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Responsibility over Rules: A Confucian-Inspired Approach to Post-Comparative Ethics

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Abstract: As cultures become increasingly involved, attempts are made to find productive lines along which ethical understandings can be developed which respect diversity and yet go beyond simplistic comparisons. Much of the discussion in this area is squarely situated within existing religious or philosophical frameworks—and these, in turn, are in the aggregate decidedly based on Western traditions. This paper proposes a philosophical-religious reading of Confucianism, especially with respect to its appreciation of ethical responsibility based on the importance of community, tradition, and norms, as a foundation for developing post comparative ethical approaches. The majority of the paper is centered on reading of responsibility in early Confucian texts which challenges the assumptions of contemporary academic philosophy (as practiced in classrooms, journals, and conferences) and fits into a decidedly Chinese way of thinking about religion that can be used to go beyond simplistic comparisons. This offers, in terms of both the approach being used and the specific content, an avenue for constructing post-comparative understandings of ethics.

Keywords: global philosophy; post-comparative philosophy; Confucianism; moral responsibility

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1. Introduction

In a wide range of arenas, the Anglophone discussions of global and comparative ethics are squarely situated within frameworks where rules, principles, and abstract concepts take precedence. Accordingly, while the specific content of these rules, principles, or concepts might be contested, or even transformed through considerations of different cultures and traditions, this basic underlying structure is not challenged. For example, in a recently commissioned research project issued by the European Union, scholars are looking for ways in which notions of (human) rights can be harmonized with the Chinese tradition.[1] Although the explicit goal of this undertaking is to foster healthier communication between the EU and the People's Republic of China, there is no room for upsetting the notion of rights itself—which is abstract, universal, and principle-based. Relatedly, scholars have sought to align developments in AI, algorithms, and associated technologies with values held by a wide array of traditions and cultures. When trying to include Confucianism, for example, this has often led to reducing important values such as filial piety (*xiao* 孝)—which is traditionally regarded as primarily indicating the attitude and emotions children and parents have—to principled accounts of specific behaviors (see, for example, Liu 2023).

The orientation in scholarship to view the Chinese tradition as fitting into some facet of Western religion or philosophy, especially in terms of demanding rules, principles, and abstract concepts, is neither new nor surprising. It began, for instance, with religiously oriented translations of *dao* 道 as "God" and discussions of the degree to which Christian truths were realized in the Middle Kingdom.[2] More recent scholarly works are certainly better at appreciating differences, but only to some extent. The explicit aim of many comparative scholars is to find similarities, and the results of their research belie this goal. Religious thinkers often suppose there is one foundational good, and that various religions,

including Confucianism, simply offer distinct expressions of it.[3] In philosophical circles, most works in English on Confucian ethics regard it as a type of virtue ethics, where the Chinese tradition has little to offer Aristotelians outside of a few new virtues, slightly different emphases in cultivation, and perhaps some interesting vices. Even more problematically, the underlying framework for much of the Anglophone scholarship on Chinese ethics holds it to standards developed in the Western academia—ones which are not only not applicable to early Chinese thought but are actually rejected. There is a background assumption in many works that whatever ethical understanding one finds must be objective and universal. If Chinese ethical approaches are to be considered legitimate, they must offer a way of thinking about right and wrong that can be applied in all cases (even if particulars might be factored in), and should somehow hold the promise of being able to answer any and all ethical issues.[4] As will be demonstrated below, most early Chinese thinkers did not develop this kind of thinking, and actually found this type of approach more dangerous than encouraging.[5]

This paper will attempt to develop a structure for thinking about post-comparative ethics[6] which is more sensitive to early Chinese approaches. Borrowing from contemporary Chinese thinkers, we can understand what is proffered here as a mixture of philosophical and religious thinking—although not necessarily "philosophical" or "religious" in the way these terms are often used in Western scholarship. We might say that early Chinese thought relies on ways of reflecting that broadly encompass both philosophical and religious thinking and believing. And we could then say that the method these texts use to convince readers is also not easily reducible to either philosophy or religion. We could also think of early Chinese thought as simply not beholden to either of these categories and try to understand it in different ways. This paper is a brief attempt to do so. We will focus mainly on the *Analects* and *Mencius* and develop an understanding of the "philosophical-religious"[7] notion of responsibility found within these texts.

In this way we see how this philosophical-religious notion of responsibility can offer a robust alternative structure to how we think about global and comparative discussions of ethics. Rather than assuming that rules, principles, and abstract conceptions are required for ethics, we can place more emphasis on the responsibility of people and traditions and appreciate how ethics, even philosophical versions of ethics, are fundamentally religious in nature.[8] Different approaches to ethics, and discussions of global ethics as well, should then not be taken as offering propositions for what is or should be the case. Rather what they point to are ways of reflecting on the world, interactions, and oneself; they can allow those who engage with them to be better positioned to develop their thinking, feelings, and behaviors. This is arguably the approach found in the *Analects* and *Mencius*, and it is one which could critically reshape the way we think about ethics in a post-comparative fashion.

2. Confucianism in/and Western Academic Philosophy

Reading Confucianism using familiar Western philosophical structures—claiming, for example, that it is a version of virtue ethics, that it contains moral principles, or that it takes abstract reasoning as central— communicates well with much contemporary moral and ethical academic discourse. Those unfamiliar with the tradition can thereby readily understand and accept that while different in some particular content, the basic structure of Confucianism is reminiscent of great philosophers such as Aristotle or Kant. Accordingly, the two basic pillars of (most) contemporary Western academic discussions of morality are not challenged: (1) there is a single knowable moral approach, and it is largely applicable in all situations; (2) if this approach is properly followed, it can solve all moral problems. Or, to put it more concisely, moral theories are expected to be objective and universal. They are not supposed to admit (too much) variance, or exceptions. Moral philosophy is about finding the final answer to all moral problems (past, present, and future).

There are, of course, many challenges to this type of thinking. Some ways of philosophizing, for example as expressed in the *Zhuangzi*, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Richard Rorty,

to name only three, are not interested in finding final answers, and their contribution to ethical discourse is therefore highly contentious. They are often then read as critiques of traditional ethical perspectives, or else critical of ethics itself. But the most problematic approaches are those which claim to be highly concerned with ethics, and yet are unable to provide final answers, or, even more radically, are not concerned with them. Constructing interpretations of early Confucianism along the lines of role ethics, or a contingency model, often runs into these problems. Likewise, many Chinese scholars are not concerned with final answers, and do not develop their understandings of Confucianism in accord with the pillars mentioned above.[9] Some general frustrations with these approaches can be framed as follows: if Confucianism does not offer universal and objective rules of right and wrong, if appropriateness is determined within situations without reference to something more abstract, then how can this be morality? is this not a type of relativism? would Confucians not have to (at least potentially) admit *anything* into their worldview?

Accordingly, Confucianism is often regarded, if not expressly in the arguments of many Western philosophy professors but at least in practice, as not being a legitimate philosophy. Generally speaking, those who push hardest to have Confucianism recognized by Western academia often do so by either putting it into a pre-existing category of philosophy, such as "virtue ethics" or "deontology"[10] or by creating another type of "ism" (i.e., moral exemplarism) or succinct label such as "role ethics". In doing so they not only add a new label to Confucian thought, but further ask that it conform to ways of thinking which it either does not generally include or even goes so far as to explicitly criticize.[11]

Seeking to resolve these tensions, many academics today[12] look for relatively fixed definitions of values like "humaneness" (*ren* 仁), "duty" (*yi* 義), and "filial piety" (*xiao* 孝) or they seek to explain "harmony" (*he* 和) or "ritual" (*li* 禮) as abstract theories. Since these are considered the cardinal ideas in the Confucian moral perspective, abstract conceptual descriptions of them allow Confucianism to be considered a legitimate philosophical approach—that is, legitimate according to generally accepted standards in Western academic discourse. When read as abstract concepts which have a uniform definition, the values Confucianism discusses can be taken as (at least potentially) objective and universal. Scholars can then promote Confucian morality as responsive to the most importance moral requirement: Confucianism is able to, at least theoretically, solve all moral problems. By participating in this type of discourse, Confucianism can be seen as a serious philosophy.

However, discussions of the aforementioned concepts in texts like the *Analects* are rarely clear-cut or non-contradictory. Therefore, a key means by which scholars argue that Confucianism is oriented towards a final answer, and that its concepts are abstract, objective, and universal, is the notion of "flexibility." Flexibility allows scholars to argue that while there are not clearly described concepts or searches for a final answer in the *Analects* or *Mencius*, these texts are ultimately considered with the same overall project. They simply give various descriptions of what flexibility looks like in practice. Behind all of this is a philosophical understanding not so different from today's academic discourse. Ultimately, these flexibility-based readings of Confucianism are premised on taking values in the *Analects* and *Mencius* as abstract and/or objective and universal rules which can then be bent or selectively applied. Therefore, it seems that the interpretation is oriented more towards satisfying the requirements of contemporary Western academic philosophy than discussing Confucianism.[13] In other words, a rule-based flexible application reading of Confucianism fits seamlessly into basic assumptions about morality that pervade much of contemporary Western academia.

We can loosely frame the way some scholars conceive of Confucianism in this context as follows:

> Yes, in Confucianism there is a standard for morality, and it is largely applicable in all situations. Since situations and people are always unique, Confucianism speaks of various values, and the application of them is always highly dependent upon the particulars involved. However, in some sense (and according to some

readings) there is basically one Confucian moral approach, and it can be applied to any moral issue.

Some scholars who employ the rule-based flexible application reading of Confucianism might counter that the multiple values in Confucianism really are different, that there is not an overriding *ren* 仁 "humaneness" or *shan* 善 "good" that serves as the single pinnacle of all values.[14] Adding variance and appreciating a diversity of values does not, however, influence the discussion here since we are mainly interested in the structure of this reading: how it takes something(s) as abstract, constant, and objective, and then argues that it (they) can be universally applied—even with a large degree of variance. When this structure is used to interpret Confucianism, then the type of approach discussed in the *Analects* and *Mencius* fits well into the assumptions of contemporary Western academic discourse on morality. This reading of Confucianism proposes ideas which are both objective and universal—they just need to always be tailored to the unique aspects of concrete situations.

Therefore, just as deontology offers principles, consequentialism offers calculations, virtue ethics identifies particular traits and ways to develop them, or care ethics highlights specific aspects of the human experience, Confucianism also offers something rather precise and constant. Read either as a version of one of the major approaches highlighted above, or as its own unique "ism," the drive in much Anglophone discourse on Confucian morality is figuring out how to specify this approach and make it compatible with objectivity and universality, or the search for a final answer. In this way, Confucianism can also be considered a legitimate philosophical approach according to the widely held norms in Western academia.[15]

Religious understandings offer other potential ways to interpret early Confucian ethics. However, once again much of the scholarship published in English sees Confucianism either as insufficient to be considered a real religion or pushes it into a category where it does not really fit. One of the more popular techniques sees Confucianism as basically compatible with Christianity—in ways similar to aligning Confucianism with Kant or Aristotle. In the following section we will look at attempts made by two contemporary Chinese thinkers to expand the meaning of "philosophy" and "religion" when dealing with the Chinese tradition.

3. Confucian "Religious" Ethics

Contemporary Chinese scholars have sought to unwedge Confucian thought from its awkward positioning in the molds of Western philosophies or religions. Many resist, for example, applying any type of label or "ism" to *Analects* and *Mencius* (besides "Confucianism"). To this end, various curious phrases, which typically sit uncomfortably with Western scholars, have become popularized in Chinese to explain the uniqueness of this tradition. "Immanent transcendence (*neizai chaoyue* 內在超越)" and "concrete metaphysics (*juti xingershangxue* 具體形而上學)" are some examples; others include thinking of absoluteness (*juedui* 絕對), universality (*pubian* 普遍), and principles (*yuanze* 原則) as all admitting exceptions—which in the eyes of Western scholars mean they are equivalent to generalizations. These are methods of creatively employing Western terminology to wrench Confucianism from the grasp of other Western philosophical and religious categories. But there have been other important methods as well. Li Zehou 李澤厚 (d. 2021) and Lou Yulie 樓宇烈 (b. 1934) use the language of religion to develop another type of response. However, their understanding of religion should not be confused with familiar Western conceptions of religion. The idea of "religion" is used mainly to free Chinese thought from the various shackles any discussion of "philosophy" seems to require.

According to Li Zehou, we can think of ethics or morality as belonging to one of two general categories. They are "religious morals" and "modern social morals." In traditional times most cultures did not differentiate between the two. This is because societies were relatively close-knit and there was little variance in norms and expectations. People in a given community shared similar conceptions of goodness, appropriateness, and all sorts of personal beliefs, moral convictions, values, and the like. In fact, this is exactly what Li

means by "religious morals." Here emotions and reason are not separated, and people are not conceived of as atomic individuals. That is, reason and emotions are taken as co-constitutive and one develops them in tandem. What we can notice as distinctive between these two are only certain emphases and the ways they can keep one another in check. They serve to help the person balance traditional practices, ideas they have learned from others, and their own personal qualities. So, while we can think of emotions and reason as separate, religious morals ask that we do not. Second, persons are always thought of as co-constitutive and defined by their social relations. Through interactions a person is developed, and it is only here that reason and emotions can be cultivated. Checks and balances against negative dimensions of the individual (e.g., excessive desires) and bad or outdated norms (e.g., sexism) are best dealt with through the person interacting well with others and doing so in a way where neither emotions nor reason are necessarily prioritized over one another. Religious morals thus highlight conceiving of the person in terms, either exclusively or near exclusively, of their social roles and relationships.

Modern social morals were gradually developed out of religious morals. Here we find more emphasis on reason as distinguished from emotions and the person as an atomic individual. Indeed, both are developed to the point of being conceived of as abstract, that is, they are thought of without the influence of concrete particulars, and without emotions or relationships. With modern social morals we then get not only abstract reason and the atomic individual, but also (abstractly) redefined conceptions of equality, justice, and autonomy. This type of morals is rule-based and seeks to develop principles of right and wrong. From some perspective, we can understand this as a necessary consequence of some types of modern societies where people no longer share thickly held norms and values. Their expectations for one another are confused, and thereby necessarily become hollow. In other words, religious morals become increasingly irrelevant as societies diversify, so modern social morals are developed to fill the gap.

Borrowing from Li's structure, we can take contemporary academia as promoting certain understandings which are derivative of "modern social morals". The primacy of reason divorced from emotions and concreteness, along with the heavy reliance on abstract conceptualizations of everything from the individual to justice, fairness, and equality, is one way to understand much of Western academic philosophy and is more or less the definition of modern social morals. Early Confucianism, on the other hand, operates like a religious morality.[16] It does not prioritize reason, nor does it allow reason to be meaningfully separated from emotions or other so-called particulars. The person too is understood largely through roles and relationships, or what Li refers to as "guanxi-ism"—which for our purposes just means the interconnectedness of people in a community. Viewed in this way, it is unsurprising that early Confucianism, as a religious morality, cannot fit well into contemporary Western academia.

In addition to this rather convincing diagnosis of the significant distinctions between early Confucian thought and contemporary academia, there are other dimensions which can also be highlighted from a religious-based approach. In his recent monograph *China's Humanistic Beliefs* (*Zhongguo de renwen xinyang* 中國的人文信仰), Lou Yulie argues for an alternative understanding of religion or belief when speaking about the Chinese tradition. Most religions, Lou notes, include reference to a second world. This may be a world where gods or God lives, and it might also be a paradise, or a place beyond space and time. Lou also describes Western philosophy as relying heavily on a second world (Li Zehou also thinks this is critical). Generally speaking, both Lou and Li agree that a strong reliance on a second world—be it explicit in Plato's world of forms, or implicit in reference to the person as an atomic individual, a conception of reason as somehow separatable from the particulars of this world, or highly abstract discussions—as foundational for most of Western philosophy and religion. Chinese thought does not include such reference, and for this reason it does not fit well into the categories of "philosophy" or "religion", nor can it be situated within related framework or adequately discussed with the associated terminology.

China does, Lou says, have a strong tradition of belief, but rather than belief in another world, or God or gods, it is belief in humans and in the natural world.[17]

According to Lou, the belief found in the Chinese tradition is "rooted in humans (*yi ren wei ben* 以人為本)" (Lou 2021, p. 3). Already this structure is quite different from many Western religions where belief is directed towards something outside of this world or beyond human beings. The trajectory of Chinese humanistic belief is inward; it looks to the past—including ancestors and tradition—and well as others and oneself. The focus is always on "the world we live in (*women shenhuo de zhege shijie* 我們生活的這個世界)" (Lou 2021, p. 4).[18] Nature also plays an important role. The world we live in is a natural world, and humans themselves are thoroughly part of this world. Thus, rooting belief in humans also means rooting belief in the natural world, and in the recognition of humans as inseparable (in any aspect) from nature. Lou readily admits that this type of belief will not fit well into Western conceptions of religion or philosophy, but this is exactly the point he wants to make. Chinese belief is unique and should not be reduced to Western categories.[19]

In concert with Li Zehou, Lou also thinks looking for principles, rules, or any overly abstract concepts in Chinese thought is problematic. There are general guidelines, but these are always only ever thought of as part of this world. Accordingly, the emphasis should not be on creating all-encompassing ideas about what is correct or not, nor should we spend too much time theorizing about moral or ethical issues. Rather, we should put our effort into helping people cultivate themselves so that they can do well when applying guidelines, traditional ideas, or social norms. Li talks about this using "proper measure (*du* 度)" and "flexibility (*quan* 權)"[20] to discuss how people should think about models. The idea is that any rules that can be given are only sometimes applicable, and the mark of a good person is found in their ability to "properly measure" and "flexibly" apply rules in an appropriate way. Lou makes basically the same argument, speaking, for instance, of "acting in accordance with the time (timing) and place (environment/situation) (*yinshi yindi er dong* 因時因地而動)"[21] and with "bringing about advantage through being in accord with the propensity of the situation (*yinshi lidao* 因勢利導)".[22]

For both Li and Lou, the idea is that people have internalized guidelines for what it means to be a good person, or to interact well with others. Indeed, this understanding has been pervasive throughout the Chinese tradition, where scholars (and non-scholars) would encourage each other to memorize past models, classics, and ritualistic behaviors, not so that they could mimic them, but so that they could reference them when deciding what they should do. Examples from history, values discussed in classical texts, and the rituals a community performs are used to help set up shared expectations and social norms. However, rather than these being rules everyone must follow, they are points of reference and must always be adapted to situations with a keen eye to the unique requirements of particular circumstances. The person is therefore responsible for making sure they are able to properly measure or flexibly apply guidelines so that they are acting in accordance with the time and situation in a way which can bring about advantage through being in accord with the propensity of the situation. This, in fact, is a particular type of responsibility that does not neatly fit into most contemporary Western understandings of either religion or philosophy.

4. Confucianism's Philosophical-Religious Responsibility

The guidelines proffered by the *Analects* and *Mencius* come in various forms. Sometimes what we find in the *Analects* or *Mencius* sound like rules (e.g., *Analects* 4.15; 15.24), or we find discussions which seem to hint at overarching definitions of abstract concepts (e.g., *Analects* 2.5; *Mencius* 2B11). We also find descriptions of the nature of humans and their interactions (e.g., *Analects* 9.14; *Mencius* 2A6; 6A1) as well as stories which should contain some moral (e.g., *Analects* 17.20; *Mencius* 7A35) or hints at how to think about oneself and others (e.g., *Analects* 14.1; *Mencius* 1B12). The guidelines provided are thus varied in terms of both their content and their form. With such a wide array of structures and types of guidelines, there is little surprise that early Confucianism does not fit well into familiar

Western categories of philosophy or religion. As will be discussed in more detail below, the breadth of what the *Analects* and *Mencius* take into consideration when deliberating on ethics is broad and looks more to the concrete than the theoretical. This means that the way to practice and learn from early Confucianism is also more about practice, proper measure, flexibility, and acting in accordance with the time and situation—in a way that can bring about advantage through being in accord with the propensity of the situation rather than simply recognizing the correct guideline or providing an abstract analysis.

Another important aspect of these guidelines, and one which bears on the classification of Confucianism as a philosophy or religion, is its convincing methodology. In other words, how do these texts aim to convince their readers of the truth of what they claim. We can begin by noting that "truth" can have misplaced importance when discussing Confucianism. While we may interpret sections of the *Analects* and *Mencius* as being related to truth, the texts themselves do not explicitly make any such claim. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find equivalent terminology in the texts. Relatedly, the standard convincing methodologies found in a general survey of most Western philosophies and religions is missing as well.[23] Philosophy normally utilizes reason and hopes to convince people rationally of the validity of what is argued. Even if emotion is important, reason plays a significant role. Religion takes a different approach, asking that one develops faith or belief. Again, reason and emotion can play significant roles, but so too can one's community and appeals to various aspects of experience. Confucianism operates differently. As noted above, there is no sharp distinction between emotion and reason, and experience, community, and every other aspect of life are all seen as intimately intertwined.[24] The texts aim to convince people by prompting them to learn certain guidelines, applying them (as Li and Lou describe) and then being impressed with their efficacy. It is up to the person to be convinced, and this convincing does not come from a single avenue. Below we will discuss in more detail how communities and interactions are important for the person being convinced and cultivating responsibility. First, however, we will briefly look at what responsibility means in this context.

As mentioned in the previous section, the method for utilizing the various guidelines found in the *Analects* and *Mencius*, at least in terms of the way the tradition actually operated, was that people would memorize the texts, consider various past and current models of excellence (as hinted at by the texts as well), and reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in light of what they learned. Ultimately, the person is broadly and deeply responsible for what they do. For example, in *Analects* 12.1 Confucius speaks of how humaneness or "human-heartedness"—typically considered among the highest values in Confucianism—is completely dependent upon oneself:

> Yan Yuan [Yan Hui] asked about human-heartedness (*ren* 仁). The Master said, "To restrain oneself (*keji* 克己) and return to ritual propriety is to be human-hearted. A day when restraining oneself and returning to ritual propriety is practiced, all under heaven will bend toward human-heartedness. To be human-hearted is dependent on oneself. How can it be dependent on others?"
>
> Yan Yuan said, "May I ask about its details?"
>
> The Master replied, "Look not if it is contrary to ritual propriety; listen not if it is contrary to ritual propriety; speak not if it is contrary to ritual propriety; act not if it is contrary to ritual propriety".
>
> Yan Yuan said, "Though I am not quick-witted, allow me to follow these instructions". (Ni 2017, p. 279)

Yan Yuan is expected to identify the proper guidelines and then to keep his own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and even senses aligned with them. And while these guidelines may be extremely useful for being an ethical person, it is mainly the person themself who is responsible. Another way to translate "To be human-hearted is dependent on oneself" is "being human-hearted comes from oneself".

The *Mencius* too echoes this argument, saying that the best type of person "is clear about things, investigates human relationships, and acts from [a sense of] humaneness and duty; they do not act according to humaneness and duty (4B47)". Here Mencius is plainly speaking against following models. A person needs to come to know about the world and about human relationships, and then, only then, can they act from a cultivated sense of ethics. The idea is that the person themself must be responsible, and that what they do, think, or feel cannot be simply following some concept or rule. If a person mechanically follows some teaching without having internalized it, then this is not actually being ethical. The responsibility of being ethical is wholly on the person, not on any rule, ritual, or calculation. It is not even up to the person to flexibly apply whatever standard they have heard, rather, they must remake ethics in each instance. This idea of constantly making ethics goes hand-in-hand with responsibility.

In 15.29, the *Analects* also diminishes the value of rules or concepts and emphasizes how ethics are made by people (who are thus also responsible): "It is humans who can broaden the Way, not the Way that can broaden humans" (Ni 2017, p. 366). "The Way" can mean any type of guideline, including rituals, virtues, or values, and anything resembling a rule or advice provided in any text. Here Confucius is saying that people should not simply follow what they learn, but that they need to renegotiate it, again in the style Li and Lou mention. In the first stages one might need to largely follow various rules, rituals and traditions, but ultimately the idea is that they transcend this type of reliance (cf. *Analects* 2.4). In this way ethics is made by people, through their interactions. It also means that people are responsible for the way that they make. When simply following a way, one does not have responsibility for the path, only their movement on it. But when one needs to broaden the way, then they have a much higher degree of responsibility.[25]

We should, however, be cautious about placing too much emphasis on creativity or agency when thinking about the person as responsible. To begin with, the *Analects* and *Mencius* do not think of people as adjudicating about ethics from a neutral position. The person is always in a context, in terms both of their immediate situation and their larger social environment and historical traditions. Many of the guidelines provided in the text explicitly remind readers of these various contexts. But we also have to remember that this is not something one necessarily needs to be reminded of when developing ethical discussions. Western philosophy and religion sometimes imagine the person as an isolated individual, take reason and autonomy to be abstract, and accordingly downplay the significance of concrete particulars.[26] This should not be assumed to be a "natural" or "standard" position, and in early Confucianism we do not see arguments against this position—we simply do not find it at all. The person is thus always thought of as in broad contexts, and reason, emotion, experience, and every messy "particular" of the concrete world (and in early Confucianism there is no other world) are all part of any person's ethical reflection and are all integral for responsibility.

Thus, responsibility does not belong to an "individual" in an abstract sense, but to a person as a conglomerate of guanxi or relationships, of social roles and norms, various communal expectations and rituals, and tradition. A person's responsibility should not be abstracted from these contexts, and in both the *Analects* and *Mencius* we find explicit arguments against trying to abstract ethical understandings from them. In *Analects* 17.21, for example, Zai Wo makes a rational argument for why mourning for three years is too long—he complains that rituals and music will be lost and suggests mourning for one year instead. In response, Confucius begins by reminding Zai Wo that exemplary persons would mourn for three years because of how they feel. This is the initial stage of the argument, where he reminds Zai Wo to try the traditional ritualistic practice and see how he feels first. Confucius might also be thinking that if Zai Wo does this, and sees the reaction in his community, he will be positively influenced. Unfortunately, Zai Wo is not convinced and goes on his way. When he leaves, Confucius tells his other students that Zai Wo is not humane (*ren* 仁). This "talking behind one's back" is probably just another appeal at having the community help Zai Wo find the right path. The other students will

likely either talk to Zai Wo or do other things to encourage him. It is no great stretch of the imagination to suppose that this is what Confucius intends. Conceding that he cannot correct Zai Wo, he instead uses this method to prompt Zai Wo's peers to influence him instead. (It was likely as obvious to Confucius as it is to us today that peers can be more effective in changing people's minds than authority figures).

In this example we see that too much reliance on one's own thoughts and reasoning can be problematic. Emotions, experience, tradition, and community[27] are significant markers for realizing what is appropriate and what is not. When the focus of one's attention is narrowed to what they think irrespective of broader contexts, and when they divorce the importance of key ethical practices, such as music, from their environments, then they are likely to make mistakes. This is precisely the problem with Zai Wo. He thinks about his responsibility in a vacuum, relying heavily on his own reflections which are disassociated from social contexts. In the *Mencius* we find the same problem manifest in a different way.

The *Mencius* relates the story of king Xuan who confesses to being too fond of money and sex. In conversation with Mencius, the king, like Zai Wo, states that he wants to be a good person. However, he admits that his concern for his own personal fortune and sexual satisfaction gets in the way of being a good king. Mencius responds by telling the king to think about broader social contexts. It is not only the king who is fond of money and sex. Most people, Mencius states, have similar desires. What the king should do is not focus on his own desires but take on the responsibility of helping his people achieve some level of wealth and sexual pleasure. Again, the message is to think about oneself in broad social communities (including the past and present) and reshape the contours of responsibility accordingly.

5. Comparing Responsibilities

In some sense, major moral approaches discussed in contemporary Western academia, such as deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, and care ethics, all offer agents a way of excusing themselves from being wholly responsible for how they think and act. The comparisons between these approaches clarifies the point: if following a deontological approach, one does not need to concern themselves (at all or too much) with consequences, virtues, or emotions. Similarly, consequentialists do not have to worry (at all or too much) about principles, virtues, or emotions. And the same thinking can be applied to virtue and care ethics. In this way, one who considers themself to be following one of these moral approaches is not responsible for things that fall outside of it.[28] The responsibility reading of Confucianism outlined above does not offer the same simplicity to its subscribers. All of these various angles, from principles and rules, to calculations, virtues, and emotions, are relevant for Confucian ethics. None of them are wholly relied upon, but neither can they be excluded.

Put otherwise, the *Analects* and *Mencius* do not readily divide the (moral) world into aspects that count as important and those that do not. (And this is partly why Confucian morality is so resistant to the various "isms" scholars have tried to apply.) There are norms which function somewhat like principles, and these are important, but so too are consequences, virtues, and emotions. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find aspects of life that the *Analects* and *Mencius* do not include in their moral discussions. Sometimes some aspects are given relative priority, but there is no clear way of deciding when or how, and the interaction of various aspects of life is often most important. Or, to frame it another way, while major moral approaches discussed in contemporary Western academia attempt to push some areas of life aside and count only what they think, for whatever reason, counts, Confucians take the opposite approach. In the *Analects* and *Mencius*, we consistently find a call for gathering more details, considering a broader scope, and weighing not just doctrines or models but any possibly relevant factors with one another.

On the responsibility reading, we can note that what is considered moral in Confucianism is nearly always something one has to negotiate in interactions. The *Analects* and

Mencius do not allow people to simply say "I was following filial piety" or "What I did was the ritual" and be done. Examples throughout these texts depict exemplary persons straying from what is considered filial or ritual conduct. Often, this is interpreted as suggesting that "real" filial or ritual conduct is something else. Instead, however, we could take this as indicating that there are no abstract principles of filial or ritual conduct at all and that what is filial or ritual conduct is always made through human interaction done well. What is done should be assessed in terms of the particular environment and with a broad consideration for how it contributes to constructing conditions whereby oneself, others, and future people might be better able to do well. In other words, there is no real value that is expressed in different ways; values are made and can only ever be remade—they are not mirrored or flexibly applied.

In this way, we can read the *Analects* and *Mencius* as suggesting that ethical models, or even what is considered ethical or moral itself—that is, the very concepts used to describe any praiseworthy behavior, including filial piety, ritual, humaneness, and the like—are made through interactions between people. Specific textual evidence for this type of thinking is mentioned above. In the *Analects* we find discussions of "broadening the way" as an alternative to simply following a way. Of course broadening a path implies the ability to stray, and suggests that what one actually does is what the way ends up being. Even more explicitly, in the *Mencius* (4B47) we have the idea of not doing what is ethical (humane or dutiful) but acting from what is ethical. The idea is that someone has a rough understanding of what is ethical, and in conducting themselves to the unique particulars of their circumstances they create ethical interactions. Each different instance of ethics thus reframes what it means to be ethical. Many times this can be simply following some past model—which can look like a rule or even principle. But in fact, this requires being keenly aware of the specifics involved, and there is always the potential need to stray from what worked in the past. So whatever rules, standards, or concepts we come up with are nothing more than tools to help us sharpen our own understandings, which need to be responsive. Ethics does not exist; it can only ever be made. Certainly, Confucianism does offer models and examples as being helpful points for people to consider, and it undoubtably thinks people should take in a wide array of influences to develop their ability to reflect, but ultimately whatever the person decides and does is their own responsibility. Acting in accord with some version of the categorical imperative, or consequentialist calculations, one can say, "I did this because the morality I believe in says it was the right thing to do." Confucianism offers no such refuge. Surely there are some who take this approach to Confucianism, turning, for instance, what Confucius said into principles. However, not only can we read Confucius himself as resisting this reading, but it was also continually rejected throughout the tradition (just as it was continually reinstated).[29]

6. Conclusions

Ethical discourse in contemporary Western academia is largely centered around the search for objectivity and universality. Many ethical theories are expected to find, or at least contribute to the search for, a final answer to all moral problems. Discussions are largely theoretical and mostly end up prioritizing some aspects of life over others. In this way they are highly abstract and ignore concrete particulars. Indeed, relatively mundane moral issues, such as how to dress appropriately, reprimand one's children, deal with a problematic friend, or simply cultivate one's attitude in traffic, are rarely mentioned. Issues like this are seen as too heavily entrenched in particulars to have a place in moral discourse. Only if we take a more abstract principled approach, such as "dress in a way that is appropriate for the situation" or "treat children with respect" can we begin to approach these issues in contemporary Western academia. But the particular details cannot be thoroughly addressed in a theoretical context.

The responsibility reading of Confucianism presented above suggests a different view. On this account, Confucianism is mainly interested in the messy details necessarily ignored in more theoretical approaches. However, this means that Confucianism refrains from en-

gaging in abstract discussions and is thereby not a valid moral philosophy—at least if the mainstream discourse in Western academia serves as defining our understanding of moral philosophy. And when faith is formulated around humans themselves, the natural world, and the relationship between them, it is difficult to see Confucianism as a legitimate religion either. However, respecting this aspect of Confucianism helps free it from its uncomfortable position as either "philosophy" or "religion"—at least as they are narrowly conceived.[30] Even more significantly, it helps us reimagine how we can develop global or post-comparative ethics. To borrow from Li Zehou, ethics today are largely constructed along the lines of "modern social morals". There is a huge amount of emphasis placed on abstract reasoning, on conceptions of the person as isolated individuals, and on notions of justice, equality, and fairness which are all but devoid of any concrete content. Or, to use the vocabulary of Michael Sandel, we find ourselves in a world which increasingly prioritizes the right over the good. In fact, it seems that the more "modern" our ethics become, the less of a shared conception of the good—or even discussion of the good—exists.

Taking Confucianism as a religious moral allows us to better appreciate it in its own context, to realize why it does not fit well in certain contemporary categories, and also opens a space for reframing our discourse. We could try to use Confucianism as a religious morality to "properly measure" or "flexibly limit" modern social morals (Western ethical discourse) and create new frameworks for developing more constructive discourse about global or post-comparative ethics.

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1 Anna Baka is the principal researcher for the project: "The 'Right' in Human Rights: Aristotelianism and Neo-Confucianism at the basis of the EU-China Dialogue" (RIGHT), which has been awarded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellowship under Horizon-2020. (See, https://pric.unive.it/projects/right/home, accessed on 5 May 2024).

2 One of the more influential figures in this project was Mateo Ricci (d. 1610). For a discussion of his work in this area see Hsia (2010).

3 The title of Robert Neville's *The Good is One, Its Manifestations Many* (Neville 2016) well demonstrates this point. Other recent works includes essays in *Confucianism and Catholicism* (Slater et al. 2020) and some aspects of *Transcendence and Non-Naturalism in Early Chinese Thought* (Brown and McLeod 2020)—more obvious examples notwithstanding. A recent paper by Michele Ferrero (2024) on *li* 礼 or "ritual" in Confucianism problematizes this issue with reference to Christianity.

4 From the perspective of Confucianism, we can understand this perspective, even as it appears in secular philosophy, as a by-product or continuation of particular religious ideas.

5 For a more detailed discussion of this issue see Ni Peimin's *Confucius: The Man and the Way of Gongfu* (Ni 2016). Here Ni presents a view of Confucius and early Confucianism that is outside of the narrow constraints of contemporary Western philosophical approaches. He also demonstrates why many of today's most unchallenged philosophical assumptions are completely misguided when applied to early Confucian thought.

6 By "post comparative" I mean not simply looking at ideas from one tradition and comparing and contrasting them with another. Instead we might also draw from various traditions to address contemporary issues. This involves some methodological changes, and understanding distinctions between various philosophical structures—which I am attempted to do, in whatever small ways, in this paper.

7 What I mean by a "philosophical-religious" reading, is one that draws on both disciplines, which allows our readings to get beyond some of the methodological assumptions they sometimes bring.

8 What we will find is not that rules or principle-like discussion are totally useless. To the contrary, they are important in the first steps towards developing a moral sense, or developing on one's moral sense, so that one can help orient interactions in ethical ways. This point will be addressed again below. (See also Ni 2017, pp. 18–29).

[9] Many Chinese scholars, from Confucius until today, thought that the social world was in need of constantly renegotiated methods of management, and therefore did not engage in a search for a final "truth". Among contemporary scholars, many prominent self-identified Confucians also oppose such endeavors, including, for example, Li Zehou 李澤厚 (d. 2021) (Li 2014), Chen Lai 陳來 (b. 1952) (Chen 2014), or Yang Guorong 楊國榮 (b. 1957) (cf. Zhang 2024).

[10] In the 1970s and 1980s when deontology was quite popular in Anglophone academic discourse, English readings of Confucianism followed suit and argued for deontological interpretations. In more recent decades virtue ethics has come to dominate, and now Confucianism is taken as a version of virtue ethics.

[11] These are of course generalizations; the Confucian tradition is broad and diverse no matter how one defines it. Below, this paper focuses more specifically on the *Analects*.

[12] Here we are referring mainly to those academics that publish and largely work in Western or English-speaking academic circles. The following is not true of many scholars in, for example, Mainland China.

[13] This is of course not the sole motivation for reading Confucianism as rule based. Within the text of the *Analects* and *Mencius*, for example, we find many instances where disciples try to tease out rules from what the respective masters offer.

[14] For example, Edward Slingerland argues that some understandings in early Confucianism are tied to natural principles (cf. Slingerland 2011), and others, including Tu Weiming (Tu 2012) and Cheng Chung-Ying (Cheng 2014) find abstract or transcendental principles in early Confucian thought.

[15] The point of this section is not to argue that Confucianism is somehow superior to other ethical views, or to attack any specific approach to ethics. The main idea is to highlight the difference between approaches.

[16] Here the idea is that we can expand our understanding of religion, and even philosophy, in light of what Li Zehou has proposed. This allows us to read early Confucianism from a different perspective.

[17] This is, of course, a lively debate. Some scholars argue that *tian* 天 might constitute another world. However, there is nothing in the *Analects* or the *Mencius* themselves that points to a world outside of space and time—which is how Lou understands the "second world" of many religions. However, later in Chinese history we do have the introduction of this type of thinking. A more nuanced discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

[18] For some, such as A.C. Graham, Chinese thought is much more concentrated on "how to live" than "what to believe in" or "what is true". Li (2014) also expresses this point.

[19] It is the author's own contention that approaches related to religion and philosophy can be useful for understanding Confucianism, indeed they already have been. However, the point of this paper is to show that there are also limitations. So we need to adjust our ways of thinking about both Confucianism and perhaps also categories such as "religion" and "philosophy"—that is, not only when discussing Chinese thought, but more generally. In this way we can also move "beyond comparisons".

[20] "Flexibility" can be understood in a number of ways. The previous section discussed attempts to use flexibility to squeeze Confucian thought into contemporary philosophical structures. This is one particular approach at understanding flexibility, where there is an overarching or abstract concept which must be negotiated with the particulars of the concrete world when implemented. According to early readers such as Wang Bi 王弼 (d. 249), this does not resonate with early texts such as the *Analects* and *Mencius*. Li is making a similar argument. Accordingly, the version of Confucianism we get not only offers an alternative to contemporary academic philosophy, but also criticisms of it.

[21] There are many different versions of this phrase. As Lou uses it, it can be taken as a combination of different phrases found in the *Wu Yue Chunqiu* 吳越春秋 (*History of Wu and Yue*).

[22] This phrase is a compressed version of "*yin qi shi er li dao zhi* 因其勢而利導之", found in the *Shi Ji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*) 65.5. Both phrases mean more or less the same thing.

[23] What follows are general comments. They are used mainly to highlight a contrast with early Confucianism. The author of this paper does not claim to be doing anything else.

[24] We find this for example in the *Analects* 17.21 (discussed in more detail below), where Confucius makes arguments which are both based on reason, emotion, and the community. Mencius does something similar in *Mencius* 1B12, discussing a certain king's love of money and sex.

[25] As will be discussed below, we should be careful in appreciating the difference between this type of responsibility and some notions of responsibility that we might be more familiar with. The broadening the way version of reasonability articulated here is not based on specific obligations. Moreover, in includes realizing one's situatedness within certain communities, cultures, and traditions. We thus must be careful about how we conceive of the person and how we think of obligations in this context. The general argument here attempts to outlines ways in which early Confucianism might include different perspectives.

[26] For an excellent discussion of this see Henry Rosemont's *Against Individualism* (Rosemont 2015) see also Michael Sandel and Paul D'Ambrosio's volume *Encountering China* (Sandel and D'Ambrosio 2018), especially the articles by Ames, Rosemont, and D'Ambrosio. Li (2014) also provides a lengthy discussion of this issue.

[27] This is not to say everyone in the community counts equally. In *Analects* 13.24 we find:

> Zigong asked, "What about someone who is loved by everyone in the neighborhood?" The Master replied, "Not enough". "What about someone who is loathed by everyone in the neighborhood?" The Master said, "Not enough. It is better that the person is loved by the good people and loathed by the bad people in the neighborhood" (Ni 2017, pp. 317–18).

The *Mencius* (7B37) also mentions the village worthies, who are some of the worst people in one's community, though they are regarded as virtuous by many. As will be discussed in more detail below, paying attention to the reactions of others in one's community is important. However, one does not listen to others without discriminating between those whose opinions are valuable and those whose opinions are not.

[28] Of course the moral approach itself is demanding full responsibility, but from other perspectives, or from the viewpoint of any person who does not strictly subscribe to one theoretical moral approach, there is much the agent is not responsible for.

[29] Numerous interpreters of the *Analects* have vigorously argued against the notion that Confucius was positing any type of principles or standards, from early commentators such as Wang Bi through contemporary scholars such as Li Zehou and Ni Peimin.

[30] To reiterate the major argument above, much of the difficulty in understanding Confucianism in terms of Western academic philosophy or religion can be seen in details of how certain ideas are interpreted due to methodological differences. From a broad perspective, many Confucian ideas are well appreciated in Western scholarship, such as humane-centeredness or the importance of filial piety. However, sometimes the details of how these ideas are understood can be misleading.

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