one should really persevere, especially if one is able to produce no good results as one works towards an official post. While Mencius in the example above keeps up the hope of influencing the ruler, he also reports how Confucius wanted to leave the state of Lu where he was officially employed (as a police commissioner, or minister of justice) because his advice was not heeded. Mencius explains that Confucius:

took part in sacrifice, but, afterwards, was not given a share of the meat of the sacrificial animal. He left the state without waiting to take off his ceremonial cap. Those who did not understand him thought he acted in this way because of the meat, but those who understood him realized that he left because Lu failed to observe the proper rites. For his part Confucius preferred to be slightly at fault in thus leaving rather than to leave with no reason at all. The doings of a gentleman are naturally above the understanding of the ordinary man.\(^{663}\)

The passage is a bit confusing but it seems to suggest that Confucius left Lu because his advice was not heeded, but used the minor ritual impropriety as an excuse. In other words, when Mencius says that “Lu failed to observe the proper rites,” I take him to mean that the ruler of Lu did not observe the proper rites of heeding to the advice of gentlemen (rather than the rites relating to sacrificial meat). This interpretation fits with the rest of the passage where Mencius emphasizes the virtuousness of different approaches to political involvement and the importance of gentlemen to the state. This still, however, does not solve the question of why Confucius did not perseverance longer. He must have thought the ruler of Lu hopeless, as Boli Xi did in relation to the ruler of Yu.

To sum up, Mencius encourages political involvement even when one has to associate with a corrupt ruler, if there is a reasonable hope that one can influence the ruler to promote

---

\(^{663}\) *Mencius* 6B.6.
welfare-inducing, and thus order-inducing, policies. One perseveres in such involvement, or the quest thereof, so long as there is reason for such hope.

2. The Analects

Startled, the bird rose up and circled round before alighting. He said, ‘The female pheasant on the mountain bridge, how timely (shi 時) her action is, how timely her action is!’ Zilu cupped one hand in the other in a gesture of respect towards the bird which, flapping its wings three times, flew away.664

This passage comes at the end of Book X of the Analects, which is devoted to showcasing Confucius’ ritual propriety, and thus suggests, as Edward Slingerland argues, that it is a metaphor for Confucius’ behavior (admired by his disciple Zilu). This idea of “timeliness” (shi 時), also used by Mencius to describe Confucius, as reported above, implies that there are times when it is appropriate, and others when it is inappropriate, to go forward in politics.

Commentators have relied on the idea of timeliness to describe the Confucians’ position towards political involvement. To say that one acts according to context, or according to “the times,” however, does not explain what factors one considers in a given context or period. To elicit these, I proceed by analyzing different passages from the Analects. I show that the two central considerations of integrity and effectiveness are at work in the former as they are in the Mencius.

Consider, first, the following passage from the Analects:

The Master said, ‘Be sincerely trustworthy and love learning, and hold fast to the good Way until death. Do not enter a state that is endangered (wei 危), and do not reside in a state that is disordered (luan 亂). If the Way is being realized in the world then show yourself; if it is not, then go into reclusion. In a state that has the Way, to be poor and of

664 Analects 10.27.
low status is a cause for shame; in a state that is without the Way, to be wealthy and honored is equally a cause for shame.’

This passage makes recommendations both about when one should enter a given state, and about when one should take up an official position (which would allow one to show oneself, to be honored, and to become wealthy). The advice about entering or residing in a state is arguably targeted towards outsiders, and the advice about holding a position towards insiders. On the second front, the duty to hold an official position is made relative to the realization of the “Way.” The most straightforward way to read the Way (dao 道) is as the Confucian Way. Doing so will lead to the conclusion that Confucius makes the duty of political involvement dependent on the pre-existing realization of Confucian precepts. In other words, political involvement would depend, as revealed in the first part of this chapter, on the availability of a reciprocal relationship between ruler and minister and, more generally, of a harmonious society. Moreover, the passage not only annuls the duty of political involvement when the Way does not hold, but also seems to argue for the opposite duty of withdrawal. No justification is explicitly offered for withdrawal, but Eno argues that the concern underlying withdrawal is ethical purity.

This reading, however, is not compatible with another version of the timeliness principle which recommends not withdrawal, but caution:

The Master said, ‘When the Way prevails in the state, speak and act with perilous high-mindedness; when the Way does not prevail, act with perilous high-mindedness but let your speech be conciliatory.’

Slingerland cites Wang Fuzhi’s comment on this passage, in which he explains that “one is conciliatory in speech not out of fear of disaster but because actively courting disaster does no

---

665 *Analects* 8.13 quoted from Slingerland.
666 *Analects* 14.3.
good, and is therefore something from which the gentleman refrains.” In other words, the justification for being cautious does not arise out of an instinct of self-defense, but precisely out of the concern with political effectiveness since, while it is worthwhile to have one’s advice heard and heeded, there are ways of going about this that are counterproductive.

On the other hand, one passage in the *Analects* provides two examples that seem to show Confucius’ preference for political withdrawal in disorderly times:

The Master said, ‘How straight 直 Shi Yu is! When the Way prevails in the state he is as straight as an arrow, yet when the Way falls into disuse in the state he is still as straight as an arrow.

‘How gentlemanly 君子 Qu Boyu is! When the Way prevails in the state he takes office, but when the Way falls into disuse in the state he allows himself to be furled and put away safely.’

While it is clear that “gentlemanly” connotes praise, it is not as clear how positive or negative the description of Yu as “straight” is, but as the case might be, “gentlemanly” seems more praising than “straight.” As to what “straight” means in the first place, it is plausible to argue that it refers to Shi Yu’s refusal to bend his principles. DC Lau says that Shi Yu was a prime minister in the state of Wei, which suggests that his stubbornness was likely directed at refusing to leave office as opposed to refusing to take up office. Confucius thus finds this model less gentlemanly and praiseworthy than the model of withdrawing from office during turbulent times, also suggested in his first version of the timeliness principle.

Confucius’ preference for the first version of the timeliness principle can also be said to be borne out by the following two examples: Nan Rong, to whom he gave his daughter in marriage, and of whom Confucius says that “when the Way prevailed in the state he was not cast

---

668 *Analects* 15.7.
669 Slingerland, and Brooks and Brooks, are in agreement about this.
aside and when the Way fell into disuse he stayed clear of the humiliation of punishment"\textsuperscript{670} and Ning Wuzi who feigned stupidity when the Way did not prevail.\textsuperscript{671} Both these statements, however, are subject to differing interpretations. In Nan Rong’s case, it is not clear whether staying away from humiliation required him to stay out of public office. As for Ning Wuzi, the text actually says that he acted stupidly when the Way did not prevail, and Slingerland’s translation that he “feigned” stupidity and his suggestion that this was in order to avoid being offered a position are based on a specific (and controversial) interpretive move: to make consistent the example with Confucius’ first version of the timeliness principle.

Moreover, what is confusing about the timeliness principle is that, like Mencius (or, as it might be more accurate to say, Mencius seems to build on the \textit{Analects}’ view in this regard), Confucius not only approves of different models of behavior, but also prefers flexibility. To start out with the examples he shares with Mencius, he describes Bo Yi as someone who “does not lower his purpose (\textit{zhi \ 志})” or “allow himself to be disgraced (\textit{ru \ 辱}).” He says of Liuxia Hui that he did lower his purpose and allow himself to be disgraced, but that nonetheless his “words were consistent with his station” and “his deeds with his thoughts.”\textsuperscript{672} In a different anecdote in the \textit{Analects}, Liuxia Hui’s insistence on serving in office is attributed to his concern for the country of his father and mother. As he is cited as saying: “If, in the service of another, one is not prepared to bend the Way, where can one go without being dismissed three times? If, in the service of another, one is prepared to bend the Way, what need is there to leave the country of one’s father and mother?”\textsuperscript{673} To return to Confucius’ acceptance of different types of behavior, he mentions a third category of those who “give free rein to their words while living as recluses”

\textsuperscript{670} \textit{Analects} 5.2.
\textsuperscript{671} \textit{Analects} 5.21, quoted from Slingerland.
\textsuperscript{672} \textit{Analects} 18.8.
\textsuperscript{673} \textit{Analects} 18.2.
but are “unsullied in character and showed sound judgment in accepting their dismissal.” He concludes, as Mencius reports him to do, with an affirmation of his own favored attitude: “I have no preconceptions about the permissible and the impermissible.” This attitude is in tension with the “preconception” that serving in office during disordered times is necessarily wrong. For this is precisely Bo Yi’s attitude, and Confucius distances himself from the former as much as he does from the other personages he mentions in the passage.

Indeed, in a response to two models, one of political involvement, and one of political withdrawal, Confucius refuses to describe either as ren. He describes Prime Minister Ziwen who “gave no appearance of pleasure when he was made prime minister three times” nor of “displeasure when he was removed from office three times” as dutiful 忠, but not ren. On the other hand, he says of Chen Wenzi, who left the state of Chi when Cuizi assassinated its ruler, and went from state to state, finding none of their rulers to be better than Cuizi, as “pure” 清 but not ren. This is not the only instance in the Analects when Confucius says what ren is not, without saying what it is, but the different instances all partake of the same idea that ren is elusive, context-specific, an outward instantiation of an inner virtue that cannot be neatly defined.

As with Mencius, though Confucius in principle favors an attitude of flexibility, the accounts of his own behavior show that he was more determined to serve in office, even during corrupt times, than not. The clearest instance of Confucius’ willingness to take up official post even when the Way is not realized is his willingness to serve Gonghan Furao who wanted to use the stronghold of Bi to stage a revolt against the Ji family, the de facto rulers of Lu. As the story goes:

---

674 Analects 18.8.
675 Analects 5.19.
Zilu was displeased and said, ‘We may have nowhere to go, but why must we go to Gongshan?’

The Master said, ‘The man who summons me must have a purpose. If his purpose is to employ me, can I not, perhaps, create another Zhou in the east?’

This passage makes clear that, as with Mencius’ attempts to obtain a position in Qi, Confucius thought it worthwhile to attempt to serve, even under a non-legitimate ruler, if there was hope of bringing back the unity, peacefulness, and orderliness of the preceding Zhou Dynasty. As Confucius puts it in a different passage: ‘If anyone were to employ me, in a year’s time I would have brought things to satisfactory state, and after three years I should have results to show for it.’

Another anecdote has Confucius expressing his willingness to help Bo Xi, who was conspiring against the ruler of his own state of Jin, again to the dismay of Zilu:

Zilu said, ‘Some time ago I heard it from you, Master, that the gentleman does not enter the domain of one who in his own person does what is not good. Now Bi Xi is using Zhongmou as a stronghold to stage a revolt. How can you justify going there?’

The Master said, ‘It is true, I did say that. But has it not been said, “Hard indeed is that which can withstand grinding”? Has it not been said, “White indeed is that which can withstand black dye”? Moreover, how can I allow myself to be treated like a gourd which, instead of being eaten, hangs from the end of a string?’

As Slingerland comments, the reference to the hard and white is a metaphor for Confucius’ “incorruptibility”: “Zilu’s misgiving are unjustified, because Confucius can be employed by a less-than-ideal ruler without being led astray.” But what Confucius’ response also underscores, as illustrated in the comparison to the un-eaten gourd, is the concern with putting one’s talent to use, in this case for political effect, in the attempt to create “another Zhou.”

---

676 Analects 17.5.
677 Analects 13.10.
678 Analects 17.7.
This concern is similarly illustrated in Confucius’ answer to Zigong, who asks whether one should put a piece of beautiful jade away or one should sell it: “The Master said, ‘Of course I would sell it. Of course I would sell it. All I am waiting for is the right offer.’”

A third anecdote, where Confucius is summoned by Yang Huo, a steward of the Ji family, is more ambiguous. In the Mencius, Confucius is said to avoid the summoning and Mencius glosses this as an issue of propriety: as Mencius reports, Yang Huo sent a gift of a steamed piglet to Confucius while the latter was not at home, thus forcing him, as the rituals prescribe, to return the visit in order to express his gratitude in person. Confucius, in turn, waits for Yang Huo to be away from home to return the visit. In the Analects, however, the story offers an additional twist, as Confucius ends up meeting Yang Huo on the way to his house and the latter tells him:

Can the man be said to be ren who, while hoarding his treasure, allows the state to go astray? I should say not. Can the man be said to be wise who, while eager to take part in public life, constantly misses the opportunity? I should say not. The days and months slip by. Time is not on our side.’
Confucius said, ‘All right. I shall take office.’

Slingerland, following Zhu Xi, reads Confucius’ answer as dismissive, an attempt to put off Yang Huo. The thought behind this reading is that Yang Huo was revolting against the Ji family out of a concern with “self-aggrandizement,” whereas Gongshan’s and Bo Xi’s motives, in the preceding anecdotes, were to restore the usurped power of the legitimate rulers of the states of Lu and Jin, respectively. As Slingerland puts it, the latter two “though less than

---

680 Analects 9.13. Slingerland comments on this that “Confucius … refuses to actively peddle his wares on the market, waiting instead for his virtue to be recognized by a ritually correct and morally cultivated ruler.” See Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, 203. But nothing, neither in this statement, nor in the anecdotes about Confucius relayed above, suggests that Confucius was “waiting” for the right offer, rather than actively pursuing it, and that this offer had to be from a “ritually correct and morally cultivated person.”
681 Mencius 3B.7.
682 Analects 17.1.
683 Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, 199.
684 In 6.9, Min Ziqian declines the Ji family’s offer to employ him as a steward for Bi. Slingerland comments that “Confucius’ disciples, and even Confucius himself, were not adverse to serving the Ji Family in public offices.
perfectly dutiful or moral, were at least moving in the right direction.\footnote{Slingerland, trans., \textit{Confucius: Analects}, 203.} The same cannot be said about Yang Huo. Although Slingerland’s reading of Confucius’ response to the latter is made plausible by the circumstances of the encounter, especially if one believes Mencius that Confucius was trying to avoid Yang Huo, it is not the most straightforward way to read the passage, and even Eno implicitly disagrees with it, seeing in this anecdote the closest that Confucius gets to accepting a political position.\footnote{Eno, \textit{The Confucian Creation of Heaven}, 51.} Slingerland’s reading rests on the assumption that Confucius cannot possibly be willing to help any ruler, bad or good, legitimate or illegitimate, but some anecdotes about Confucius give the impression that he was as a matter of fact willing to do so. In one, for example, he went to see Nanzi, an ill-reputed consort of the ruler of Wei. Zilu was, yet again, displeased:

The Master swore, ‘If I have done anything improper, may Heaven’s curse be on me, may Heaven’s curse be on me!’\footnote{Analects 6.28.}

Slingerland argues that some requirement of ritual propriety must have led Confucius to meet with Nanzi. This argument, like the interpretation of Confucius’ answer to Yang Huo, is an attempt to salvage Confucius from the accusation of pandering to undeserving rulers.\footnote{Slingerland, trans., \textit{Confucius: Analects}, 62.} Eno, on the other hand, focuses on Confucius’ answer, arguing that it shows that Heaven was in agreement with Confucius and Zilu, both of whom “disapprove of any notion that political means can be any less exalted than political ends.”\footnote{Eno, \textit{The Confucian Creation of Heaven}, 87.} Whatever the reason for Confucius’ seeking to see Nanzi, however, it is quite a stretch to find him in agreement with Zilu.

\footnote{Slingerland, trans., \textit{Confucius: Analects}, 55.}

\footnote{Eno, \textit{The Confucian Creation of Heaven}, 87.}
Slingerland is right to point out that this is another anecdote where Zilu actually comes out as too “fastidious.”

Similarly, in an anecdote in the *Mencius*, Mencius refutes the theory that Confucius stayed with Yung Ju when he visited the state of Wei and with Ji Huan when he visited Qi, both being favorites of their respective rulers. According to Mencius, “Confucius went forward in accordance with the rites and withdrew in accordance with what was right.” This anecdote is further evidence that Confucius might have actually been less scrupulous in his political involvement than he otherwise suggests, thus prompting Mencius to come to his defense.

A few more anecdotes are worth mentioning. In one, Jieyu, a madman from the state of Chu, went past Confucius, saying:

Phoenix, oh phoenix!
How thy virtue has declined!
What is past is beyond help,
What is to come is not yet lost.
Give up, give up!
Perilous is the lot of those in office today.

We do not know Confucius’ reaction to this because, as the anecdote continues, the madman hurried off and Confucius did not get the chance to speak to him. Slingerland cites the commentator Wang Fuzhi who argues that Confucius wanted to speak to the Madman to “broaden his mind,” presumably to persuade him that being a recluse was no good and that Confucius’ commitment and willingness to put himself forward is better. In other words, Wang Fuzhi also understands Confucius to have been an advocate of political involvement, and to be criticized on precisely these grounds in this passage.

---

690 *Mencius* 5A.8.
691 *Analects* 18.5.
Finally, two more encounters between Confucius and recluses are relevant. In one, the recluse Weisheng Mou asks Confucius why he is restless and whether he is trying to practice flattery, a question that can plausibly be taken to be aimed at criticizing Confucius’ attempts at seeking office. Confucius answers that he does not practice flattery, but that he detests inflexibility (ji gu 疾固), emphasizing the importance of keeping at what he does, i.e. trying to obtain office. 693 In another, Confucius was playing the stone chimes in the state of Wei. A man with a basket on his back, presumably a recluse, passes by his window and comments that the person playing the music must have something on his mind, then adds: “How despicable is his petty stubbornness! If no one understands you, just tend to yourself.” The man follows with the following statement:

‘If the river ford is deep, use the stepping-stones;  
If it is shallow, simply raise your hem.’ 694

Slingerland points out that the ford symbolizes the move out of a chaotic world. The thought would thus be that such a move would require protection from the river (using the stepping stones) if the river is deep enough, i.e. if the world is chaotic enough that it is corrupting. If it is not so chaotic, then one could afford to just wet one’s feet a little, to brave the political world, while easily protecting oneself (simply by raising the hem of one’s clothes).

Confucius’ answer to the recluse is not straightforward. Slingerland, who takes the answer to be sarcastic, translates it as: “Such resoluteness (guo zai 果哉)! Who could take issue with that (mo zhi nan yi 末之難矣!” Lau agrees with this reading. Eno, on the other hand,

693 Analects 14.32.  
694 Analects 14.39.
suggests that the reply should be translated as “Were this right, it would all be so easy.” In line with his general thesis about Confucian political idealism, Eno’s translation suggests much more approval of the recluse’s position than Slingerland’s. Both these translations, however, seem to take the recluse to be advocating absolute political withdrawal. If we assume instead that Confucius is responding to the recluse’s advice to respond appropriately to the times, then it might make more sense to take the answer to be both positive, but sounding a note of reproach or angst, in the vein suggested by Eno’s translation. In other words, Confucius agrees that it is right to respond appropriately to the times, but either finds that the recluse himself does not follow this principle, or believes that the principle is easier stated than followed, which would explain his own political inconsistencies.

To recapitulate, I have tried to show so far that Confucius, like Mencius, approves of different types of political behavior, but that he prefers an attitude of flexibility that is responsive to circumstances. I have also shown that he rejects the recluses’ insistence on political withdrawal, and shows in his own personal behavior more of a readiness for political engagement than not. In short, based on the preceding, it is hard to describe Confucius as an ethical purist or idealist, or as being against political involvement. In fact, it is not even clear that the first version of the timeliness principle, oft-cited by interpreters, captures the essence of Confucius’ position on political involvement. Recall that the timeliness principle advocated advancing in politics when the Way prevailed, and not advancing when the Way did not. In all of the situations faced by Confucius and relayed above, the Way, if taken to mean the Confucian Way, a situation where all the precepts of Confucian teaching are put into practice, is not realized. A better way to understand this principle is by lowering the standards for political involvement.

---

695 Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 249, fn 51.
696 Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 93.
such as to allow for Confucian gentlemen’s involvement precisely in order to bring the Way into being. If the standards are too low, then it is not worth trying, not only because one risks forgoing more worthy ethical pursuits, but also because trying is futile. Commenting on the first version of the timeliness principle, Bao Xian (c. 6 BCE-65) interprets the need to leave a state to arise only “once a state has degenerated into immoral disorder” which he defines as “a situation where ministers are assassinating lords and sons killing fathers.”\footnote{Slingerland, trans., \textit{Confucius: Analects}, 82.} It is plausible to read the idea of the absence of the Way in a given state along these lines, suggesting that the condition for involvement in politics is not the full-blown realization of Confucian precepts, but the presence of a basic modicum of propriety in the key human relationships.

This said, Eno’s case for political idealism largely rests on a different set of passages from the ones discussed above, and which deal with Confucius’ decision to leave various states. Thus, in one passage, Confucius decides to leave the state of Wei because its ruler asked him about military formations and this was not a topic he wanted to advise on.\footnote{\textit{Analects} 15.1.} In another, he leaves Lu, where he held an official position, because its ruler was distracted by a gift of female entertainers and did not hold court for a few days.\footnote{\textit{Analects} 18.4.} Finally, he leaves Qi because the ruler says that he is not able to treat him at the level of the head of the Ji family (but somewhere between the rank of the Ji family and that of the Meng family), later conceding that he cannot employ him at all.\footnote{\textit{Analects} 18.3.} What these passages reveal, however, is not so much Confucius’ political idealism but rather, as the commentator Jiang Xi, quoted by Slingerland, says, “that the sage is not inflexible,” since he is willing to be employed, but leaves when he deems it proper to do so.

\footnote{Slingerland, trans., \textit{Confucius: Analects}, 82.} \footnote{\textit{Analects} 15.1.} \footnote{\textit{Analects} 18.4.} \footnote{\textit{Analects} 18.3.}
It is only Xunzi who comes close to the idea of political idealism and withdrawal suggested by Eno, leading one to wonder whether the passage of time, with its increasing war-mongering and the fast-disappearing specter of a Zhou come back, bred Xunzi’s disillusionment. Xunzi does not actually say much about the topic of political involvement, except to emphasize the need to maintain one’s virtue under any circumstances. He thus says that “rather than being successful in serving a disruptive (luan 亂) ruler, it is better to be obedient in the serving an impoverished (qiong 窮) one,” though this does not go as far as saying that it is never permissible to serve the former.\(^{701}\) Xunzi’s account of superior valor also emphasizes the importance of maintaining one’s moral integrity in disordered times:

> When proper standards prevail in the world, to dare to bring your own conduct into accord with them; when the Way of the former kings prevails, to dare to follow its dictates; to refuse to bow before the ruler of a disordered age, to refuse to follow the customs of the people of a disordered age; to accept poverty and hardship if they are in the cause of ren; to reject wealth and eminence if they are not consonant with ren; if the world recognizes you, to share in the world’s joys; if the world does not recognize you, to stand alone and without fear: this is superior valor.\(^{702}\)

Xunzi compares the tenacity of the gentleman during adverse times to the cypress and cedar trees in winter,\(^{703}\) adding that “although a gentleman is in dire straits, he does not lose his way. Although he is tired, he does not behave indecorously. Although he faces calamity he does not forget in the smallest measure his doctrines.”\(^{704}\) As examples, Xunzi mentions Emperor Shun

---

\(^{701}\) Xunzi 2.5.  
\(^{702}\) Xunzi 23.18, quoted from Watson, 173. See also Xunzi 7.5, 8.2, 8.17, 22.8, 22.9.  
\(^{703}\) See also Analects 9.28: The Master said, ‘Only when the cold season comes is the point brought home that the pine and the cypress are the last to lose their leaves.’  
\(^{704}\) Xunzi 27.80. Mencius actually makes a similar argument in 7A.9, though he still emphasizes the need to perfect the whole empire when one is able to (while Xunzi’s statement suggests that he lost hope on this front): “a Gentleman never abandons rightness in adversity, nor does he depart from the Way in success. By not abandoning rightness in adversity, he finds delight in himself, by not departing from the Way in success, he does not disappoint
(and, strangely for this purpose, Yi) who persisted in his filial duties although his parents did not love him, Bigan and Zixu who were loyal though their rulers did not employ them, and Confucius and his disciple Yan Hui who were wise though their generation left them in poverty.\textsuperscript{705} It should be mentioned, with regards to these examples, that they overstate their case. Shun was very filial, but he did get married without telling his parents. Mencius justifies Shun’s decision on filial grounds, by emphasizing the importance of grandchildren but, as the case might be, the point is that in the dire situation of lacking his parents’ love, Shun had to resort to the otherwise unfilial means of not seeking their approval. Similarly, as I showed in the preceding section, Confucius was far from merely putting up with a lack of an official position: he actually went around from ruler to ruler trying to obtain one. Yet Xunzi seems to envision a scenario where a gentleman’s only political involvement in a disorderly situation is to wait “should the Son of Heaven or the three Counsellors ask about government,” in which case he is to “tell them what is right and wrong.”\textsuperscript{706} Otherwise, when “one is detained and persecuted in a violent country and lacking any means of escape,” then one should primarily “promote its goodness and extol its refinement and speak of its virtues but never refer to its shortcomings.”\textsuperscript{707} This distant but still engaged attitude is perhaps what Xunzi means when he speaks of “restoring order (zhi 治) by “leaving what is chaotic behind and reaching over to what is well ordered.”\textsuperscript{708} By doing so, as Confucius did, according to Xunzi, “he will establish alone a noble reputation. Heaven cannot kill it, earth cannot bury it, the age of a Jie or Robber Zhi cannot tarnish him.”\textsuperscript{709}

\textsuperscript{705} Xunzi 27.116.
\textsuperscript{706} Xunzi 27.79.
\textsuperscript{707} Xunzi 27.116. See also 13.4.
\textsuperscript{708} Xunzi 3.7.
\textsuperscript{709} Xunzi 8.17.
The last segment of the *Xunzi*, on the other hand, which was probably added later to the corpus of the text by disciples, does suggest a certain indignation at Xunzi’s not having enjoyed an official position. Interestingly, the purpose of the passage is to answer the charge that Xunzi was not equal to Confucius in stature. The defense emphasizes the fact that Xunzi lived in chaotic times when rituals and rightness were not observed, when there were no worthy men, when benevolent men were constrained, and the transforming effects of teaching were not brought to completion. It was a time when “the wise had no opportunity to reflect, the able had no opportunity to govern, and the worthy had no opportunity to serve.” This apparently forced Xunzi to cover up his true worth, hence the reason why his fame is not plainly evident and his followers are not many:

The world did not recognize him, and instead enjoyed the likes of Jie and Zhou Xin, killing the good and the worthy. Hence Bigan had his heart cut out, Confucius was seized in Kuang, Jizi has to feign madness, Tian Chang created chaos and Helü seized power for himself.

It was impossible for him to attain government, so how could his achievements be completed? But his ideals were perfected and his virtue opulent, how could he be said not to be a worthy?\(^7\)

The thought here is that Xunzi would have been politically accomplished if the circumstances had allowed for it, suggesting perhaps that the reason that Xunzi did not try to be politically engaged was not simply because he was focused on self-cultivation, but also because he thought that trying to get involved politically was futile. As he puts it elsewhere, the Confucian gentleman requires enabling conditions and resources to make his worth manifest:

Zaofu was the best charioteer in the world but if he had lacked a chariot and horses he would have no way to make his ability manifest. Yi was the best archer in the world, but if he had no bow and arrows, he would have no way to make his skills known. A great *ru*

---

\(^7\) *Xunzi* 32.7.
is best at adjusting and unifying the world, but if he lacks so much as a hundred li square of territory, he has no way to make his achievements manifest.\textsuperscript{711}

Xunzi’s pessimism about the value of political involvement perhaps explains, or at least meshes well, with his otherwise more complex ritual-centered blueprint for the regulation of society. Indeed, the previous two chapters focused on Xunzi’s conception of rituals as institutional mechanisms for the regulation of society, and on the role of ministers in running the day-to-day administration of government. I also argued that Mencius placed a little more hope than Xunzi in education and in the persuasive power of the exemplary ruler, suggesting that Mencius had more hope in the power of persons, while Xunzi, perhaps reflecting the crisis of his day, envisioned a more thorough refashioning of government, centered on institutions, rather than persons.

\textbf{IV- Heaven}

In the preceding parts of this chapter, I have focused on the ethical and political dimensions of the duty of political involvement. I now turn to the relationship between, on the one hand, Heaven (\textit{tian} 天) and its “decree” (\textit{ming} 命)—otherwise translated as “fate” or “destiny”—and, on the other hand, political participation. “Heaven” is the translation adopted by the Jesuits when they first came to China in the sixteenth century and thus carries with it a largely inapplicable Judeo-Christian monotheistic theological baggage.\textsuperscript{712} This said, since no

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{711} Xunzi 8.16. \\
\textsuperscript{712} Tan, \textit{Confucian Democracy}, 137.
\end{flushright}
other translation has yet gained ground and because I only focus on a subset of the references to the concept, I will keep to this traditional translation.

As I suggested in my discussion of Heaven’s role in the succession to the throne in Chapter 2, I do not take Heaven to be an anthropomorphic metaphysical entity with the omnipotent power to direct the course of human events. Instead, as Eno argues in relation to Confucius’ shifting use of the concept of Heaven, “the passages appear to reflect no more than Confucius’ skillful ability to employ traditional religious rhetoric in order to say something about matters other than Tian.”713 Put differently, the resort to Heaven is meant to provide a cover of legitimacy for different kinds of ideas that the early Confucians wanted to defend: in Chapter 2, I showed how Heaven was used to provide legitimacy for both meritorious and hereditary successions to the throne. In what follows, I show how the references to Heaven and its decree in discussions on political involvement provide legitimacy for the latter, thus encouraging it even in a politically unstable environment.

References to Heaven legitimate political involvement in two ways: First, they set external limits to what the latter can achieve, by making some (Heaven-ordained) events beyond human control, and therefore justifying the failures that inevitably beset it. Secondly, and from a different perspective, they provide meaning for political involvement, especially when it appears failed or aimless in the short-term, by making it part of a longer-term march of history (steered by Heaven).

First, then, Heaven provides the needed distinction between what is within, and what is beyond, humans’ control. To illustrate, Mencius argues that both the five senses and moral dispositions (ren, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom) are decreed (ming 命) by Heaven; but

---

713 Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 96.
he also argues that it is proper to associate only the first with what is decreed because the senses, as opposed to moral dispositions, are beyond our ability to develop.\textsuperscript{714} Similarly, whether one is “going to die young or to live to a ripe old age” is part of the decree.\textsuperscript{715} As for the moral dispositions, the proper way to look at the relationship between them and Heaven is not to focus on the fact that they are given to us by Heaven (although they are), but on the idea that to develop them would be to fulfill Heaven’s wishes. Furthermore, what is decreed to us in life should not influence our “steadfastness of purpose” in nurturing our morality.\textsuperscript{716}

Just like the decree separates aspects of human life that are within our control from those beyond it, similarly, on the political level, it separates events that the gentleman worries about from those that he should not worry about. For example, when Zifu Jingbo warns of killing Gongbo Lai for speaking ill of Zilu, Confucius discourages him from doing so by saying: “It is the decree (ming) if the Way prevails; it is equally the decree if the Way falls into disuse. What can Gongbo Liao do in defiance of the decree?”\textsuperscript{717} Eno plausibly reads in Confucius’ response a rejection of political intrigue,\textsuperscript{718} but one could also see in it the argument that the gentleman cannot control the actions of others, and should not take this as an obstacle to his actions.

In line with this idea, Mencius attributes the Duke of Lu’s reluctance to meet with him not to the Duke’s advisor Zang Cang, but rather to the decree:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{714} Mencius 7B.24. For Mencius’ view of human nature, and how it differs from Xunzi’s, see Chapter 3.
\item \textsuperscript{715} Mencius 7B.24. See also Analects 6.10, 7.35, 12.5.
\item \textsuperscript{716} Mencius 7A.1. One confusing element here is that Mencius calls fulfilling Heaven’s wishes “the decree” too. See, for example, 7B.24. Mencius also makes a distinction between two sorts of pursuits: the pursuit of wealth, rank, even a ruling position, for their own sake, is something that is beyond humans’ control to some extent, but also beyond what Heaven wishes for humans to pursue, while the pursuit of the virtues is both within humans’ control and part of Heaven’s plan or “decree.” See Mencius 6A.16, 7A.3, 7A.21, 7B.33, and Xunzi 25.42. In Analects 12.5, on the other hand, wealth and honor are associated with Heaven, though only in the sense that they are beyond humans’ reach.
\item \textsuperscript{717} Analects 14.36.
\item \textsuperscript{718} Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 92.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
When a man goes forward, there is something which urges him on; when he halts, there is something which holds him back. It is not in his power either to go forward or to halt. It is due to Heaven that I failed to meet the Duke of Lu. How can this fellow Zang be responsible for my failure?\textsuperscript{719}

Since Mencius does not typically attribute political events to fate, his doing so here suggests that this is to resist the idea that corrupt people can jeopardize his political plans.

Similarly, when faced with a threat from a military minister from Song, Confucius says, “Heaven is the author of the virtue that is in me. What can Huan Tui do to me?”\textsuperscript{720} Here again, Confucius’ reference to Heaven is not meant to imply a sense of invincibility, but to dismiss the thought that Huan Tui could provide him with a source of concern. In a different anecdote, Confucius adds the idea of the lasting effect the Confucians can have on politics regardless of others’ actions, revealed by his statement when under siege in Kuang:

With King Wen dead, is not culture (\textit{wen 文}) invested here in me? If Heaven intends culture to be destroyed, those who come after me will not be able to have any part of it. If Heaven does not intent this culture to be destroyed, then what can the men of Kuang do to me?\textsuperscript{721}

These references to Heaven are not actually meant to justify an attitude of fatalism, where one is not responsible for one’s actions, which is what the Mohists accused the Confucians of.\textsuperscript{722}

\textsuperscript{719} \textit{Mencius} 1B.16.
\textsuperscript{720} \textit{Analects} 7.23.
\textsuperscript{721} \textit{Analects} 9.5. Mencius also emphasizes the importance of leaving an imprint when he advises Duke Wen of Teng, who feared the growing power of the state of Qi, that “All a gentleman can do in starting an enterprise is to leave behind a tradition which can be carried on.” According to Mencius, however derailed one might be in one’s attempts, one is at least able to pave the way for future generations to succeed. He concludes, “What can you do about Qi? You can only try your best to do good.” (\textit{Mencius} 1B.14).
\textsuperscript{722} Mark Csikszentmihalyi argues that there are two potential explanations for why the Mohists attribute an “unequivocal fatalism” to the Confucians when the latter advocated “a limited notion of \textit{ming}”: either the passages from the \textit{Analects} available when the \textit{Mozi} was composed did not reflect the view of fate that our current version of the \textit{Analects} offers, or the Mohists thought “the notion of limited fatalism logically inconsistent.” He also adds that the Mohist critique of Confucian fatalism “throws light on a debate between competing notions of the sacred in the fourth and third centuries BCE. A fundamental tenet of the Mohist picture was the belief that \textit{tian}, through the intermediary \textit{guishen} (demons and spirits), rewarded and punished people based on the morality of their actions,
The Confucians in fact make a distinction between what is properly beyond one’s control and what is not. As Mencius says:

Though nothing happens that is not due to the decree, one accepts willingly only what is one’s proper decree. That is why he who understands the decree does not stand under a wall on the verge of collapse. He who dies after having done his best in following the Way dies according to his proper decree. It is never anyone’s proper decree to die in fetters [i.e. as a criminal].

While also dismissing the notion of Confucian fatalism, Eno argues for a notion of Confucian idealism buttressed by references to Heaven which, according to him, completely separate the development of one’s virtues from “the actual outcome of events,” thus “rationalizing” the Confucian “persistence in ethical conduct in the face of political futility.”

It is true that there are a couple of references where the Confucians are described as pursuing a task that they know to be hopeless. One is a statement by Zilu, mentioned earlier in this chapter, where he says that one attempts to put the Way into practice even if he knows this is never going to happen (bu xing不行). The other is a statement by a gatekeeper to Zilu describing Confucius as one who “keeps working towards a goal the realization of which he knows to be impossible?” (zhi qi bu ke er wei zhi知其不可而为之) Based on such statements, Sor-hoon Tan argues that Confucius shows “faith … a willingness to try without guarantee of success, a positive attitude to the unknown and uncertain.” But as Angle argues, and as I have tried to show above, Confucius's attitude cannot be described as “faith,” since he has a realistic sense of

where morality is defined with reference to the Mozi’s particular Consequentialist vision.” The Confucians did not hold to the idea of an “automatic reward and punishment system” which also meant that they believed that “sacrifices could not hope to affect conditions in the world.” This argument is made forcefully in the “Discourse on Heaven” (tianlun天論) chapter of the Xunzi. See Csikszentmihalyi, Material Virtue, 40-42.

723 Mencius 7A.2.
724 Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven, 126.
725 Analects 18.7.
726 Analects 14.38.
727 Tan, Confucian Democracy, 153.
what he can actually achieve.”\textsuperscript{728} Given that neither of the two preceding statements is attributed to Confucius himself, and that the second appears to be a statement by someone critical of Confucius, it is not difficult to dismiss them as inaccurate representations of the Confucians’ own take on their mission. As I argued in the preceding part of this chapter, the Confucians are actually concerned with political effectiveness, which would be incongruent with the claim that Heaven and its decrees shield them from focusing on the outcomes of their actions. In my interpretation of the preceding passages, I have shown instead that one way to read these is by taking the notion of the decree to be meant to shield the Confucians from being discouraged by the vagaries of the political world; not from outcomes \textit{per se}, but rather from unforeseen and unpredictable outcomes. In other words, saying that these unpredictable events are caused by Heaven is a way to prevent an attitude of resentment or despair: as Xunzi says: “those who know the decree do not resent Heaven” for “those who resent Heaven cannot accomplish their aims.”\textsuperscript{729} Confucius similarly states that “one who does not understand the decree lacks the means to become a gentleman.”\textsuperscript{730}

In short, the decree, on my reading, is just another way to gloss the limits created by the complex world of politics.\textsuperscript{731} On the other hand, the decree also suggests a hope in an unfathomable march of history that ultimately gives sense and justification to the gentlemen’s efforts. Indeed, while both Confucius and Mencius express similar disillusionments as those expressed by Xunzi and quoted above, in which they bemoan the fact that they did not obtain positions worthy of their merits, they also appeal to Heaven as a way to temper the

\textsuperscript{728} Angle, \textit{Sagehood}, 202.  
\textsuperscript{729} Xunzi 4.6.  
\textsuperscript{730} Analects 20.3.  
\textsuperscript{731} Eno takes the limit to human action to be “entailed with existence as a determinate entity.” This existentialist strain in Confucianism is beyond the scope of my discussion. See Eno, \textit{The Confucian Creation of Heaven}, 127.
disillusionment, by providing a reason for hope. Thus the border official in the state of Yi tells Confucius’ followers that they should not worry about Confucius’ loss of office, because “The Empire has long been without the Way,” which means that Heaven, which would not let this situation continue for too long, is “about to use your Master as the wooden tongue for a bell.”

According to Slingerland, the bell is “the kind used by itinerant collectors and transmitters of folk songs or functionaries who circulated around the countryside promulgating official announcements.” In other words, Confucius was going to be the transmitter of the Way. Both Slingerland and Eno read this passage as suggesting that Heaven purposefully made Confucius’ quest for employment fail so that he could focus on spreading his teachings. But the passage might also be interpreted simply to mean that Confucius was soon going to be employed and thus be in a position to put the Way into practice.

In a different passage in the Analects, Confucius complains that no one understands him, which might be taken as a complaint about his lack of employment, but he keeps away from despair and resentment precisely by mentioning Heaven: “I am not bitter toward Heaven, nor do I blame others. I study what is below in order to comprehend what is above. If there is anyone who could understand me, perhaps it is Heaven.” Again, Slingerland reads this passage as expressing the thought that Confucius is fulfilling Heaven’s plan by focusing on studying. Another way to read this passage, however, is as a justification of his political mission, despite its failures: the failures do not imply that the mission is wrong-headed, and the allusion to

---

733 Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, 28.
735 Analects 14.35 quoted from Slingerland.
736 Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects, 92.
Heaven brings in the needed cover of legitimacy. Mencius similarly sounds a note of despair while also insisting that he is neither unhappy nor resentful, given his hopes in the ultimate direction of events symbolized by Heaven’s plan:

When Mencius left Qi, on the way Chong Yu asked, ‘Master, you look somewhat unhappy. I heard from you the other day that a gentleman reproaches neither Heaven nor man.’

‘This is one time; that was another time. Every five hundred years a true King should arise, and in the interval there should arise one from whom an age takes its name. From Zhou to the present, it is over seven hundred years. The five hundred mark is passed; the time seems ripe. It must be that Heaven does not as yet bring peace to the Empire. If it did, who is there in the present time other than myself? Why should I be unhappy?’

In the same way that Mencius finds it hard to understand why Heaven has not yet made him king over a vast land that needs one, he also finds it hard to explain why Confucius himself never became emperor or, as he puts it, why Confucius “never possessed the empire” (*bu your tian xia* 不有天下), but both worries are tempered by his view of the cycle of history, guided by Heaven.

In short, the incentive for political engagement is buttressed by references to Heaven, which provide the grounds for delimiting the sorts of actions and events which the Confucians should hold themselves accountable for, and which, on a different level, provide hope in the ultimate meaning of the Confucians’ political mission and its failures.

---

737 In *Analects* 9.9, however, Confucius sounds a more desperate note: “The Phoenix does not appear nor does the River offer up its Chart. I am done for.” Slingerland comments that “Both the phoenix and chart were auspicious omens sent by Heaven in the past to indicate that a sagely ruler was arising to bring peace to the world.” See Slingerland, trans., *Confucius: Analects*, 89. Confucius thus seems hopeless here about the possibility of being employed by a wise ruler.

738 *Mencius* 2B.13. See also 7B.38 and 3B.9.

739 *Mencius* 5A.6.
V- Conclusion

This chapter concludes my discussion of the Confucian conception of the political
through a turn into the personal aspect of politics, or individuals’ responsibility in relation to
their government and society. While individuals, in the Confucian vision, cannot become fully
virtuous without participating in political relationships, and while the possibility of a harmonious
society rests on such participation, the duty of political involvement is not limited to
circumstances that would allow for virtuous development. One should seek political involvement
even under a corrupt ruler and during disordered times. To the extent that one is able to preserve
moral integrity by refusing to commit immoral acts, and to the extent that one sees a potential for
convincing the ruler to undertake order-promoting policies, like the welfare-oriented policies
delineated in Chapter 2, then one should get involved, even at the detriment of devotion to the
pursuit of purely intellectual and moral cultivation. That politics involves corrupt actors and
unforeseen events, and that the course of history does not always take clear paths, should not
derail one’s attempts to try to bring about a more orderly society.
Conclusion

As the early Greeks were propounding their views on ethics and politics that became the foundation for the Western philosophical tradition, the Confucians were, almost around the same time, offering their own views on the good life and the good society, paving the way for China’s own two thousand year-long tradition of thought.

Interest in the Chinese tradition has revived today after a Communist interlude that sought to impose—ultimately without success—a complete break with the past. Writings on Confucianism have proliferated inside and outside China, offering new interpretations of Confucian thought in relation to themes like virtue ethics, special obligations, human rights, and democracy. The urgency of the recent debate, concerned as it is with the future of a Confucian China, has meant that the Confucian texts are now mined with a view to contemporary concerns. Many of the political discussions in the early texts have thus been ignored for being irrelevant today.

This is not to say that the Confucian texts have not been presented as political theory. Rather, on what I have called the conventional view, the political aspect of Confucianism has been derived from its ethical precepts: since virtue is sought for the individual, then the aim of Confucian government is to promote the virtue of its people; since virtue is the highest ideal for the Confucian gentleman, then it is also the highest ideal for the officials making up Confucian government; since virtue has priority in one’s personal life, then one’s political participation should also be premised on the development of one’s own, and others’, virtue.

I have shown in this dissertation that these conclusions are wrong: first, Confucian government does not aim at inculcating virtue in the people. The reason for this is not a low
regard, on the part of the Confucians, of the intellectual capacities of the common people, but the recognition that their conditions of life, as they spend their days engaging in manual labor, do not allow them the leisure to practice and hone the virtues of *ren*, rightness, and wisdom. Instead, the common people are expected, as I showed in Chapter 2, to develop qualities like industriousness, honesty, and loyalty, worthy of an orderly society.

Similarly, as I argued in Chapters 2 and 4, the officials making up Confucian government are not always required to be virtuous. The Confucians recognize a distinct category of political abilities that make for successful rulers and ministers and that do not partake of high Confucian virtues: for example, it is important for rulers to be courageous to fend off enemies from within and without. Rulers and ministers should also be able to govern effectively: they should apply rules consistently and assertively, they should be impartial and unify the people under their leadership, and they should not squander state resources but rather be able to provide for the welfare needs of the common people.

Finally, while Confucian gentlemen should not compromise on their virtue in their personal lives, by disregarding the needs of their parents, for example, or by engaging in relations and transactions that do not follow the rules of propriety, the same cannot be said about their engagement in politics: as I explained in Chapter 5, a concern with effectiveness, with bringing about better policies, such as lower taxation, justifies serving even under a corrupt ruler who does not fulfill his role as ruler and who does not adequately appreciate the role of ministers.

Many of the oft-drawn conclusions about Confucian political theory are misleading because they assume a one-on-one correspondence between ethics and political theory. I have tried, in this dissertation, to bring out the tensions between the two and to elicit, to use
Schwartz’s phrase, the presence of an independent “realm of the political”\textsuperscript{740} in Confucianism that is concerned with what I have called “political order.”

My goal has not been to argue that there is absolutely no overlap between ethics and politics in early Confucianism. It is rather to contend that Confucian political theory does not derive in any straightforward manner from Confucian ethics. I have thus suggested in Chapter 3 that, while the Confucians approve of ruling through penal sanctions, welfare measures, and consistent regulations, they ideally favor ruling through rituals which lessen the need for the former measures, wagering instead on the tendencies of humans to be sociable. Now, a ritual system operates on the basis of the observance of ritual propriety (\textit{li}) on the part of all members of society, and ritual propriety is a cardinal Confucian virtue. This said, ritual propriety is not expected to be practiced to the fullest extent by everyone: while most, including the common people, will merely follow rituals, the more sagely members of society will understand rituals’ logic, enabling them to follow them effortlessly and, in some cases, to transcend them. It is therefore only the latter that fully practice ritual propriety as a virtue.

On the other hand, in a ritual-centered order, it is required for the highest-positioned members of society, especially the ruler, to be virtuous, even sagely in the way just described; for the ruler is the guarantor of the ritual system and is assigned the task of ensuring its smooth running. Moreover, the more virtuous the ruler is, the more legitimate the ritual order is in the eyes of its participants: for the ritual order is a hierarchical one, hierarchy tracks merit, and merit is equivalent to virtue, meaning that the highest position in the land, under the best application of the system, should go to the most virtuous. In short, a ritual-centered political order requires—differing degrees of—virtue, or, to put it in the language I have been using here, ethics and

\textsuperscript{740} Schwartz, \textit{The World of Thought in Ancient China}, 102.
politics do overlap here, but there is no straightforward correspondence: starting with the Confucian conception of virtue, including ritual propriety, does not directly lead to the Confucian ritual system.

Perhaps one way to gloss the tension between ethics and politics in early Confucianism is to distinguish between two levels of analysis, as I did in Chapter 2: on the ethical level, individuals are the primary subject of analysis. On the political level, the Confucians shift to a birds’ eye view: they consider social groups (the common people, scholar-officials, and the ruler) rather than individuals. They also consider the well-being of society as a whole, for example the harmony engendered by the ritual order, without breaking it down into the well-being of individual members.

There has been a recent trend in Western political theory to critique the post-Kantian approach to political theory for taking ethics as its basis. My interpretation of early Confucianism agrees with the critics’ insistence on keeping ethical and political thinking apart. A central part of the critique of this post-Kantian approach, however, is a critique of the way in which the latter sidesteps the centrality of violence and conflict in politics. The Confucians, on the other hand, do not have much place for conflict in their political theory either, even though theirs is not an ethics-based political theory. Indeed, one distinguishing mark of the early Confucians is their optimism about human nature. While Xunzi is often described as a pessimist in this regard, I have argued in Chapter 3 that he is a believer in the natural ability of people to develop morally, based on the faculties of the intellect, which qualifies him as an optimist. And

742 Bolsinger, The Autonomy of the Political, xii. See also Honig, Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics.
while the Confucians’ faith in the inherent and equal potential of all humans to become fully virtuous is not embodied in their political vision, the latter nonetheless allows for the ability of most to develop qualities like filiality, loyalty, reciprocity, honesty, etc. i.e. not full-fledged virtues, but political or “civic” qualities that make for an orderly at least, and harmonious at best, society. Their optimism explains Confucians’ wariness of laws and punishments, and their belief that humans’ social tendencies should be the basis of politics.

Confucian optimism has sometimes been confused with idealism and with the idea that Confucians put too much faith in the rule of the virtuous. Many Chinese intellectuals today thus seek to replace Confucianism’s emphasis on “rule by man” (renzhi 人治) with the idea of “rule by law” (fazhi 法治). What I have tried to show in this dissertation is that the idea that the Confucian political vision stands or falls with the presence or absence of a virtuous ruler on top is exaggerated. First, I have noted the division of labor between a ruler and his ministers. Secondly, I have shown how government relies on institutional mechanisms, rather than virtue per se, for the regulation of society. These mechanisms include welfare measures, punishments even if only at the last resort, rituals, and educational institutions to promote filiality. The critics are of course right about the absence of guarantees that the ruler and his ministers will actually promote and maintain these institutions and policies. But the point remains that these institutions exist, and that the extent to which the critics attribute to the Confucians a reliance on rule by men is exaggerated.

This leads me to my final point: while I have not attempted in this dissertation to normatively assess Confucianism, or to evaluate its applicability to the modern world, my

---

contention is that a nuanced understanding of Confucian political thought is a useful supplement to current debates about the “East Asian challenge to human rights” and about the compatibility between Confucianism and democracy. While these debates focus on the important, practical, and even urgent, concern to ponder the fate of modern China, and of its two thousand year-long tradition, they have not given the sort of attention to the Confucians that theorists from the Western tradition, like Aristotle, or Rousseau, usually get. Confucianism is more than a solution to a political problem: it is a philosophical tradition with a long pedigree, and it is thus important to study it in its own right, as a source of theorization about society, politics, and the challenge of living together. The epilogue will say more about the importance of such a study.
Epilogue: Global political theory

I argued in the Introduction to this dissertation that political theorists are likely to turn to the Western canon to trace the origins of political thought, define the category of the political, and identify the major dilemmas of political philosophy. Countering this tendency, I have explored instead, in this dissertation, the political theory of a non-Western tradition, showing how the Confucians conceptualized the political, particularly in relation to ethics. One question that my study raises, and which I want to address in this final chapter, is as to whether the study of non-Western texts and authors necessitates a departure from the traditional methodologies and practices of political theory.

This question has been central to the debates around the emerging subfield in political theory, named “Comparative Political Theory” (hereafter, CPT), to which the study of non-Western traditions is assigned. Scholars have disagreed about whether CPT should form its own subfield, whether specific methodologies should be devised for it, and whether including non-Western traditions involves revising the current practice of political theory, its concepts, and its methods. On the one hand, theorists like Farah Godrej and Leigh Jenco have emphasized the need to rethink current practices in political theory so as to properly allow for the inclusion of non-Western traditions. Others, like Andrew March, on the other hand, express doubts about the need for an independent subfield for the study of non-Western traditions. March argues that studying the “internal concerns” of non-Western traditions should pose no challenge to the
current practice of political theory, since political theory is already comparative and its historical methods are sensitive to context.744

In what follows, I argue for a third position: I contend, on the one hand, that geographical boundaries indeed do not justify the need for a distinct subfield of inquiry or for distinctive methodologies. On the other hand, I show that the study of non-Western traditions does not effortlessly blend into our usual practices of political theory and the history of political thought which crucially rely, I argue, on a specific conception of what “our tradition” is. Traditions, I argue, are a product of long historical processes, as is also the contemporary dominance of the Western tradition. While we cannot hope to turn around forces of history overnight, I argue that we can encourage less hegemonic trends by pushing for a shift away from a narrowly defined Western tradition and to a more global one. I take this dissertation to be an effort in that direction, as I explain below.

I- The methodological question

Farah Godrej devotes her new book, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, to developing methodologies for CPT, in response to “the relative scarcity of methodological reflection within

---

744 Andrew F. March, “What is Comparative Political Theory?” *The Review of Politics* 71 (2009): 538. March does ultimately argue for the possibility of a distinct field of study called “comparative political theory” but he offers specific requirements for what counts as pertaining to this field, mainly that it should “focus on moral disagreement and justification across multiple distinct, semiautonomous traditions” (565). He describes this type of comparative political theory as “engaged,” distinguishing it from the “scholarly” tasks usually attributed to comparative political theory and which, on his view, do not necessitate an independent subfield. One such “scholarly” task is the study of the “internal concerns” of non-western traditions (560), such as studying Confucius’ conception of a sagely ruler, or Ibn Khaldun’s account of the rise of cities, etc. According to him, such a study can be subsumed within the usual practice of the history of political thought.
the emerging field calling itself comparative political theory.” She argues that, in the study of non-Western thought, it is not enough to simply adopt a “methodological lens: Foucauldian, Straussian, conceptual, intellectual history, deconstructionist, and so on”; these are “often insufficient to understand well the ideas from others civilizations, given the unique challenges these pose.” She recommends an approach that combines “internal immersion in the lived experience of the text and an external stance of commentary and exegesis of the text.” In terms of “internal immersion,” Godrej recommends an “interpretive method” which she calls “existential understanding” and where the texts are not analyzed simply as texts but through “a praxis-oriented existential transformation in which the reader learns to live by the very ideas expressed in a text.” As illustration, Godrej argues that someone interested in understanding the concept of dharma in Hindu thought would need to experience “the dharmic life Gandhi instituted at his ashrams (community of followers)” and to “insert herself into conversations with and among community members who claim to live by a certain understanding of dharma,” attempting to make sense of these understandings through “methodologies employed by anthropologists, ethnographers, or scholars of comparative politics (such as participant-observation, interviewing, or case analysis).” In terms of the external stance of commentary, Godrej argues for two options, but favors the first: in the first option, the practice of studying a non-Western idea, such as Gandhi’s theory of nonviolence, “brings ideas from non-Western traditions to bear on specific problems and normative issues,” providing “a potentially new

746 Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, 52.
747 Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, 53.
748 Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, 54.
750 She worries that “holism” [i.e. the second option] might involve a concern with “authenticity” and “accuracy” in representing a non-Western tradition to such an extent that it ignores the latter’s “internal fissures” and “the pluralities of its manifestations” (90).
answer to the question we have grappled with in Western political thought.”751 The second option is the approach that she attributes to Leigh Jenco, which she describes as “holism,” and in which the only way transcultural understanding can occur is by “attempting to replicate the entire webs of meaning within which it [the text or idea] takes shape.”752

Jenco’s own proposal is expounded over two articles: In “What Does Heaven Ever Say,” she argues that the study of non-Western traditions should extend not only to the content or ideas to be found in these, but also to the methodologies of study used by non-Western thinkers. The examples she gives are the interpretive methodologies pursued by two Chinese Classicists, Wang Yangming (1472-1528) and Kang Youwei (1858-1927), the former favoring an “intuitive” textual approach, while the latter recommends more elaborate philological techniques.753 Jenco’s guidelines for recognizing “non-Western traditions as themselves productive of methodological and political-theoretic inquiry”754 are reminiscent of Godrej’s: she recommends “local experiences within a living tradition and prolonged, deeply committed engagement with its canonical texts in the original language,” including ‘language study, historical research, and fieldwork,” and also the adoption of a "critical insider" perspective, which involves “immersion, illumination, participation in ritual, and daily practices.”

In her more recent article, “Recentering Political Theory,” she again argues for taking “foreign sources of thought” seriously, with regard not only to their ideas and concerns, but also to their disciplinary practices, methodological ambitions, and “claims to wider-than-local significance.”755 She rejects the idea that the study of non-Western traditions should merely

751 Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, 87.
752 Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, 52.
“decenter” political theory as traditionally practiced, i.e. that its task should merely be to show that Western political theory is parochial and has no claim to universal truth, arguing instead for taking non-Western traditions as sources of original theory, not just “case studies” for “existing theories.”

The two main examples that Jenco gives of recentered political theory are Stephen Angle’s *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, which defends a Neo-Confucian ethical ideal, drawing to a large extent on Chinese sources, and targeting both a Western and a Chinese audience, and the work of Ingrid Jordt who looks at the relationship between mass Buddhit meditation and political legitimacy in Burma.

Construed as a call to take non-Western traditions seriously, and a reminder about the extent to which Eurocentric categories, questions, and concerns shape our usual inquiry in political theory, Godrej’s and Jenco’s recommendations are very important. The question, however, is whether any of the directives are either necessary for the study of non-Western thought, or distinctive of it, and whether, consequently, insisting on them does not detract from what is really at stake in the study of non-Western texts and authors.

Consider the claim about the need for cultural immersion. The need is neither restricted to non-Western cultures, nor do all studies of non-Western traditions require it: cultural immersion would indeed make more sense for the study of contemporary Amish practices in the United States than for the study of Classical Confucianism. While Confucius temples might shed light on the popularization of Confucianism in contemporary China, they do not help us in understanding the *Analects* as such. In other words, cultural immersion is suited for the study of contemporaneous cultures, and for the study of practices, rather than texts. For the study of earlier authors and texts, a close attention to historical context is necessary, but the

---

756 Jenco, “Recentering Political Theory,” 34.
757 Jenco, “Recentering Political Theory,” 47.
methodologies for studying context should not differ from East to West. Indeed, as Jenco herself recognizes, in the introduction to her book on an early twentieth century Chinese thinker:

> It may be possible to formulate an argument that cultural versus historical differences demand alternative modes of engagement, but until that time I will press forward on the assumption that, given proper training, the political thinking of early Republican China is as accessible to me as is that of any other time and place, whether ancient Athens or Florentine Italy.758

What allows Jenco to access the thought of early Republican China, moreover, is not the methodological apparatus of early Republican Chinese thought. Her approach to the study of the thought of Zhang Shizhao is similar to what is typically performed by historians of Western political thought: in addition to a close reading of Zhang’s texts, she is also attentive to their historical context, and to the intellectual debates of the time. Similarly, Stephen Angle, whom she offers as a model of “decentered political theory” writes in the vein of contemporary Western moral philosophers, although drawing extensively on his knowledge of Chinese and of contemporary philosophical debates in China. In other words, though both Jenco and Angle draw on the ideas, concepts, and concerns of non-Western authors, they do not use the latter’s methodologies, as she recommends one should do.759

As for the requirement to take seriously the concerns of the subjects of inquiry, rather than starting with the usual concerns of contemporary Western political theory, here again neither is this idea distinctive of the study of non-Western authors (Cambridge School

758 Jenco, Making the Political, 11. Andrew March similarly suggests that Laozi, Kautilya, Ibn Khaldun, and Gandhi are not necessarily more alien to us than Plato or Machiavelli. He also argues that the former should not be treated differently than the way that the latter, and other past Western thinkers, are treated by intellectual historians who do not always take their subjects of inquiry as relevant to contemporary normative concerns. See March, “What is Comparative Political Theory?” 548-9

759 In addition to the intuitive methodology of Wang Yangming and the philological techniques of Kang Youwei, Jenco mentions, as an example of Chinese methodology, the revival, by Chinese thinkers who reject the label of “philosophy” as a Western imposition, of “hermeneutic techniques … associated with late Imperial debates over the interpretation of the classics” and “the renewed use of terms that originally structured traditional Chinese … knowledge classification.” See Jenco, “Recentering Political Theory,” 37.
proponents are very much attentive to the concerns of past thinkers) nor is it necessary (Consider the work, for example, of Sor-hoon Tan who presents a theory of “Confucian Democracy,” also drawing on the work of John Dewey. Democracy is not, as I have shown in this dissertation, a concern of Confucius’, but it is still a legitimate project to seek to enrich our own thoughts on democracy by drawing on him as the central thinker of the Chinese tradition). In this dissertation, I have looked at the early Confucian texts both for answers to questions in Western political theory (Did Confucius allow for people to revolt against a bad ruler?) and for new questions (What role can rituals play in politics?). The distinction between what counts as a Western question, and what counts as a non-Western, local question, is in any case a difficult one to make. Commenting on Roxanne Euben’s book, Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge, Jenco writes that Euben “gathers Muslim perspectives not to set political theory on a new track addressed to Muslim audiences disciplined by their terms of debate, but to make a tripartite argument [about the relation between travel and knowledge] notably independent of any particular Muslim viewpoint.” Jenco’s statement assumes that there is a Muslim debate on travel, whose terms Euben elides; but it is not clear what the “terms of debate” are on, say, Ibn Battuta, let alone who the “Muslim” audiences are who are supposed to be having it. Moreover, Euben’s purpose in her book is precisely to show that travel creates similar concerns across different cultures. There is no reason to assume a priori that this cannot be possible.

Indeed, this dissertation has shown that very general concerns unify different traditions, in this case the Western and the Confucian ones, blurring the distinction between what it would mean to study non-Western texts as “case studies” and what it would mean to study them as

sources of original theory. I have shown, for example, that the question about the fraught relation between ethics and politics is internal to the Chinese tradition itself (see Introduction), while it is also a lively question in Western political theory today, that the debate between rituals and regulations was a debate that the Confucians had with other philosophical rivals in early China (Chapter 3), though one that could also be conceived as a debate between Western and Confucian outlooks on politics, and that the obligation to participate in politics was a central question in early Confucianism (Chapter 5), if also a quintessentially modern question. Similarly, Jenco uses Zhang Shizhao to offer a theory of “collective action,” i.e. by eliciting from him an answer to a very prominent dilemma in Western political thought. This is not to say that she imposes the Western conception of collective action on Zhang, but simply to point out that it is hard to see whether her approach in her book does or does not fall afoul of her own principles as set out in her most recent essay.

To sum up, my aim in this section has not been to dismiss the methodological recommendations offered by Jenco and Godrej, but to show that none of them are necessary to the study of non-Western traditions, that some might be more relevant in some cases rather than others, and that none is distinctive of the move from West to East (as opposed to the move back in time to study Western thinkers of the past). Moreover, I worry that too much energy spent on charting a distinctive approach for the study of non-Western traditions derails from it by forcing the burgeoning practice into a methodological straightjacket that is not even imposed on the more mature and long-standing comparative and historical inquiries inside the Western tradition. In what follows, I take a step back, clarifying that the study of non-Western traditions requires, and in turn promotes, an attitudinal, not a methodological, shift.
II- The Western tradition

While I have argued above that the methodological directives offered for the study of non-Western texts are not distinctive of that study, and that they feature in many, if not most, of the practices, and debates, undertaken by historians of Western political thought, I still believe that Jenco and Godrej are on to something when they suggest that the study of foreign sources involves a reconceptualization of political theory as currently practiced: Jenco calls this reconceptualized political theory “recentered political theory,” while Godrej describes it as “cosmopolitan political theory.” In what follows, I argue, contra March, that such a reconceptualization is indeed needed, but not because, as Godrej and Jenco suggest, we lack the proper methodologies for the inclusion of non-Western others. I will show that, while the methodologies that historians of political thought have traditionally been using can be applied to the study of non-Western texts, it is their understanding of their task, and their justification for the study of the history of political thought, that will have to be revised when they turn to non-Western authors. I develop this argument in what follows by elaborating on the concept of a “tradition” of thought. I show that historians of political thought, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes implicitly, understand themselves to be operating within what we may call “the Western tradition,” which provides them with the basis for making sense of, and justifying, their practice. This role that the “Western tradition” plays in political theory today therefore needs to be revised if non-Western texts are to be included.

Andrew March also elaborates on the importance of the idea of “tradition” in his article. Our accounts differ, however, because March focuses on what he describes as “engaged” political theory, and the traditions he thus finds important are not the purely “scholarly” ones, but ones that have led to “normative contestations of proposals for terms of social cooperation affecting [their] adherents” (565, emphasis in the original). Examples of traditions undergoing such contestation are liberalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Since March is interested in the question of what could potentially make CPT distinctive, he focuses on the issue of value conflicts, and uses these to identify the traditions leading to them. I focus instead on the implications of integrating non-Western texts into what he describes as the “scholarly” (versus “engaged”) aspect of political theory, without arguing for an independent CPT.
1. The place of the “Western tradition” in the practice of the history of political thought

In *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation*, John G. Gunnell critiques what he calls “the myth of the tradition.” He defines this myth as the “imposition on the framework of the classical works of an elaborate dramatic story of the rise and fall of political theory and the implications of these events for the modern age.”

According to Gunnell, some political theorists, having diagnosed the malaises of the modern age, go about interpreting the history of Western political thought to find in it not only the origin of these malaises but also a pre-malaise, golden age. Gunnell identifies Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin, and Sheldon Wolin, as being “particularly influential in defining and propagating this paradigm.”

Gunnell’s analysis points to the most explicit way in which the idea of the “Western tradition” frames and justifies the task of historians of political thought. In the cases of Strauss and Arendt, there is indeed a clear sense in which the study of earlier Western thinkers allows them to present a certain view of how political theorization evolved through time and how it came to be what it is today. For Strauss, for example, it is only classical political philosophers who understood that “the goal of political life is virtue,” while all modern philosophy has rejected this aim as too high. It is with Machiavelli, Strauss argues, that Western thought started its tragic and unending decline. Arendt, on the other hand, writes in her essay on “Tradition and the Modern Age,” that “Our tradition of political thought had its definite beginning in the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. I believe it came to a no less definite end in the theories of Karl

---

Marx."\textsuperscript{765} Arendt identifies the beginning and end of the tradition in relation to the central \textit{problematique} of Western thought on politics which, according to her, revolves around the relationship between philosophy and human affairs. Differently from Strauss, it is not ancient theory that Arendt wants us to return to, but "ancient praxis,"\textsuperscript{766} the politics of the Greek polis where the "freedom experienced in the process of acting and nothing else … has never again been articulated with the same classical clarity."\textsuperscript{767} She is thus critical of the whole tradition that started with Plato, and which privileged contemplation over action.\textsuperscript{768} She bemoans the fact that this Platonist approach has been "authoritative for the whole tradition of political thought"\textsuperscript{769} such that even Marx, in his "conscious rebellion,"\textsuperscript{770} and even though he turned "the tradition upside down,"\textsuperscript{771} could not escape it. As she puts it, "It is as though Marx, not unlike Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, tried desperately to think against the tradition while using its own conceptual tools."\textsuperscript{772}

The question that the preceding raises is as to how someone like Strauss or Arendt would justify studying non-Western texts or authors: such a study cannot show how a particular viewpoint on political theory, among a coherent set of revolving approaches, has won or lost out, and how this explains the contemporary fate of our thinking about politics. The exception that proves this rule is medieval Islamic philosophy, which Strauss does include in his compendia on the history of political thought, and for which the justification is clear: the Muslim philosophers

\textsuperscript{767} Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in \textit{Between Past and Future: Six Exercises inPolitical Thought}, 165.
\textsuperscript{768} Beiner, "Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss," 240.
\textsuperscript{769} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 201.
offered a commentary on the early Greek texts which was then transmitted to medieval Europe, and thus became part of the worldview of medieval Western thought.

As the example of Gunnell’s book suggests, Strauss’ and Arendt’s identification of a continuous stream of thought emanating from the early Greeks and passing through Aquinas and Augustine, and continuing to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Marx, has not been without its critics. The main line of criticism focuses on this approach’s lack of historical sensitivity: it cannot be, the critics charge, that thinkers who lived at such different times and in such different places as, say, Aristotle and Kant, were responding to a coherent and consistent set of the same recurrent questions. Quentin Skinner, and the Cambridge School more generally, have been at the forefront of attempts to rescue the history of political thought from anachronism by insisting on situating the various thinkers of the past within their proper social and linguistic context. This approach has sometimes been dubbed the “New Historicism.”

Quentin Skinner describes the Straussian approach to the history of political thought as “historical fiction.” He advocates instead that historians try “as far as possible to think as our ancestors thought and to see things their way.” He argues that this is not the same as “to re-enact or re-create the experience of being sixteenth-century demonologists or peasants of Languedoc or any other such alien creatures.” Instead, the requirement is to “recover the concepts they possessed, the distinctions they drew and the chains of reasoning they followed in their attempts to make sense of their world” without translating these into the “familiar,” but “different,” “distinctions and expressions we happen to use ourselves.”773 The question that Skinner’s approach has often raised is as to the significance of the history of political thought when

undertaken this way. Why should we care that Machiavelli, or Hobbes, used this or that concept, to make a statement about this or that problem that has no resonance for us today?

Skinner argues that it is “a lost cause to try to justify the subject [of the history of ideas] in terms of the answers it can provide to the ‘perennial problems’ allegedly addressed in the classic texts” given that “there are no perennial problems in philosophy” but only “individual answers to individual questions, and potentially as many different questions as there are questioners.” Even more strongly, Skinner writes that “rather than looking for directly applicable ‘lessons’ in the history of philosophy, we shall do better to learn to do our own thinking for ourselves.” Instead what the history of thought teaches us is that what “we may be disposed to accept as ‘timeless’ truths may be little more than contingencies of our local history and social structure,” which is tantamount to discovering “a general truth not merely about the past but about ourselves.”

In other words, studying past Western thinkers fulfills the task, criticized by Jenco as insufficient in the study of non-Western thinkers (of the past and of the present), of “parochializing” contemporary political theory. In the same line of thought, Skinner offers as a justification for his approach its ability to attain a greater deal of “objectivity” in the face of “cultural diversity”:

We can hope to attain a certain kind of objectivity in appraising rival systems of thought. We can hope to attain a greater degree of understanding, and thereby a larger tolerance, for elements of cultural diversity. Above all, we can hope to acquire a perspective from which to view our own form of life in a more self-critical way, enlarging our present horizons instead of fortifying local prejudices.

Skinner’s approach thus questions contemporary prejudices and does not attempt to tell a story about the rise and fall of a clearly demarcated Western tradition. This means that there

774 Skinner, Visions of Politics, Volume 1, 88.
775 Skinner, Visions of Politics, Volume 1, 89.
776 Skinner, Visions of Politics, Volume 1, 125.
should be no *prima facie* problem in applying this approach to the study of non-Western authors. It is indeed probably Skinner’s approach that Jenco has in mind when she argues, as I mentioned above, that the thought of a Chinese thinker should be as accessible to us as that of Plato or Machiavelli. Is this, however, true? In other words, if we adopt the methodologies of the Cambridge School, should it therefore really matter whether the authors we study are from inside or outside Europe and the United States?

A few remarks are in order here. First, not many historians of political thought actually follow Skinner’s approach. While many do provide important descriptions of the social context of past thinkers, this would not fulfill the Cambridge School’s requirements for the reconstruction of a past thinker’s “intentions” in saying what s/he said. Without delving into the details of these requirements, they revolve around the need to situate an author’s “utterance” in “the full range of communications that could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the issuing of the given utterance;” details about social context only come in later as “a part of this linguistic enterprise.” This type of linguistic study is not usually practiced outside the narrow circles of the Cambridge School, meaning that most political theorists actually do employ, explicitly or implicitly, contemporary (Western) categories and concepts in their understanding of earlier thinkers.

Furthermore, although his proposal lends itself to a series of largely distinct accounts about what different authors said in response to particular debates of their times, Skinner does not eschew the idea of a tradition. As Paul Ricoeur argues in relation to Michel Foucault’s thesis, formulated in *The Order of Things*, about epistemological breaks separating different time periods in Europe, such breaks do not invalidate the idea of historical continuity, since

---

discontinuity itself becomes part of the narrative, wherein “tradition” can be characterized by the interplay between sedimentation and innovation, continuity and change. When Skinner therefore shows how the Neo-Roman conception of liberty was given up for the classical liberal conception of liberty, he is offering a narrative, albeit a subtle one, of a “Western tradition” to which such continuities and discontinuities can be attributed.

Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre, though he argues—as suggested by the title of his book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*—that there are different understandings of rationality in Western thought, he also maintains that interpretation across these incommensurable divides in rationality (between, for example, modern political theory and Greek thought) is possible precisely because of an underlying continuity. On the one hand, MacIntyre argues that “continuity, resemblance and recurrence” are the counterpart to the discontinuities in the history of philosophy. But even more tellingly, he claims that philosophy does offer a “minimal unifying definition.” This definition allows us to determine what counts as philosophy in the first place. The definition avoids the danger of taking our contemporary standpoint as a yardstick because it derives not from its end-point (as is the case with the natural sciences), but from its “starting-point.” He explains:

Nobody is to count as a philosopher who does not have to be judged in the end against standards set by Plato. I do not say this only because Plato does already in fact to a surprisingly large degree provide philosophy with its starting-point and with the definition of its scope and subject-matter … Plato transcends … the limitations of Pre-Socratic philosophy and in so doing sets a standard for all later attempts to transcend his limitations in turn. This is how he made Aristotle possible; this is indeed how he made philosophy possible. Hence all philosophers after Plato must confront a situation in which if you cannot transcend the limitations of Plato’s fundamental positions, then you have no

---

sufficient reason for failing to recognize yourself as a Platonist—unless, that is, you abandon philosophy altogether.\footnote{MacIntyre, “The relationship of philosophy to its past,” in Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy, edited by Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, 45.}

This is a strong and controversial claim, and in no way can a similar one be attributed to Skinner, whose choice of authors and thinkers is less canonical and more eclectic than what MacIntyre’s emphasis on Plato suggests. But my point in citing MacIntyre here is to contend that there is an underling matrix that allows historians of political thought to decide what counts as philosophy, what authors to study, and what issues are important.

This matrix is partly attributable to actual ties that link together the canonical thinkers of the Western tradition who have sometimes read, and sometimes heard of, their predecessors’ ideas. But it is also, to a significant extent, a construction. John Dunn is helpful on this:

To concentrate on the professional historiography of western political theory … is simply to register two facts: firstly that the historical development of western political theory has been relatively continuous and self-conscious, and secondly that its relative continuity and self-consciousness have been subjected, in the present century, to increasingly rigorous and systematic historical analysis.\footnote{Dunn, The History of Political Theory, 15.}

It is the second point, about the amount of intellectual and academic effort devoted, in the last few decades, to reinforcing the “continuity and self-consciousness” of Western political theory that I have been emphasizing. My point, then, is that Skinner naturally builds on this effort: in focusing on Machiavelli and Hobbes, for example, he follows what historians before him have already identified as canonical writers, though he clearly revises our understanding of these figures, and adds to the canon lesser known figures.

J.G.A. Pocock, another central figure in the Cambridge School, is explicit about the importance of a pre-existing tradition. He starts out his inquiry by saying that a historian “does
his thinking within a tradition,” i.e. that he “does it within an inheritance of intellectual positions,” though ones “which can never be reduced to a single pattern of coherence and cannot even be completely distinguished from one another.” The task then, according to Pocock, is “to distinguish between the various positions of which our tradition consists with as great a degree of precision as can be managed,” with the aim of clarifying acceptable and unacceptable positions. 781 In other words, historians of political thought start from within a pre-existing matrix of intellectual positions clarified and refined by their predecessors and then contribute to the development of this tradition. This means that they (including historians of the Cambridge School) will have a hard time undertaking, and justifying, their task, if presented with the project of studying a Chinese or an Indian thinker. 782 The reason for this is not the lack of a (similarly constructed) Chinese or Indian tradition, or the impossibility of having access to these, but because the disciplinary practices of generations of historians of political thought have not reached these traditions, which makes it more difficult for the contemporary historian to navigate them but also, and more importantly, to justify the importance of studying them given the absence of pre-existing categories and concepts in the discipline, centered as it is on developing and clarifying the Western tradition, that would assist with such a justification. To put this more simply, I would not have needed to devote a whole chapter of my dissertation to justifying my subject matter if I were writing on, say, Aristotle’s politics because a large part of the

782 MacIntyre literally brackets this issue by providing this comment, between parentheses, at the outset of his essay: “That precisely the same type of issue [i.e. incommensurability] could obviously arise in defining our relationship to the mode of philosophical activity carried on within some alien cultural tradition has of course been noticed on occasion by anthropologists; but I am concerned here with the specific problems which arise in situations where we are concerned only with past eras within our own cultural tradition.” See MacIntyre, “The relationship of philosophy to its past,” 34.
justification would have been provided by the place that Aristotle holds in an already-defined canon which all political theorists start out from (even if they end up questioning it).

Furthermore, one could argue that though Skinner’s justification for the task of the historian as he conceives of it is based on the claims of “objectivity” and of accounting for “cultural diversity,” it also relies on a clear sense of who the “us” are who are doing the interpreting. As he puts it himself, part of the aim of the history of political thought is to understand “ourselves,” our “local history” and our “contingency.” It might be possible to argue that a concern with showing our “contingency” should naturally lead us to study the ways in which political values have evolved really differently from ours, such as in a faraway place like China. But what Skinner’s work actually reconstructs is how paths that were, as a matter of fact, available to us (the Neo-Roman conception of liberty) disappeared, leaving us espousing values that were at one point far from accepted (the classical liberal conception of liberty). In other words, the attempt is to do what Charles Taylor attributes to the philosophical task in general, i.e. to recover “previous articulations [of our social and philosophical practices] which have been lost.”783 Taylor contends that only on the basis of such a recovery can we normatively judge our current practices, and while Skinner in principle shies away from normative judgment, his work is not devoid of a certain level of it (his approving account of the Neo-Roman conception of liberty is a case in point). In any case, both share the idea that we can only understand and, on a second level, evaluate, our current beliefs and practices by knowing how they came to be accepted, which requires that we start off from a given history, a given tradition.

Finally, I said above that many who study the history of political thought do not follow Skinner’s approach. Those who neither follow the Cambridge School’s approach, nor the

Straussian one, usually undertake what Richard Rorty calls “rational reconstruction,” which involves studying philosophers of the past with an eye to contemporary concerns. Its difference from the Sraussian and Arendtian approaches surveyed above is that it does not attempt to draw a straight storyline linking up the philosophers of the past and leading to present crises, or present victories. Instead, the attempt usually is to strike a balance between historical reconstruction, and the attempt to make explicit the relevance of past thinkers to resolving contemporary problems, or understanding contemporary realities and concepts. It is not difficult to see how this approach relies on the idea of the “Western tradition.” For if the aim is to answer contemporary philosophical concerns, why look back at all at what earlier thinkers have to say? If the aim is to consider the meaning of freedom, or the boundaries of sovereignty, or the role of the state, or our duties to our co-citizens, why not draw on what progress in our philosophical insights and tools has produced in our day? We find it important to go back to past thinkers, often not because we think they thought about issues better than we do today, but because we implicitly or explicitly assume that our own ideas today are, in one way or another, heirs to those of these past thinkers. To resort to them to shed light on contemporary philosophical problems is to recover the first and original (albeit rudimentary) statements of these problems, in order to make better sense of these, and thus allow us to hone our current philosophical insight to understand more fully the nature of these problems and respond to them in a well-informed manner.

2. The sociological and political basis for the Western tradition

I have argued in the preceding that, in the practice of the history of political thought, we explicitly or implicitly rely on (among others) the idea of a Western tradition, which establishes a
sense of continuity, however elusive, among the thinkers of the past, and between them and us, and which gives us direction in choosing the philosophers we study and a justification, above and beyond the actual content of their ideas, as to why we study them. This explains why, to quote Farah Godrej, “Gandhi is alien to us in a different way than Machiavelli is, and Plato’s works may present us with a sense of familiarity that is entirely different from that which we feel when we encounter, say, Confucius.” In other words, on my account, a large part of the difference that we feel when we read Plato and Machiavelli, versus Confucius and Gandhi, stems from the sense of familiarity that is produced in us by the way in which the former are presented to us as part of the narrative of the “Western tradition.”

It should be noted here that the Western tradition is not a unique phenomenon: the tendency on the part of human beings to construct traditions is, as Hans-Georg Gadamer has famously argued, an ontological necessity. For Gadamer, indeed, humans are “affected by history”:

If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there—in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon—when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth.

Thus, for Gadamer, the temporal distance that separates contemporary Western thinkers from past ones is “not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in light of which everything handed down presents itself to us;” in other words, “we are

---

784 Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, 47.
always situated within traditions.”^787 For reasons that will become clearer in what follows, European and American scholars have generally situated themselves within—among other, more specific traditions—a broadly conceived “Western tradition.”

The aspect of tradition which I want to focus on in this section concerns the ways in which it is propagated, in order to mark the boundary between the Western and other traditions, and to shed light on why and how the Western tradition has come to dominate both inside and outside the West. Mark Bevir’s account of tradition is helpful for this purpose. Like Gadamer, Bevir argues that the concept of tradition “captures an ontological fact or argument; that is, humans necessarily have their being in a social context which influences them,”^788 but he also proposes to “fill out this ontological concept of tradition” by defining tradition “as a set of understandings someone acquires during a process of socialization.”^789 The analogy that Bevir uses to illustrate how beliefs and ideas are passed on from one generation to another, thus forming a tradition, is the teacher-pupil analogy:

The relationship of teacher to pupil provides a useful metaphor for the way in which others impart a tradition to someone, although we must be careful not to take this metaphor to refer exclusively to a formal, face-to-face relationship. Individuals acquire their initial beliefs and practices by listening to and watching other people, including their parents, educators, the authors they read, and their peers. The learning process requires teachers who initiate and pupils who learn … It is because beliefs and practices thus pass from generation to generation that we can talk of teachers initiating pupils into a tradition that persists and develops through time. Although pupils receive their inheritance from teachers during fairly brief moments in time, these moments always represent the culmination of a larger historical process.^790

---

^787 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283. In the same line of thought I offered in the preceding section, Gadamer criticizes the Romantic Movement, and more generally Historicism (the argument would also apply to Skinner’s New Historicism), in their belief that we can gain unmediated access to past thinkers by putting ourselves in their shoes—however doing so is conceived. For Gadamer, “there is no zero point from which an understanding consciousness can proceed in an attempt to hear what the object of interpretation has to say.” See James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997), 9.


256
Bevir presents this description as metaphorical but, despite his warning, I believe that it can also be taken literally: tradition is transmitted from generation to generation via teacher-student relations in institutions of learning, primarily schools and universities. Focusing on schools, and the teacher-pupil relations in them, does not contradict, but actually follows from, the idea that our inheritance of a set of beliefs and ideas is a reflection, as Bevir says, of “larger historical processes.” For schools, and institutions of learning more generally, are clearly affected by historical, political, and socioeconomic developments over time, and thus embody the victorious ideologies, beliefs, and ideas of their age; they do so alongside other cultural and political institutions.

The distinction between the West and the East is often criticized for attributing to wholesale cultures homogenous and everlasting values and features, such that it almost appears as if these values and features originate from the nature or psyche of the people forming the culture. The indignation against such “essentialism” especially rose, and became the reigning orthodoxy, since it was spurred by Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), which identified the boundaries between civilizations as the faultlines of future world conflict. But the identification of distinct cultures need not amount to the postulation of immutable values that homogenous communities hold over time. There are, as Alan Patten argues, institutional and societal factors (“formative contexts”) which promote sets of beliefs, customs, and practices.⁷⁹¹ In a similar sense, to speak of a “Western tradition” is not tantamount to speaking of enduring values that have won with the force of their perspicacity.

against the vicissitudes of time. Instead, what I identify as the “Western tradition” can be seen as the product of specific socialization processes that have taken place primarily in institutions of learning, but also in the media, government agencies, popular culture, etc. in Europe and the United States. My focus on educational institutions thus agrees with Jenco’s argument that “intellectual prejudices” have less to do with “national or ethnic cultures” and more to do with “training, institutional incentives, expectations, or intellectual resources.” My account, however, as will become clear below, takes these institutional incentives to have a durable effect on ideas, since they reflect the larger historical processes mentioned above, and to therefore be more difficult (though not impossible) to overturn than Jenco suggests.

The Western canon, i.e. the history of thought/philosophy from Plato to Marx (and beyond) has been central to university curricula in disciplines ranging from literature to philosophy to the history of science. In other words, the Western tradition is produced and reproduced by schools and universities, reflecting larger historical and cultural processes, in their design of course curricula and their delimitation of disciplines and specializations. It is therefore not surprising that it frames, both professionally and intellectually, the task of political theorists and historians of political thought. It is true, of course, that there might be significant differences in the way that the Western canon is taught in different countries or institutions of learning. But what is important for my purposes here is that the notion of the “West” is, in Roxanne Euben’s words, “imagined as continuous and unitary in a dialectical relationship to those concrete articulations and enactments by which [it is] transformed and adapted in different contexts for

---

792 As, for example, Ricardo Duchesne does in *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
793 Jenco, “Recentering Political Theory,” 43.
plural purposes.”\textsuperscript{794} In other words, though as a matter of fact the “Western tradition” is not taught in exactly the same way in different places, it is imagined as a singular, cohesive whole in all of them.

One way to further clarify why it is plausible to speak of a “Western tradition” is to point out that the same cannot be said of an “Eastern tradition.” Indeed, there is no such thing as an “Eastern” canon. India teaches its own canon; China does the same; the Islamic canon is taught across Islamic countries alongside canons like the Persian, the Arabic, or the Malay. This is obviously to a large extent because of “historical and spatial discontinuities” between these different canons,\textsuperscript{795} but there is also clearly an element of design here: had there been a political and intellectual interest in an “Eastern canon,” there would have been efforts to conceive of one, based partially on spurious connections, and partially on more real ones (connections along the Silk road, for example). Yet no “Eastern” canon is usually taught by universities in the East or the West. In other words, we cannot sociologically identify, by looking at educational curricula, a set of ideas that make up a self-avowed “Eastern tradition.”

We can, however, identify a Chinese tradition. This is made particularly easy in the Chinese case because school curricula were given a centralized and official character through their ties to the imperial examination system. This examination system, which lasted from 605 until 1905, was the basis upon which men were appointed to positions as civil servants in China’s large bureaucracy. The exam, in turn, was based on a largely literary and philosophical (mostly Confucian) curriculum which received state sanction, and was revised whenever major ideological shifts accompanied the change of regimes. Another feature of the Chinese, and


\textsuperscript{795} Dunn, \textit{The History of Political Theory}, 14.
particularly Confucian, tradition that makes its identification uncontroversial is that it is a largely commentarial tradition. It shares this feature with the Islamic tradition as well. In both cases, the traditions’ thinkers self-consciously saw themselves as commenting on a set of “Classics” and on previous commentaries on these. In the Confucian case, the two main Classics are the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. In the Islamic tradition, the Classics are the Koran, and the major Hadiths which relate the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (one might argue that the commentarial nature is also true of the Western tradition if Strauss, Arendt, and MacIntyre are right in seeing much of Western political thought as a commentary on the early Greeks, but the claim is much more controversial in this case than it is for the Islamic and Confucian traditions). Additionally, in the Islamic tradition, commentators underscore the legitimacy and plausibility of their recounted anecdotes (usually about the Prophet) by explicitly chronicling the sources through whom the anecdote passed to reach them. This is known as *isnād*, and usually takes the following form: “It has been related to me by A on the authority of B on the authority of C on the authority of D (usually a Companion of the Prophet) that the Prophet said…” In other words, the identification of the tradition is, in some sense, explicitly spelled out in the first line of the commentary.

Before turning to the issue of the domination of the Western canon outside the West, I should mention that although I have chosen as examples broad traditions (Western, Chinese, Islamic), nothing in my definition precludes narrower examples. Indeed, I have already spoken

---


797 Euben argues that “to speak of a singular Islam is almost invariably to speak of the sacred texts, an emphasis that has tended to privilege juridical Islam and its gatekeepers at the expense of more heterodox, popular, and mystical practices.” See Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore*, 5. This privileging is no problem for my argument. On the contrary, I have defined tradition at the outset as focusing on intellectual ideas propagated in institutions of learning, and thus likely orthodox and elitist. The idea of the “Islamic tradition” is not meant in any way to capture Islam in all its variety.
of both the Chinese and the Confucian traditions above. One could similarly speak of liberalism as a tradition, or with Gadamer, of hermeneutics, Christianity, and Classical Antiquity as traditions. So long as these have been presented as consistent bodies of thought in school curricula, the definition I offer here applies to them. I emphasize the more encompassing examples of tradition because my aim has been largely to justify the usage of the idea of a “Western tradition” and to clarify what it is meant to be distinguished from.

Having explained the sociological basis for the idea of a Western tradition, it remains for me to show why it has been dominant even outside of the West itself. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s book *Provincializing Europe* provides an account of this dominance. He describes, for example, how social sciences are presented in India as the product of a long development in Western thought:

> Faced with the task of analyzing developments or social practices in modern India, few if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with, say, the thirteenth-century logician Gangesa or with the grammarian and linguistic philosopher Bartrihari (fifth to sixth centuries), or with the tenth- or eleventh-century aesthetician Abhinavagupta. Sad though it is, one result of European colonial rule in South Asia is that the intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only matters of historical research for most—perhaps all—modern social scientists in the region. They treat these traditions as truly dead, as history. Although categories that were once subject to detailed theoretical contemplation and inquiry now exist as practical concepts, bereft of any theoretical lineage, embedded in quotidian practices in South Asia, contemporary social scientists of South Asia seldom have the training that would enable them to make these concepts into resources for critical thought for the present. And yet past European thinkers and their categories are never quite dead for us in the same way. South Asian(ist) social scientists would argue passionately with a Marx or a Weber without feeling any need to historicize them or to place them in their European intellectual context. Sometimes—though this is rather rare—they would even argue with the ancient or medieval or early-modern predecessors of these European theorists.\(^\text{798}\)

---

It might be true that contemporary social scientists in India rarely argue with the earlier thinkers of the Western canon, but this is much less of an anomaly in the case of intellectual historians and historians of political thought who teach the Western canon from Plato to Marx. In short, institutions of learning outside the West are nowadays likely to adopt “European categories” of thought.

Jenco criticizes this idea of taking European categories as “inescapable” and points to the “irony” that “those who most insist on the inescapability of Europeanized categories, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, are themselves not of European or American cultural descent,” and that it is their “Anglicized (and often overseas) education, not their local contexts or countries of origin, that determine how and to what extent they participate in Anglophone academic debates.” The irony here only arises if the claim of “inescapability” is a claim about the “inescapability” of the culture one is born in, but Chakrabarty’s claim is not actually about culture, but about institutions and intellectual practices. These institutions and practices were produced in the West since the Industrial Revolution and have spread with its colonial and neo-colonial conquests.

It is true of course that intellectuals outside the West are not having exactly the same debates as those in the US or Europe are having: their countries face challenges of a different nature, and their own local traditions are not dead. Indeed, Stephen Angle has, for example, written about Neo-Confucianism in China today as a “live philosophical tradition” and has emphasized in his work the ways in which Western philosophers can learn from it. And yet, even the “New Confucians” that Angle discusses, the inheritors of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in contemporary China, are clearly concerned, in a central way, with the encounter between their local tradition and Western institutions, with combining Confucianism with

800 Angle, Sagehood, 6-7.
modern constitutionalism and democracy. And this is as it should be, since many of the modern social and political institutions in non-Western countries are themselves imported from the West through colonialism (direct or, as in the case of China, indirect). The nation-state itself is the clearest case of such importation. Chakrabarty is again helpful here in linking global politics and national curricula:

Nation-states have the capacity to enforce their truth games, and universities, their critical distances notwithstanding, are part of the battery of institutions complicit in the process. “Economics” and “history” are the knowledge forms that correspond to the two major institutions that the rise (and later universalization) of the bourgeois order has given the world—the capitalist mode of production and the nation-state … A critical historian has no choice but to negotiate this knowledge. She or he therefore needs to understand the state on its own terms, that is, in terms of its self-justificatory narratives of citizenship and modernity. Because these themes will always take us back to the universalist propositions of “modern” (European) political philosophy—even the “practical” science of economics, which now seems “natural” to our construction of world systems, is (theoretically) rooted in the ideas of ethics in eighteenth-century Europe—a third-world historian is condemned to knowing “Europe” as the original home of the “modern,” whereas the “European” historian does not share a comparable predicament with regard to the pasts of the majority of humankind. 801

In other words, precisely because modern political (and other) institutions are largely modeled on Western ones, and because these Western ones have a long history in the making, including intellectual developments that accompanied them, there is no escape importing the story about the intellectual developments together with the institutions. Thus, having taken up the nation-state as a model, non-Western countries also have to study, if not adopt, the intellectual developments surrounding it, including the history of the notions of sovereignty, democracy, liberalism, etc. 802 Hence the reason why Western philosophers feature prominently

801 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 41-2.
802 Similarly, John Dunn argues that “no one thinking seriously and on in any scale about political agency in the world in which we live can ignore for any length of time the legal, administrative, and coercive apparatus of the modern state, the ideological and practical obliquities of the modern political party, or the recalcitrant dynamics of the world trading system. These are all historical realities that were first analysed with any rigour and profundity in the west; and it seems clear that, for a variety of reasons, they are still more intensively and deeply understood by
in the history of political thought as taught in, say, China, Pakistan, or Tunisia. As John Dunn writes, what separates the Chinese, Japanese, Islamic, etc. intellectual traditions from “the dynamic continuity of the history of political theory in the west” is not simply spatial discontinuities, but more subtly, and perhaps in the end more profoundly, it is also the degree to which they, unlike the bearers of the political theory of the west, have been forced over the last few centuries to address the terrain of modern politics not just on practical terms set by intruding imperialist power and wealth, but also, increasingly, on intellectual terms set by the west and through categories forged in the west to interpret the demands and possibilities of a shared global habitat. 803

To recognize this phenomenon is not to approve it, let alone to sound a note of resignation. It is simply to make a sociological observation that should affect our understanding of political theory in the modern world. As Farah Godrej argues in relation to the use of “the distinction between West and non-West,” it is not a distinction that one necessarily normatively espouses, but it does reflect a sociological fact on the ground, namely “patterns of historical privilege and exclusion within modes of knowledge production, both substantive and methodological.” 804 While the aim in giving serious attention to non-Western traditions is to contest these patterns, it might not be helpful to deny them. In other words, it is difficult, and perhaps pointless, to think of non-Western traditions, when considered as a whole, outside the influence that the encounter with the West has had on them and on current debates around them in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. To completely step out of Eurocentric debates, as Jenco argues for, is to ignore the political realities of our current world, and the substantial influence political, economic, and evidently educational institutions have on the way we live in it.

thinkers who have chosen to adopt the categories of western political and economic analysis (with whatever amendment) for their own than they are by any traditions which have sought to insulate themselves as best they could from the imaginative pollution of western conceptions of value, purpose and causality.” See Dunn, _The History of Political Theory_, 15-6.

803 Dunn, _The History of Political Theory_, 14.
804 Godrej, _Cosmopolitan Political Thought_, 14.
I have argued in this section that “tradition” is an intellectual construct that is neither transient not unchanging. It is the product of long historical processes affecting the make-up of school curricula and the knowledge framed and imparted by educational institutions. Having established that traditions are inevitable intellectual constructs, I show in what follows that the solution cannot be to get rid of them, but to encourage the reconceptualization, through the rethinking of educational curricula and canons, of what we take to be “our” tradition.

III- Toward a “global political theory”

I argued in the first part of this chapter that distinct methodologies are not needed for the study of non-Western traditions of thought. In the second part, on the other hand, I showed how historians of political thought understand their task to follow from, and contribute to, a developing a body of thought conceptualized as the Western tradition. I also argued that the Western tradition has been propagated through formative institutions, especially educational ones, first in the West, and later, through direct or indirect colonialism, in the rest of the world.

The idea that tradition captures the ontological reality of the way in which a social context necessarily influences us, as Bevir argues, might suggest the argument that members of each tradition should study their own, given the intimate access they have to it: thus Westerners would study the Western tradition, the Chinese the Confucian tradition, the Arabs the Islamic tradition, etc. This idea is problematic for two reasons: one factual and the other normative. The factual reason, which I alluded to above in my discussion of Western hegemony, is the fact that we all share common concerns today stemming, to quote John Dunn, from “the legal, administrative, and coercive apparatus of the modern state, the ideological and practical
obliquities of the modern political party, or the recalcitrant dynamics of the world trading system.”805 This means, as I also mentioned, that contemporary debates in non-Western countries, and the ways in which local traditions are constructed and reconstructed, are, for good or for worse, inflected by the concerns, values, and categories that follow from a modern sensibility. It would be odd therefore, but also implausible, to reconstruct educational and intellectual curricula such that they eschew this new commonality of concerns among traditions across the globe.

The second factor, which I want to develop in what follows, is related to the first, but has a less realist undertone: I present the normative reasons why differently situated political theorists should care about studying the political theory produced by other cultures, and why we should therefore care about expanding the canons of intellectual history such that they include both Western and non-Western authors, instead of, or at least in addition to, assigning to each geographical region or culture their own local canon. As I do so, I flesh out my proposal for a “global political theory.”

- The human condition

My proposal is to take as a starting point of our inquiry into politics our shared fate as fellow humans, and thus to look at how humans, in different places and at different times, have managed to organize their lives together, how they have solved predicaments, what goals they have had, what values they have considered dear, etc. We would then learn, not only about the variety of political experiences in the world across history, but also about shared concerns and

805 Dunn, The History of Political Theory, 15.
strategies. As Roxanne Euben puts it, this would shed light on “familiar debates about the problems of living together,” thus ensuring that political theory is “about human and not merely Western dilemmas.”

Moreover, while the goal is not to help us explain how we, Europeans, or Americans, or Chinese, or Arabs, came to be what we are today, the hope is to explain how the world came to look the way it does today, how humanity and human history have unfolded in time. In other words, our starting, and ending, point of inquiry would be the “human condition” and not merely the Western condition.

Attempts have been made, in the history of political thought, to get at this “human condition” by abstracting culture and history out of human life. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau have thus stipulated a state of nature, where humans are in a primordial phase before the advent of civilization. In a slightly different vein, John Rawls has offered the idea of the veil of ignorance to conjecture what system of justice humans would choose based on their reasoning faculties, and in abstraction of their social standing, and cultural and religious identity. Many have found fault with these attempts, arguing that they are based on very specific, and not universally shared, views of human nature and human society, and on controversial stipulations about the primacy of reason in human judgment, the primacy of individuals in society, the nature of collective action, the place of religion in human life, etc. An alternative way to understand the human condition and the challenge of forming, organizing, and preserving human society, and to understand the varieties of the ways in which humans act politically, relate to their communities, and combine their spiritual and political lives, is to adopt a historically informed approach. The idea is thus to provide an account not only of human political experiences across time and space (which historians have long offered), but also of human political thinking at different times and

---

in different places (the purview of political theorists). In this sense, like history, anthropology, and comparative literature, political theory would expand our “data” about the human predicament, and explain the evolution of human thinking about politics around the world. To give one example here, I argued in Chapter 3 that the early Confucians, and contrary to most of the thinkers of the Western tradition, believe human nature to be good, and humans to be prone to act with reciprocity towards others in society. This is one of the reasons that they favored rituals that hone humans’ social tendencies, instead of rewards and punishments that wager on humans being self-interested, calculating, and lacking in benevolence. This Confucian conception of human nature helps both to unsettle some of the assumptions about how humans act in society that have been buttressed by the long history of political thought in the West and to explain some of the debates around the tension between Confucianism and constitutionalism in China today.\footnote{See Thomas Metzger, A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today (Beijing: Chinese University Press, 2006).}

The idea of a shared human condition might seem naïve, or at least too idealistic, especially when compared with the realism exhibited in the previous section, where I spoke about Western hegemony. Godrej and Jenco would certainly find fault with the idea of “familiar” debates across cultures and time periods about the challenges of collective life. Godrej indeed argues that

\footnote{See Thomas Metzger, A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today (Beijing: Chinese University Press, 2006).}
confluence of various traditions seems, on the one hand, to make it (misleadingly) easier to attribute a certain familiarity to them. But on the other hand, it makes it more difficult to grapple with their situatedness within a non-Western tradition.\footnote{Godrej, \textit{Cosmopolitan Political Thought}, 48.}

While agreeing with Godrej in her diagnosis, I propose that we take the familiarity that she warns against as a productive starting point for cross-cultural study: that we share the same modernity today should be a spur, rather than an obstacle, to cross-cultural inquiry. While the burden to familiarize themselves with other traditions has been heavier on scholars in non-Western countries, who have had to study Western categories and philosophical debates, in addition to trying to maintain their local traditions, the pressure to transcend cultural boundaries has also increased in the West. For very different reasons, ranging from the internet, to global trade, to events like September 11, there has been a growing interest—partly benign, and partly much less so—in the West to study different cultures. On Fred Dallmayr’s optimistic view, globalization today has even led to the decline of the “Eurocentric world view of the past” and the “rise of a global arena in which non-Western cultures and societies are increasingly active participants in shaping the future of the world.”\footnote{Fred Dallmayr, \textit{Beyond Orientalism: Essays in Cross-Cultural Encounter} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), ix.} For him, the emergence of CPT as “a mode of theorizing that takes seriously the ongoing process of globalization”\footnote{Dallmayr, “Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory,” \textit{Perspective on Politics} 2:2 (June 2004): 249.} is the intellectual ramification of this political development. While Dallmayr’s optimism is widely exaggerated, it remains the case that globalization creates the need, albeit one that is still unfulfilled, to engage in cross-cultural inquiry. As John Dunn argues in an unpublished lecture, the interaction between countries, peoples, and cultures today makes it so that politics today is global in scope; any effort to study the history of political thinking should therefore start from this “global context.” The
need for a “global history of political thinking” is therefore an “epistemic need, not an unconstrained imaginative choice over where to direct their attention.”

Instead of assigning CPT the task of global inquiry, as Euben and Dallmayr do, I propose instead to reconceive political theory and the history of political thought as “global political theory” and the “history of global political thought,” respectively. Western and non-Western traditions alike would come together as our “global tradition.” I choose the adjective “global” rather than “cosmopolitan” for two reasons. First, cosmopolitanism sometimes connotes a specific normative outlook (the universalism of the Stoics) that is tangential, and by no means necessary, to the project I recommend. Secondly, the use of “global” is reminiscent of “global history,” which I take to be a model for what I call “global political thought.”

Bruce Mazlish makes a useful distinction between two trends in the discipline of history: “world history” and “global history.” While world history is the study of the “interaction among peoples of diverse cultures,” “global history” takes its lead from recent trends in globalization. On the one hand, its task is to study these trends. On the other hand, and this is what is crucial for my purposes here, global history denotes “a new consciousness, a new perspective” which is inspired from globalization. The new consciousness is, in part, a consciousness based on a “developing global identity.” It is this—still nascent—global identity that raises the question whether we could write not only a global history, but also a global history of political thought or, in other words, the history of a global tradition. Like global history, global political thought is not primarily a history of the ways in which political ideas travelled from one place to another.

Instead it is a history that traces both interactions in time, and moments of isolation, that together help explain the current mapping of political thought, visions, and categories, around the world.

As John Dunn says about his proposed “Global History of Political Thought”:

> For some time to come, within this new voyage of discovery, there would inevitably be a degree of imaginative trade-off between these two perspectives, with the long retrospect trough the experience of each particular community reinforcing, and even imposing, a degree of imaginative parochialism, and the focus on the recent past fostering a hastier, and almost certainly inadvertently chauvinist, interpretation of the content, if not the basis, of the enforced encounter. But in the longer run, the partition walls between the parish histories would begin to crumble, and the vision of the encounter decentre insistently, and raise quite novel questions of its own. \(^{815}\)

Global political thought is the product of a shift in contemporary consciousness from national and civilizational identities, to a global identity. It is premised on what Charles Taylor identifies as the need to “elaborate a common language,” to “develop a common set of practices” and thus to “to grow together as civilizations,” for us to be able to understand other traditions and arbitrate values across cultures. \(^{816}\)

Of course, the shift to a global identity has not actually occurred yet. In terms of political theory, the identity of its practitioners is still decidedly Western. And, given my account of tradition above, it will not be easy to change the intellectual worldview that political theorists start from, the tradition that they consider their own, before educational and other formative institutions start propagating a more inclusive idea of what “our” heritage is, and how we define ourselves. But this is precisely where the importance of the study of non-Western thought comes in: the more non-Western texts are integrated into the canon of political thought, i.e. the more they are considered productive of useful knowledge, the more they are likely to be included in educational curricula, and the more they are thus included, the more likely it is for a global

---

\(^{815}\) Dunn, “Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought,” 14.

\(^{816}\) Taylor, “Philosophy and its History,” 30.
identity to take shape, and the more a global identity takes shape, the more it makes sense to speak of a global tradition. The argument is circular, but the circle is not a vicious ones. It simply describes the way in which interpretive practices and the conceptualization of tradition affect each other. Indeed, on Gadamer’s account of tradition, the traditions we inherit are not “simply a permanent precondition,” one that would require us to devise proper methodologies to sift them out in the process of interpretation. Instead, we “determine” tradition and contribute to its “evolution,” in the act of interpretation and understanding. As Gadamer puts it, all understanding is based on the “interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter.”

- Implications

The first implication of my proposal, already spelled out above, is that the study of non-Western traditions should not be conceived as an independent subfield, but as part and parcel of the discipline of political theory. The idea is to expand and make more inclusive the heritage that political theorists draw from, rather than to compartmentalize it. While I have called for rethinking political theory as global, based on a newly constructed global or human tradition, this does not mean that political theory will not continue to include distinct traditions such as the Western, the Chinese, the liberal, the Islamic, the Marxist, etc. traditions. It only means that, in parallel with continuing developments in these traditions, we should push for a perspective that is global in scope, and within which many contribute, as I hope to have done in this dissertation, in discrete but ultimately cumulative efforts, to building a global history of political thought.

Secondly, as I have suggested in the first part of this chapter, there is no reason to insist on a specific kind of “immersion” when non-Western traditions or cultures are at stake. The debate about how to approach thinkers from bygone eras is a lively one in the history of political though: some, like proponents of the Cambridge School, insist on a close attention to historical and discursive context, while others are more concerned with the question of contemporary relevance. My own approach to early Confucianism, while attentive to historical context, has also focused on issues and concepts that find clear echo in contemporary political theory: the idea of political order, the relationship between ethics and politics, the question of democracy, the idea of political or civic duties, etc. To put this differently, I did not look at the Confucian texts from the perspective of later Chinese commentators, but from the perspective of a Western-trained political theorist. This is in line with seeing Confucianism as being not simply part of the Chinese heritage, which only the Chinese tradition has something to say about, but as also being part of the global political and theoretical heritage, which should be accessible to all. In other words, in studying Confucianism, as in studying Islamic travel literatures, or the Indian practice of non-violence, or the Chinese Republican ideal of collective action, or the Neo-Confucian ideal of virtue, we cannot be required to focus only on the debates around these traditions in their countries of origin. These traditions are important for us, whoever we are (Confucianism is important for me not only as a Western-trained academic, but also as a Lebanese and an Arab). This is not to ignore the fear that such appropriation plays into existing hegemonic patterns of world dominance. But one has to start from somewhere, and push for less hegemonic appropriations once the interest in non-Western sources gains traction.

Thirdly, while the impetus behind global political theory is a motivation to treat texts and authors from different traditions as valuable sources of knowledge about humans, politics, and
society, the expectation should not be that we can overturn the dominance of European categories overnight. Jenco comes close to advocating such an overturning when she criticizes Godrej for not being radical enough, for simply “decentering” political theory, when the goal should be to “recenter” it. CPT falls short of its radical potential, according to Jenco, if it limits itself to emphasizing that political theory is, *pace* Euben, about the universal and familiar questions of political life. For this is to “reduce the thought of foreign others to case studies,” to fit “their work into an existing framework,” and thus only allow them to “modify” the existing framework, rather than “displace” it. My emphasis on the sociological bases for the dominance of the “existing” Western framework, which is based on the prevalence of modern, typically Western, institutions, suggests that “displacing” the framework is neither possible in the short run, nor perhaps needed. Unless political theorists, together with the rest of the world, decide to give up on democracy, human rights, and the sovereign state, the existing framework will not, and should not, be displaced anytime soon. As I said above, this should not be construed as a form of recalcitrance to the existing status quo, and Jenco’s and Godrej’s efforts are worthy in reminding us against this, but we should keep in mind the nature of that status quo, and whether we can step out of its intellectual dimension while keeping to the nation-state as a form, democracy as an ideal, and modernity (legal systems, industrialization, the modern university, secularism, etc.) as our way of life.

Finally, once we relax both the concern with devising distinctive methodologies and the concern with overthrowing European categories, the study of non-Western thought will take more diverse shapes, and the burden on those studying it to justify their projects will be reduced. The canon of Western political thought did not arise out of an argument for its importance, nor

---

did its authors’ significance have to be justified before they were actually studied. The importance of studying them arose out of the study itself, not the other way round. One also wonders whether political theory should not take its lead from disciplines like anthropology, history, and comparative literature, where the methodological question about self and other, though alive and well, is not required to be solved before the inquiries into the “other” can take place. The idea, in other words, is to spend more time studying non-Western thought, and less time arguing about how to study it. This is the reason why I have kept this discussion to the concluding chapter of my dissertation.
Bibliography

Primary texts and translations:


Secondary sources:


Tiwald, Justin. “A Right of Rebellion in the Mengzi?” *Dao* 7, no.3 (Fall 2008), 269-282.

