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.

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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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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 ethicists 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.

¹The 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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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”
Usage

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 “Platón.”) 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 龒, 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.