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In the past two decades, Confucian political theory has rapidly established itself as one of the most vigorous subfields of political theory, obliterating the image of Confucianism as a relic of the “feudal” age and the single greatest obstacle to East Asia’s modernization. Of course, Confucianism as a set of intellectual ideas or as a world religion has long been incorporated into modern education since East Asia’s full-scale “encounter with the West” in the late nineteenth century. In the last century, Confucianism has been taught or engaged in many academic disciplines and programs including sociology, history, sinology, religious studies, East Asian studies, and, most recently, philosophy. Despite the ongoing controversy in the Anglophone academic world as to whether Confucianism, and so-called “Chinese philosophy” in general, can be properly considered “philosophy,” as the term and its intellectual practice are understood in the discipline,¹ an increasing number of philosophers have begun to recognize Confucianism as an important subject worthy of exploration and are thus eagerly integrating it into their curriculum and research, thereby enriching and reforming the discipline of philosophy to be more multi-cultural and cross-cultural comparative. Political theorists in political science, however, have not yet expressed equivalent enthusiasm for Confucianism as an academic subject and this is quite surprising, even unfortunate, considering the fact that they are often situated in an environment in which some of their more empirically minded colleagues are actively engrossed in Confucianism understood as a political culture or value system in relation to various indicators of modernity such as economic development and democratization.² Seen in

¹ On this controversy and for a forceful criticism on West-centrism in the philosophy departments of North America, see Bryan W. Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

² See, for instance, Doh Chull Shin, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Chong-Min Park and Doh Chull Shin, “Do Asian Values

this way, recent interest in and development of Confucian political theory among political theorists in their endeavor to de-provincialize politics and “the political” signals the rise of a new intellectual movement that is long overdue, catching up with what other disciplines have done long ago.³

But what do we mean by “Confucian political theory”? Does it only refer to a constructive philosophical project concerned with the present and future of contemporary East Asia and beyond, one that puts Confucianism in dialogue with liberalism and democracy? Indeed, the recent emergence of Confucian political theory has been propelled largely by contemporary Confucian political theorists who commonly cite classical Confucianism as the guiding philosophical inspiration for their reconstruction of Confucianism into a modern political theory. Not surprisingly, creative intertwinement between history of political thought and normative political theory has been one of the most salient and exciting features of Confucian political theory and it is arguably for this reason that highly abstract and purely analytic forms of political theory, which dominate normative political philosophy of the West, are nearly non-existent in Confucian political theory.⁴ In most cases, key normative arguments advanced by Confucian political theorists are difficult to make sense of or to justify, unless supported by some textual evidence, and only then is the theory in question considered to retain its “Confucian” credential. Accordingly, much of

Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?” *Asian Survey* 46 (2006), pp. 341–361; Adrian Chan, “Confucianism and Development in East Asia,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26:1 (1996), pp. 28–45; Kyung-Dong Kim, “Confucianism, Economic Growth and Democracy,” *Asian Perspective* 21:2 (1997), pp. 77–97; Gregory K. Omatowski, “Confucian Ethics and Economic Development: A Study of Adaptation of Confucian Values to Modern Japanese Economic Ideology and Institutions,” *Journal of Socio-Economics* 25:5 (1996), pp. 571–590. To the best of my knowledge, until very recently, Benjamin I. Schwartz’s classic book *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) has been the only book-length work by a political theorist on Chinese political thought in which Confucian political theory is given substantive attention.

³ See, among others, Brooke A. Ackerly, “Is Liberalism the Only Way toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy,” *Political Theory* 33:4 (2005), pp. 547–576; Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); idem., *Public Reason Confucianism: Democratic Perfectionism and Constitutionalism in East Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); idem., *Democracy after Virtue: Toward Pragmatic Confucian Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Joseph Chan, Doh Chull Shin, and Melissa S. Williams (eds.), *East Asian Perspectives on Political Legitimacy: Bridging the Empirical-Normative Divide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴ Arguably, Chan’s *Confucian Perfectionism* presents the most abstract and analytic form of Confucian political theory, but even Chan supplies an appendix at the end of the book where he provides a textual interpretation of several key passages of the classical Confucian texts that he believes are essential to his normative argument (pp. 213–232).

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the normative disagreement among contemporary Confucian political theorists can be attributed to their different interpretations of key Confucian texts.

However, while contemporary Confucian political theory's methodological eclecticism has made a remarkable contribution to the development of Confucian political theory by encouraging many normative Confucian political theorists to simultaneously engage the history of Confucian (and other East Asian) political thought, it has, somewhat ironically, kept them from actively pursuing a full-scale investigation of classical Confucian political theory in its own intellectual context with close attention to individual Confucian thinkers' distinctive philosophical contributions. That is, recent enthusiasm for cross-cultural comparison between classical Confucianism and Western political theory, though important, has mainly encouraged Confucian political theorists to highlight the general features of classical Confucianism in comparison with Western philosophical traditions, but in doing so they have paid less attention to Confucian political theory as developed by classical Confucians themselves – their internal disagreement (and agreement), debate, and evolution, especially during the formative stages of the tradition.

As a result, in political theory, we have many accounts of a general and idealized Confucian view of several important philosophical concepts and ideas such as justice, freedom, human rights, equality, autonomy, political participation, citizenship, and so on, which are mainly West-inspired, but surprisingly little has been discussed of how the classical Confucians, individually or together, struggled in their own social and political contexts or how their intellectual struggles, often involving internal disagreement and debate, eventually contributed to the development of classical Confucian political theory.⁵ Even when existing studies on classical Confucian philosophy draw due attention to the disagreement or debate between the classical Confucians, their focus has predominantly been on the disagreement over “ethical” issues, such as whether the classical Confucians held contrasting accounts of human nature in a philosophically robust way or how such difference gave rise to equally contrasting methods of moral self-cultivation, without making much effort to extend this ethical concern to a broader political question of how the classical Confucians *thereby* advanced distinct political theories via internal disagreement and debate in ways plausible in their own political contexts.⁶ Despite the plethora of studies on classical Confucian philosophy, little work has been produced that investigates whether classical Confucian thinkers, especially Mencius

⁵ Note that, throughout this book, by “classical Confucianism” I mean pre-Qin Confucianism, more specially the philosophical thought developed by Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. Accordingly, by “the classical Confucians” I strictly refer to these three ancient Confucian masters.

⁶ Though Loubna El Amine's *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015) intends to provide a rather holistic picture of classical Confucian political theory, it, too, falls short of articulating how classical Confucian political theory was advanced via internal debate and disagreement by focusing mainly on the common ground that binds the three ancient Confucian thinkers as “political realists.”

(372–289 BCE) and Xunzi (c. 310–235 BCE), who came after Confucius (551–479 BCE), each had a coherent political theory and whether or how they developed a more systematic Confucian political theory in the course of wrestling with their predecessors' ideas.

The relative disregard of classical Confucianism as a coherent and systematic political theory in the English-speaking academic world is rather surprising if we turn to Chinese and comparative philosophy, where exciting philosophical innovations have been made through careful reconstruction of and comparison between Mencius's and Xunzi's overall philosophical systems (in modern academic language), especially with regard to their contrasting views of human nature, different accounts of moral motivation, reasoning, and judgment, and their equally different methods of moral self-cultivation, which are *then* engaged with contemporary virtue ethics, epistemology, empirical psychology, evolutionary biology, and even neuroscience. Though book-length studies that thoroughly examine each Confucian thinker's moral philosophy are also scant relative to the studies on, for example, Plato's or Aristotle's moral philosophy, despite their parallel impact on the East Asian moral and political tradition,⁷ several pioneering works in early Confucian ethics and philosophy, many of which are produced in the form of anthology, help us to attain a comprehensive philosophical understanding of Mencius's and Xunzi's ethical theories.⁸ Comparable intellectual endeavors are deplorably lacking in political theory, as strikingly evidenced by the virtual absence of a book-length study (including anthologies) dedicated to the political theories of Mencius and Xunzi – what they have in common as Confucians, where they part company, and whether or how Xunzi's political theory is indebted to Mencius's seminal insights and ideas.

⁷ Until today, the most comprehensive study on Mencius's moral philosophy and ethics is one offered by Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), but this book also does not sufficiently engage Mencius's political philosophy. Also see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002); Bryan W. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter 4. For Xunzi's moral philosophy, see Kurtis Hagen, *The Philosophy of Xunzi: A Reconstruction* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2007); Janghee Lee, *Xunzi and Early Chinese Nationalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004); Antonio S. Cua, *Human Nature, Ritual, and History: Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), part 1.

⁸ Essays compiled in Xiusheng Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002) combine to provide a comprehensive picture of Mencius's moral philosophy. For Xunzi's ethics and moral philosophy, see Eric L. Hutton (ed.), *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016); T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000); T. C. Kline III and Justin Tiwald (eds.), *Ritual and Religion in the Xunzi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014). For a short yet pointed comparison of Mencius's and Xunzi's ethical theories, see Kim-chong Chong, *Early Confucian Ethics* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2007).

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This book is motivated to fill this critical lacuna in both Chinese philosophy and Confucian political theory by systematically reconstructing Mencius's and Xunzi's political theories from several guiding philosophical angles, which I discuss shortly.

The Paradigm of Confucian Virtue Politics

There are several guiding propositions that underlie this book, which combine to constitute what I call the paradigm of Confucian virtue politics. The paradigm of Confucian virtue politics will provide an important backdrop against which the distinctive characteristics of Mencius's and Xunzi's political theories, to be presented in the following chapters, will be highlighted and evaluated.

First, virtue understood as excellent trait of character is the central concern for both Mencius and Xunzi, and their political theories are predicated on their respective virtue ethics, which begins with a specific account of human nature, supports a specific method of moral self-cultivation, and aspires to the moral ideal of the "sage" (*shenren* 聖人) as the final destination of moral self-cultivation. Let us call this *the virtue proposition*. Though some scholars challenge the virtue-ethical interpretation of Confucian ethics due to the danger of assimilating it into Western virtue ethics, especially the Aristotelian variation,⁹ there is deep consensus among contemporary scholars that the Chinese character *de* 德, which I render as virtue, is concerned with human excellence and flourishing and that its cultivation and proper performance in order to become a gentleman (*junzi* 君子) or even a sage is at the heart of classical Confucianism.¹⁰ Insofar as Confucian ethics is perfectionist in nature, so is Confucian politics, even when it is profoundly concerned with order (*zhi* 治) and stability.

Second, Confucian virtue ethics, as subscribed to by both Mencius and Xunzi, generates a specific mode of perfectionist politics, namely, virtue politics, which relies primarily on the ruler's moral character for its moral goal and

⁹ These critics tend to capture the nature of Confucian ethics in terms of "role ethics." See Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press); Henry Rosemont Jr., "Rights-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons," in *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibility*, ed. Mary I. Bockover (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1991), pp. 77–101.

¹⁰ Ames and Rosemont, two of the most vigorous critics of the virtue-ethical interpretation of Confucian ethics, nevertheless admit that in classical Confucianism *de* is centrally concerned with "excellence" in the sense of "excelling at becoming one's own person" (Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1998], p. 57). Even granting Ames and Rosemont's more dynamic and process-focused interpretation of the Confucian self, it seems difficult not to understand their notion of "excellence" in terms of a character trait. For an argument that there is meaningful difference as much as similarity between Confucian and Aristotelian virtue ethics, see Jiyuan Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (New York: Routledge, 2007); May Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

political viability. Let us call this *the virtue politics proposition*. In Confucian virtue politics, therefore, the ruler is considered to be the primary object of moral self-cultivation because the moral and material well-being of the people, the telos of Confucian politics, hangs critically on his virtuous character, or, more precisely, his care for the people. Therefore, Confucian virtue politics does not make the impossible demand that *all* members of the political community be perfectly virtuous for it to function properly, nor does it assume that as long as the ruler is virtuous, good government will naturally follow. In emphasizing the ruler's robust moral character, Confucian virtue politics stipulates that the ruler, if his self is properly cultivated, helps maintain the institutional apparatuses or the "model" (*fa* 法) against various political contingencies.

The third proposition is *the moral education proposition*. To be morally legitimate and to flourish politically, Confucian virtue politics cannot rely on the ruler's robust character alone, despite its foundational importance. It also requires the people's virtue, making the people's moral cultivation the most profound perfectionist concern of the Confucian state. More specifically, in Confucian virtue politics, the people's moral well-being is realized in the form of a state-centered moral education. If the ruler's virtue is the locomotive of a good government, what puts the government on a firm moral foundation is the people's appreciation of the moral and aesthetic value of good form (*wen* 文) that underlies good government. Moral education enables the people to develop moral taste and motivates them to subject themselves to the political order, willingly reciprocating the material and moral well-being that they enjoy under good government with voluntary obedience. Though penal codes and punishment are not completely eliminated from the Confucian state, it aims to use such coercive measures minimally, and, when it does, only for the purpose of the people's moral correction and reform.

Fourth, since the people's moral flourishing cannot be expected or attained in poverty, Confucian virtue politics makes it its critical role, no less important than to provide moral education, to create socioeconomic conditions that enable the people to build a fiduciary society and devote themselves steadily to moral development in association with others. We can call this *the material condition proposition*. Like other institutions that govern the people's personal conduct and social interactions across all spheres of their life, socioeconomic order and institutions that satisfy the people's material well-being are predicated on ritual (*li* 禮), which not only places the people (and the ruler) each in their proper place, thereby achieving social harmony, but, more importantly, helps them to overcome their natural desires for profit so that they (the desires) can be put in balance with morality and the common good.

Now, notice that all of these key propositions of Confucian virtue politics are strongly supported by Confucius's vision of good government. Precisely in the sense that they are rooted in and vindicated by Confucius's own thought, I say that they constitute the "paradigm" of Confucian virtue politics, after which political theories of later Confucians were modeled, albeit in varying

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degrees, thereby forming the (internally diverse) tradition of Confucian virtue politics. Then, how is each proposition supported by Confucius?

Although Confucius never actively concerned himself with the question of human nature, the virtue proposition is attested throughout *The Analects*. One telling piece of evidence is found in his conversation with his student Yan Hui, who asks about *ren* 仁 (casually translated in English as benevolence or human-heartedness), the Confucian virtue par excellence.¹¹ Confucius replies, “To return to the observance of ritual through overcoming the self constitutes *ren* ... [T]he practice of *ren* depends on oneself alone, and not on others. [Therefore] do not look unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not listen unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not speak unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not move unless it is in accordance with *li*.”¹² Yan inquires to Confucius about *ren* because it is the most important virtue that his teacher has been talking about and yet its content remains most elusive. Confucius’s core message is that *ren* is a character trait, or, more accurately, a set of traits one acquires (*de* 得) by, most crucially, immersing oneself in the practice of ritual, a set of rules and norms guiding one’s proper personal and social conduct – not because it is imposed top-down as a moral maxim but because its moral meaning is realized in the course of critical self-reflection (*si* 思) that recalibrates one’s desire in a way appropriate to his or her specific situations, making the practice of *ren* self-originated (*youji* 由己).¹³ Confucius relates this “acquisition model” of moral self-cultivation with his own life-long endeavor to become a sage, although he never believed that he had arrived at sagehood.¹⁴

At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned [sic]; at seventy I followed my heart’s desire without overstepping the line.¹⁵

For Confucius, however, the primacy of virtue does not end with ethics. It extends to politics, with which the Decree of Heaven (*tianming* 天命) is originally associated in the Zhou 周 political discourse, the ancient civilization that Confucius was eager to revive,¹⁶ with a moral demand that in order to entertain

¹¹ For a classic account on the nature of *ren* in classical Confucianism as the virtue par excellence encompassing all other virtues, see Wing-tsit Chan, “The Evolution of the Confucian Concept *Jen*,” *Philosophy East and West* 4:4 (1955), pp. 295–319.

¹² *The Analects* 12.1.

¹³ For Confucius’s emphasis on reflection (*si*), see *The Analects* 2.15. Also see Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 47.

¹⁴ For the acquisition model by Confucius, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), p. 2.

¹⁵ *The Analects* 2.4. Also consider Confucius’s following description of the gentleman’s moral character: “The gentleman has *yi* as his basic stuff and by observing *li* puts it into practice, by being modest (*sun* 孫) gives it expression, and by being trustworthy in word (*xin* 信) brings it into completion” (*The Analects* 15.18).

¹⁶ *The Analects* 3.14.

the Mandate of Heaven the ruler be (or strive to be) virtuous by subjecting himself to ritual as well as by leading the people by means of ritual.¹⁷

The first dimension of the virtue politics proposition, concerning the ruler's moral character, is most clearly addressed in Confucius's following statement: "When those above love *li*, none of the common people will dare be irrelevant; when they love what is righteous (*yi* 義), none of the common people will dare be insubordinate; when they love trustworthiness (*xin*), none of the common people will dare be insincere. In this way, the common people from the four quarters [i.e., the world] will come with their children strapped on their backs."¹⁸ The point here is the central importance of the ruler's robust moral character, which can inspire the people toward goodness. In this vein, Confucius famously defines good government (*zheng* 政) in terms of being corrected in goodness (*zheng* 正), asserting that if a ruler sets an example by being correct, none would dare to remain incorrect.¹⁹

But the virtue politics proposition does not valorize the ruler's moral character alone as though it yields certain magical power that attracts the people without the institutional means to facilitate their moral transformation – hence its second dimension concerning the people's moral enhancement beyond mere political compliance.²⁰ Consider the following statement by Confucius:

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 *li*, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.²¹

Earlier we noted that Confucius understood *li* as indispensable to his acquisition model of moral self-cultivation, though without clarifying the nature of the relationship between *li* and *ren* or moral virtue more generally – instrumental or intrinsic? – to which I return in Chapter 3. What the passage above reveals is that *li* is an indispensable means for good government as well, an institutional mechanism by which people can be morally reformed and political order can be attained *therewith*. Thus, in the paradigm of Confucian virtue politics, political order and stability is not a value

¹⁷ Notice that both the Decree of Heaven and the Mandate of Heaven are translations of the same Chinese term *tianming*. Modern scholars tend to translate *tianming* as the Mandate of Heaven when it is explicitly associated with the ruler (his political legitimacy, more precisely) while rendering it as the Decree of Heaven when it is concerned with an individual moral agent in relation to his (Heaven-given) moral nature or moral mission.

¹⁸ *The Analects* 13.4. Also see 14.41.

¹⁹ *The Analects* 12.17. Also see 13.3; 13.6.

²⁰ Admittedly, however, several statements by Confucius, some of which (allegedly) describe sage-king Shun's government, do highlight a certain "magical" or "charismatic" force of the ruler's moral character (see *The Analects* 2.1; 12.19; 15.5). My argument is that the ruler's moral character does not fully explain the way in which Confucian virtue politics actually operates in the non-ideal political context.

²¹ *The Analects* 2.3.

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in itself. It is one of the positive byproducts that the *li*-based moral transformation of the people yields.²²

Of course, the fact that Confucian virtue politics does not valorize political order and stability for its own sake neither entails that it downplays the critical importance of such political goods nor suggests that it does not acknowledge ritual's more active, as I will argue, "constitutional" contribution to political order and stability. In fact, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, one of the major political differences (if not outright disagreements) between Mencius and Xunzi is whether to understand *li* as sociopolitical institutions that can directly address the problem of disorder that defined the political situation of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), admittedly the most turbulent period in Chinese history. Confucian virtue politics' largely instrumental approach to political order only suggests that the classical Confucians did not appreciate the pure "political" value of order and stability, which has no (long-term) internal connection with the ethical relationship between the ruler and the ruled and does not facilitate the moral cultivation of the people. No classical Confucian ever attempted to derive "political morality" that is internal to the standard of ordered political rule as such in the way Bernard Williams understands political morality in relation to what he calls "the Basic Legitimation Demand," which is concerned with the "first" political question (in the Hobbesian sense) of "securing order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation."²³

This second dimension of the virtue politics proposition naturally justifies the moral education proposition. When Ji Kangji, a usurper of the ruling authority of the state of Lu 魯, Confucius's home country, asked how the ruler can "inculcate in the common people the virtue of reverence, of doing their best and of enthusiasm," Confucius replied, "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."²⁴ More tellingly, when asked by Ranyou, his student, what more can be done if there are numerous people and they have been made prosperous by the state, Confucius famously replied that they should be educated.²⁵ It is a matter of controversy whether the virtues that Confucius thinks are expected of the common people as a result of state moral education are the same sorts

²² So, I disagree with El Amine, when she asserts that "[t]he standard in politics is therefore not virtue (the moral edification of the people), but rather the establishment and maintenance of political order" (*Classical Confucian Political Thought*, pp. 10–11). I critically revisit El Amine's central argument in the concluding chapter.

²³ Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 3. Williams claims that "the BLD [Basic Legitimation Demand] is itself a moral principle," not in the sense that it represents a morality that is prior to politics but in the sense that it is "inherent in there being such a thing as politics" (p. 5).

²⁴ *The Analects* 2.20.

²⁵ *The Analects* 13.9.

of virtues required of the ruler for good and effective government. Equally controversial is whether they are the same moral virtues that are concerned with human excellence and flourishing or whether the virtues required of the common people in their political capacity of “the ruled” have only indirect connection with their moral self-cultivation toward sagehood. If so, what is the nature of such virtues? Or how can we make sense of their distinctive nature? Again, and as we will see later in this book, meaningfully different responses to these questions lead Mencius and Xunzi to qualitative different versions of Confucian political theory.

As Confucius’s response to Ranyou clearly shows, however, moral education can hardly be effective if people are impoverished, as they cannot afford to think beyond their material survival, and this concern gives rise to the material condition proposition. Like political goods such as political order and stability, in Confucian virtue politics, socioeconomic conditions do not hold a value of intrinsic moral importance, independent of what they aim to facilitate, namely, the people’s moral well-being and flourishing. Nevertheless, no classical Confucian believed that it would be possible to lead the people toward goodness without creating the socioeconomic conditions under which they have sufficient means to support them and their families. It is for this reason that Confucius singles out “enough food” as one of the three core elements that buttress good government, along with enough arms and trust between the ruler and the people.²⁶

Two Aims

In suggesting (a) the primacy of virtue as the wellspring of human excellence and flourishing, (b) a mode of government relying primarily on the ruler’s moral character, (c) moral education of the people, and (d) the material conditions for the people’s moral well-being as the key constituents of the paradigm of virtue politics, however, Confucius did not develop an articulate political theory in which these components are coherently interweaved into a systematic whole. Although none of the later classical Confucians advanced a systematic political theory in the form of a philosophical treatise paralleling Aristotle’s *Politics* or Cicero’s *On the Commonwealth*, mainly due to the vastly different way of

²⁶ *The Analects* 12.7. Also see Joseph Chan, “Is There a Confucian Perspective on Social Justice?” in *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia*, eds. Takashi Shogimen and Cary J. Nederman (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), pp. 261–277; Sor-hoon Tan, “The Concept of Yi (義) in the Mencius and Problems of Distributive Justice,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 93:3 (2014), pp. 489–505. It is highly debatable, however, whether this implies that the classical Confucians believed in the overriding value of the so-called “right to subsistence” vis-à-vis civil and political rights, as Bell claims (see Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, pp. 237–243). For an argument that counters Bell’s claim, see Sungmoon Kim, “Confucianism, Moral Equality, and Human Rights: A Mencian Perspective,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 74:1 (2015), pp. 149–185, esp. at pp. 174–178.