Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy

In this book, Bryan W. Van Norden examines early Confucianism as a form of virtue ethics and Mohism, an anti-Confucian movement, as a version of consequentialism. The philosophical methodology is analytic, with an emphasis on clear exegesis of the texts and critical examination of the philosophical arguments proposed by each side. Van Norden shows that Confucianism, though similar to Aristotelianism in being a form of virtue ethics, offers different conceptions of "the good life," the virtues, human nature, and ethical cultivation. Similarly, Mohism is akin to Western utilitarianism in being a form of consequentialism, but it is distinctive in its conception of the relevant consequences and in the specific arguments that it gives on its own behalf. The author makes use of the best current research on Chinese history, archaeology, and philology. His text is accessible to philosophers with no previous knowledge of Chinese culture and to Sinologists with no background in philosophy.

Bryan W. Van Norden is an associate professor in both the philosophy and Chinese and Japanese departments at Vassar College. He has edited and contributed to *Confucius and the* Analects*: New Essays* and co-edited *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. A Fulbright Fellow, he has also received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Chiang Ching–kuo Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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BRYAN W. VAN NORDEN
Vassar College

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To Becky

Then she opened up a book of poems
And handed it to me
Written by an Italian poet
From the thirteenth century.
And every one of them words rang true
And glowed like burnin' coal
Pourin' off of every page
Like it was written in my soul
From me to you. . . .
– Bob Dylan

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Preface

This book examines the teachings of the *Analects* of Kongzi (Confucius), early Mohism, and Mengzi using a particular philosophical methodology. Specifically, I interpret Kongzi and Mengzi as virtue ethicians and the early Mohists as consequentialists. I also focus (especially in the case of the early Mohists and Mengzi) on the philosophical arguments they give for their own positions and against those of their opponents. I hope to later extend this methodology to cover the "School of Names" (Gongsun Longzi and Huizi), the "Daoists" (Zhuangzi and the authors of the *Daodejing*), the Neo-Mohists, the Ruist Xunzi, and his student, the "Legalist" Han Feizi.[1]

My aim has been to produce a work that will be accessible to Sinologists with a limited knowledge of philosophy and to philosophers with a limited knowledge of Chinese culture. I have made a special effort to make this work comprehensible to those with no special philosophical background. I hope readers will keep this in mind if my exposition of philosophical terminology and issues seems too elementary at points. Non-philosophers who still find my philosophical terminology daunting may wish to consult *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, edited by Robert Audi. Those without a background in Chinese culture may find helpful the introduction to a volume I edited, *Confucius and the* Analects*: New Essays*. For a more extensive introduction to early Chinese history and culture, one may consult the authoritative *Cambridge History of Ancient China*, edited by Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy.

[1] The names of schools that I have put in scare quotes are only labels of convenience for loosely related groups of thinkers. The Ruists and Mohists were organized movements (with various factions), but the others were not organized schools during the pre-Qin period.

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It is fitting that I acknowledge my many unrepayable debts: to the philosophers of the Western and Chinese traditions, especially (in the order I encountered them) Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Kuhn, Kongzi, Thomas Aquinas, Mengzi, and Alasdair MacIntyre; my primary and secondary school teachers, especially Mrs. Wonetta Crouse and Mr. James J. Seabol; my college teachers, especially Charles Kahn, Nathan Sivin, and James Ross; Chad Hansen, whose work first influenced and inspired me when I was an undergraduate; my teachers in graduate school, especially Lee H. Yearley, David S. Nivison, and Philip J. Ivanhoe; the emotional support and guidance provided by Gail Pease, Dr. Hubert Kauffman, and the "Keep It Simple" group of Wappingers Falls, N.Y.; and my colleagues over the years, especially Arthur Kuflick, Margaret Holland, Jennifer Church, and Douglas Winblad. Most of all I owe a debt to my ancestors; my many other friends whom I have not mentioned; my siblings; my parents, Helen K. and Charles R. Van Norden; my children, Charles and Melissa; and my ex-wife, Sarah Rebecca "Becky" Thomas.

Usage

Dates are identified as B.C.E. and C.E., instead of B.C. and A.D. "C.E." stands for "Common Era" (and "B.C.E." for "Before the Common Era") – meaning the era common to Christianity, Judaism, and the other religions of the world. This is intended not as a way of downplaying the significance of Christianity but merely to provide a usage that is comfortable for non-Christians as well.

Translations from the *Mozi*, *Mengzi*, *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi*, *Han Feizi*, and "Robber Zhi" are adapted freely from Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd rev. ed. unless otherwise indicated. Citations follow the passage numbering in that text. (For long passages in the *Mengzi*, I supply not only the book and chapter number, but also the number of the "verse," according to James Legge, trans., *Mencius*.) Translations from the *Analects* follow the sectioning in Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius: Analects*. I have sometimes modified the translations from *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* and Slingerland's *Analects*, so the original translators should not be blamed for any errors I have introduced.

Pinyin Romanization will be used throughout, except in the following cases: citations of titles, quotations from other works, and proper names of individuals who have selected their own Romanizations. Tones will be provided for at least the first occurrence of Romanized words that accompany characters. (If I add tones to a Romanized word in a translation, I do not bother to note that the translation has been modified.)

Two of the most famous philosophers whom I discuss in this work are commonly known in the West as "Confucius" and "Mencius." However, these names are actually Jesuit Latinizations. Furthermore, "Confucius"

is a Latinization of an extremely rare form of that thinker's name.[1] There is a good case to be made for retaining the Latinizations when writing in English. (After all, I do not refer to Plato as "Platôn.") However, as the world gets smaller, it is more and more important to be able to communicate with other cultures using their own terms. Consequently, in place of the Latinizations "Confucius" and "Mencius" I shall use the more faithful "Kongzi" and "Mengzi." The term "Confucianism" is another Westernism, and one that is potentially quite misleading. The corresponding Chinese term is rú 儒, which is etymologically unrelated to the name of Kongzi.[2] This fact sometimes makes the translation "Confucian" quite unworkable (e.g., *Analects* 6.13). More important, it would seem odd to continue to use the term "Confucian" when I no longer use the name "Confucius." Thus, at the risk of seeming quaint, I shall write "Ruism" and "Ruist" in place of "Confucianism" and "Confucian."

In my notes, I use a short citation format, supplying the last name of the author and enough of the title of the work to uniquely identify it. The bibliography at the end provides complete bibliographic information. This format has an advantage over more conventional citation formats. Providing complete bibliographic information in the notes clutters them with redundant information. On the other hand, a reader who encounters "Nivison (1980c)" in a note is highly unlikely (even if she has a good memory) to be able to remember what article is being cited. Likewise, "Nivison, pp. 739–61," forces the reader to page back to find the first reference to the work in question in the notes for that chapter (sometimes easy, sometimes not). However, anyone conversant with the secondary literature will know what article "Nivison, 'Two Roots or One?'" refers to.

[1] On these points, see Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*.

[2] See Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, as well as Eno, *Confucian Creation of Heaven*, Appendix B, and Zufferey, *To the Origins of Confucianism*, on this vexed term.