

The “Good” and “The Good Life”: Confucius and Christ

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Abstract

The Golden Rule is the ethical point most frequently compared in Jesus and Confucius;¹ in each case, what is recommended is reconsideration of one's own actions toward other people in the light of an imaginative projection of how it would be if the roles were reversed. The formulations in both look substantively identical.² Yet the positive formulation of Jesus and the negative formulation of Confucius actually shape the substance and import of the precept in distinctive ways. Moreover, there may be a deeper level at which, while they are certainly not contradictory, these two formulations are expressions of an important register of ontological difference. Engaged thoughtfully, they nonetheless afford to ethical modeling an opportunity for “harmony in diversity,” complementarity rather than mere equivalence. I argue here that the two traditions can be mutually enhancing, each through knowledge of and sympathy for the other.

Keywords

agape – *Analects* – Beatitudes – *eudaimonia* – Golden Rule – harmony in diversity – reciprocity – *ren*

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1 Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:12. cf. Arthur Waley, trans., *Sacred Writings: Confucianism, The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 5.11, 15.23.

2 *Analects*, 12.2; Luke 6:31.

Confucius has famously claimed that when he was seventy years old, so great was his attunement to “the will and decrees of Heaven” that he could follow his heart’s desires “without overstepping the lines of rectitude.”³ At almost his age, I have considerably less confidence. With respect to at least one desire, which is in some useful fashion to juxtapose the teaching of Confucius with the teaching of Christ, I am particularly conscious of the inadequacy of my learning to the task. As scholars of Confucian moral thought are keenly aware, the tradition of Chinese wisdom is both prolix and complex; its riches are sufficiently bountiful that Confucius, his successor Mencius, and others have prompted reflection and application in divergent cultural and social contexts. Confucius himself has been variously characterized as the exemplary gentleman, a sage, a religious authority, and a philosopher of political ethics—all of these already between his lifetime in the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BCE–476 BCE) and the end of the Eastern Han period in 220 CE.⁴ Confucianism since then is no less variegated and supple as a tradition; as many as five distinctive philosophical epochs have been identified, including Neo-Confucianism, which arose after the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, by which time Daoism had begun to elaborate metaphysical possibilities in the aphorisms of Master Laozi. Accordingly, it seems that the Confucianism rejected at the time of the May Fourth Movement (1919) was not really equivalent to early Confucian thought or to Confucius himself, and a conference in 1962 in Shandong in honor of the 2,440th anniversary of the death of Confucius produced, partially in the light of Marxist thought, many new perspectives.⁵ Was *ren* 仁 a kind of virtue of self-transcendence, a universally accessible virtue? Or only a virtue of the “gentleman”? When we add to this long-established record of complexity the “New Confucianism” of the past few decades, we are quite far from a close correspondence with our source texts. New Confucianism, though it was already being advocated before World War II and, indeed, had begun to gather force even as Confucianism was being attacked as anti-modern in the 1920s and 1930s, has morphed and been reformulated in startling ways in the twenty-first century.⁶ As a result, it becomes

3 *Analects*, 2:4.

4 Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo: Sophia Institute of Oriental Religions, 1977; New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 43.

5 *Ibid.*, 42, 47, 49.

6 Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Leonard Swidler, “Confucianism for Modern Persons in Dialogue with Christianity and Modernity,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 40 (2003).

impossible for anyone to speak of "Confucianism" as a unitary body of ideas. This fact alone is intimidating for a nonexpert.

The same sort of thing, of course, could with justice be said of Christianity. Unlike Confucius, Jesus neither wrote books nor even edited, at least in the textual sense, previous Jewish materials. What we have of his words is, as the New Testament author Luke makes clear, the oral reports of his students; these, in turn, are interpreted and variously applied in different cultural circumstances by the writers of the four gospels. Luke, for example, was a well-educated Greek, familiar with classical Greek writings, and spoke Greek as his first language. Unsurprisingly, he attunes his account to elements and formulations in the sayings of Jesus rather differently than his peers, even in the other synoptic gospels, Mark and Matthew. Because of Luke's announced historical method, *diegesis*, he is in some ways more deliberately attentive to the verbal formulations of his *autoptes*, his eyewitnesses. Consequently, whether through scruple or just a fascination with the linguistic oddity of it, he actually preserves far more oral, idiomatic Hebraisms than do the other gospel writers, even though he had a far more extensive vocabulary in Greek than did any of the others. And this is just the beginning. The Christianity of Mediterranean later antiquity or the European Middle Ages has features of teaching emphasis different from those found in the Reformation or, indeed, in various spheres of modernity. Contemporary African understandings of Christianity diverge sharply from those of European Christians on some issues. It is possible now to question whether American Christianity can be as closely connected to teachings of the Founder as the Christianity of China; it is certain that there are distinct differences in normative practice and that Christianity was originally Middle Eastern culturally may account only in part for some elements in the Asian understanding and practice of the teachings of Jesus. As in Europe and America, syncretism is a persistent factor. Part of the distinct flavor of Christianity in China surely owes to the influence not only of Confucianism and Daoism but also—quite profoundly it seems—of Marxism. That Marxism has served as a kind of John the Baptist for Christianity among the intellectuals in modern China may be one of the reasons that Chinese Christians focus on the social aspects of the teaching of Jesus more authoritatively, or so it seems, than do many Americans who claim a Christian affiliation.

Fortunately, there is an abundant supply of excellent scholarship in both the Confucian and Christian traditions. Unfortunately, for someone like me, while I have access to the texts of Christian Scriptures and the theological tradition in their major original languages, I cannot claim the same for Confucian texts. Dependent as I am on translations of Confucius and the interpretations of only a narrow range of Asian and Western Confucian scholars, I have thought that

the most honest approach I could take in a comparative reflection would be to consider the early textual representation of the teachings of both founders, Confucius and Christ, and to focus on a few prominent aspects of their ethical and what we might call “wisdom” teaching in particular. I want (a) to acknowledge something of the way in which similarities between the two teachers are understood to be so; (b) to suggest that, in certain cases, the similarity may be smaller than it appears; and (c) to indicate how important points of divergence may, despite the divergence, actually suggest a basis for fruitful complementarity. This complementarity in the teaching of Confucius in the *Analects* and the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke strikes me as among the more promising possibilities for “harmony with diversity and a harmonious world.”⁷

Central Teachings of Jesus and Confucius

Neither Jesus nor Confucius, strictly speaking, was a philosopher in the modern sense. Socrates had more claim to the term as we use it and, certainly, so did Aristotle. The formal study of philosophy in the West, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, tends now to be preoccupied by a narrow analytical focus of a sort entirely alien to Confucius—more alien, indeed, than was the Aristotelianism of Thomas and the Scholastics at the time Matteo Ricci tried to apply it to Confucius four centuries ago. Some sense of the continuing pertinence of this factor is suggested by the absence of terms for philosophy (*zhe xue* 哲学) and religion (*zong jiao* 宗教) until late in the nineteenth century, terms that even then appear only in connection with the translation of Western works.⁸ These terms are also foreign, it should be acknowledged, to the Jewish context of Jesus’ teaching. St. Paul was aware of Hellenistic “philosophy” but treated it as alien to what he calls the “wisdom of God.”⁹ He points to Jesus, “who became for us the wisdom of God,”¹⁰ as both embodiment and exemplar of this higher wisdom. Early Christian writers, like their Confucian counterparts, speak readily in terms of a social or moral wisdom. Largely because of intellectual exchanges with Greeks, such as those at Corinth, and with the Romans, terms such as “philosophy” and “religion” in reference to foundational

7 I am aware that there are many different traditions represented in *Analects*, and that the later books especially are of distinctly later date and compilation. My argument depends on books 1-15.

8 Ching, introduction to *Confucianism and Christianity*, xxv.

9 1 Corinthians 1:21.

10 1 Corinthians 1:30.

teachings appear much earlier in Christian literature than in China. "Religion" (Gk. *eusebia*) is found in Hellenistic-era Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, and in later New Testament epistles because of the Greek influence (e.g., James 1:26-7) and yet not uniformly in a positive light (e.g., 2 Tim. 3:5). But while neither "philosophy" nor "religion" are terms employed by Jesus or Confucius themselves, there is a kind of determination of scholarly retrospect to superimpose these belated categories on their teachings. Sometimes it has been helpful for later interpreters to have imposed this vocabulary, but more often not, because of a holistic seamlessness in the teachings of both Jesus and Confucius that does not readily admit of compartmentalization of the sort normative to Hellenistic philosophy, it is therefore difficult to apply such categories as "epistemology" and "metaphysics" meaningfully. Ethics, with which both teachers are intimately concerned, is, however, primary; consequently, reflections on what a Greek philosopher might call metaphysics or, indeed, cosmology often arise solely in the context of "ethical wisdom," and it seems to be best be left there, where a primary understanding is to be sought.

The ethical point most frequently compared in Jesus and Confucius, namely, their respective formulations of the Golden Rule,¹¹ is a case in point: in each case, what is recommended is a thoughtful reconsideration of one's own actions toward other people in the light of an imaginative projection of how it would be if, as we say, the shoe were on the other foot. At first glance, these formulations both look very much like identical ethical principles or precepts: for Confucius, "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself,"¹² and, for Jesus, "Just as you want men to do to you, you do also to them likewise."¹³ Yet I think on a closer examination we can see that the positive formulation of Jesus and the negative formulation of Confucius actually shape the substance and import of the precept in distinctive ways.¹⁴ Moreover, there may be a deeper level at which, while they are certainly not contradictory, these two

11 Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:12; cf. *Analects*, 5:11, 15:23.

12 *Analects*, 12:2.

13 Luke 6:31.

14 This is what C.S. Lewis was getting at, I think, in his elevation of Confucius over certain types of social engineering in education after World War II. For Lewis, the formulation of the Golden Rule by Jesus is an advance within a compatible sense of underlying Dao "because no one who did not admit the validity of the old maxim [Confucius] could see reason for accepting the new one [Jesus], and anyone who accepted the old would immediately recognize the new as an extension of the same principle." See C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Macmillan, 1947, 1965), 58; cf. the view of Robert E. Alinson, "The Golden Rule as the Core Value in Confucianism and Christianity: Ethical Similarities and Differences," *Asian Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (1992).

formulations are expressions of an important register of ontological difference and hence suggest in their context a different prospect on how one determines the ultimate nature of wisdom.

In Book 12 of *Analects*, the passage cited, the context is political pragmatism, an expectation of quid pro quo. In Book 14, the principle is repeated, here explicitly indicating a decorum of “reciprocity.” Indeed, “reciprocity” is invoked as the “one word upon which the whole life may proceed.”¹⁵ When a particular way of wisdom is to be summed up as “a way of life,” and in “one word,” we know we are getting to a principle more fundamental than matters of method or manners, and we see here that in the *Analects* the essence of this principle of reciprocity expresses a pragmatic concern for harmony based upon thoughtful self-interest. At the simplest level, Confucius is represented on both occasions as engaging questions from his students (e.g., Zi Gong) about “achieving goodness” and “how to become good,” a parallel pursuit in this context of what an ancient Greek scholar would call *eudaimonia*, a principal condition of the Good Life.¹⁶ Confucius answers more extensively on this topic of the Good Life than the cryptic formula of the Golden Rule can begin to capture, obviously. Nothing is quite as easy as that rule suggests. For example, pursuit of the Good may cost not less than life itself,¹⁷ and, furthermore, pursuit of the Good is necessarily social but prescriptively so; it may be done only in the company of those who are good.¹⁸ When Zi Gong follows up with his request for a single word that sums up the character of a good life, the answer is “reciprocity” or “consideration,” a term that Confucius had earlier identified as the “thread” running through everything in his “Way.”¹⁹ This is as much as to characterize his wisdom as preeminently a social wisdom, a decorum of mutual obligation in which good manners make for good morals, not merely as a matter of precept but of habitual and life-long practice. Yet in the context it is also a contingent political wisdom, suitable for princes and for gentlemen-scholars or counselors, as several subsequent sayings show.²⁰

When we consider the parallel saying of Jesus,²¹ the context is different. Jesus is speaking to disciples who are experiencing political occupation by

15 *Analects*, 15:23.

16 *Ibid.*, 15:8-9.

17 *Ibid.*, 15:8.

18 *Ibid.*, 15:9.

19 *Ibid.*, 4:15.

20 *Ibid.*, 15:31-33.

21 Luke 6:31.

an alien state, and Jesus has been giving them something characteristically contrary to either enlightened self-interest or even, we may suppose, a decorum of social obligation. His disciples are not princes but peasants subject to generally haughty, even hostile princes, and they have no access to any court. They are told: "love your enemies," and "do good to those who hate you."²² When they receive a blow, they are in no way to resist, and when their material goods are seized from them, they are not to ask for them to be returned.²³ This is clearly not a normative political counsel or a wisdom Jesus ever offers to rulers (a class of people in whom he shows small interest). The Golden Rule here is not, in any sense, a matter of reciprocity or mutual consideration. As Yao Xinzong correctly puts it, "Jesus rejected any reciprocal intention in love and demanded that one *love* those from whom nothing good could be expected in return, and even those who one knew were ungrateful."²⁴ But it is precisely by such behavior that his disciples shall become "sons of the Most High," because the Most High is also "kind to the unthankful and evil persons."²⁵ Accordingly, the difference between the two teachers is that in Jesus' case the category of "others" includes enemies. Thus, while the principles appear similar, each is rooted in a distinctive social framework and ethical context. Yet each, it might also be said, has application in its own context. One advances social harmony by an advocacy of political reciprocity (Confucius); the other advances harmony with the "Most High" or, as Confucius might say, "The biddings of Heaven"²⁶ by a philosophy of nonresistance, even active benevolence toward an oppressor (Jesus). Yet it would be unfair to Confucius not to recognize that, for him, though in a less theologically defined way perhaps, the pursuit of reciprocity among states or princes is likewise an attempt to be in harmony with Heaven (*Tian* 天). Here, then, is an example of what I mean by "complementarity" rather than mere equivalence; their dialectical relationship suggests a way in which the two traditions of wisdom can be mutually enhancing, each through knowledge of and sympathy for the other.

22 Luke 6:27-28.

23 Luke 6:29-30.

24 Xinzong Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 1996), 196.

25 Luke 6:35.

26 *Analects*, 2:4.

The Good (*ren*) and the Good Life (*eudaimonia*, *makariotês* / *agathosunê*)

It has been customary to link *ren*, a key term in Confucius, with *agape*, the word describing self-effacing love in Christianity.²⁷ One reason for this is the similarity of the request for a “summation in one word” of *Analects* 15.23 to the request to Jesus about the greatest point of the Law: his answer is also a summary, and *agape* love is the operative principle: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”²⁸ In this sense, we may rightly consider *ren* and *agape* as key terms in parallel traditions, as many have. But we should exercise caution so as to avoid elision here also. Both terms are polyvalent—*ren* perhaps especially so. It can imply filial piety, benevolence, and a range of social virtues. Thus, while the Daoist master Zhuangzi thought “perfect *ren*” had no part in notions of human affection,²⁹ Confucius connected this term with positive human relations in society, and thus with *ren*, a kind of ideal humanity.³⁰ In some translations, *ren* is rendered reasonably, it seems, as “love,” as in “love for our fellow man,” in which context, especially for Mencius (4B: 28), affection is a part of the meaning.³¹ But in Confucius’ *Analects*, it is clear that the formative sources of *ren* are in filial piety and loyalty to one’s own clan: it is a community-based notion and pertains to what philosophers elsewhere will refer to as the common good. Confucius himself seems to have found actual pursuit of the common good uncommon, but nonetheless certainly it remained for him a preeminent human virtue-practice, reflective of ultimate Good. This leads me to think that Arthur Waley’s consistent translation of *ren* as “Good” or “goodness” in his rendering of the *Analects* (*Lunyu*) is appropriate.³² It also suggests a point of strategy for comparison with the central teaching of Jesus: rather than comparing *ren* solely with *agape*, it may be more symmetrical also to compare *ren* as “goodness” or “the Good” with the New Testament idea of “blessedness” or “beatitude,” a state of being, rather than an emotion. In fact,

27 Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*; Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity*; but also Yutang Lin, *From Pagan to Christian* (Cleveland: World, 1959).

28 Matthew 22:37–40.

29 Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 44; cf. 155, 171, 259.

30 Lin, *From Pagan to Christian*, 79.

31 Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 93–96.

32 Waley, *Sacred Writings*.

not only *agape* but also the Greek word *philia* is used frequently in the contexts of parental love and filial piety, even for the disciples' love for Jesus. *Philos* bears a closer connection to some uses of *ren* in the *Analects* itself than the more passionate *agape/agapetos*. *Agape* typically refers to an intense, sometimes all-consuming love, such as is recommended in the Great Commandment,³³ while *ren* in Confucius often has an apparently dispassionate though admiring register of appreciation for a state of equanimity and fully realized human flourishing to which one may aspire.

Thus, in *Analects* we may observe that the one who is "really Good can never be unhappy"³⁴ and that the virtues of the Good are composite features of the worthy or "happy" life.³⁵ (In this, Confucius agrees with Aristotle.) For all that, practice of these virtues is not necessarily productive of the ultimate Good. In a statement that bears some comparison to the teachings of Jesus (e.g., Luke 18:18-27), Confucius responds to a description of a person as good because "neither love of mastery, vanity, resentment nor covetousness have any hold on him" by commending the achievement but withholding the ultimate category.³⁶ For Confucius, too, then, it is possible to be virtuous, eloquent, and, indeed, a "true gentleman" and still lack this quality of *ren*, "goodness."³⁷ To be precise, "the Good man rests content with Goodness; he that is merely wise pursues Goodness in the belief that it pays to do so."³⁸ Goodness is here a quality of consciousness or state of being, to be distinguished from a pursuit of the good, which is merely instrumental to it (also like Aristotle). For Confucius, the Good must be loved for itself. Achieving the Good is a proper aspiration for the young ruler,³⁹ who as he matures toward the Good will become a little like Plato's philosopher-king. But it will be a reflection of the Good in one who loves it that action, rather than words, bears witness to this devotion.⁴⁰ It is in this light that we may appreciate the Golden Rule for Confucius as the product of a virtuous life of pious practice in generous demeanor, whether at home or abroad: "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself."⁴¹ The "trunk of goodness" is family loyalty and filial piety, in which this practice is

33 Matthew 22:37-40.

34 Ibid., 9:28, 14:30.

35 Ibid., 13:19, 17:6.

36 Ibid., 14:2.

37 Ibid., 14:5, 7; cf. 4:1-7.

38 Ibid., 4:2.

39 Ibid., 12:11; 14:5, 7; 15:32.

40 Ibid., 12:3.

41 Ibid., 12:2.

formed; it would seem that the good life acquires in the family setting both its source of nourishment for full flourishing and the aspiration that maintains this flourishing.⁴²

If the connection between love and the Good are thus evident in Confucius, this is perhaps even more explicitly so in the teaching of Jesus, whose exemplary virtue, as John the apostle puts it, is a demonstration that “God is love.”⁴³ This passage reverberates with a longstanding Old Testament connection of the good⁴⁴ with nature, what God has done in his creation,⁴⁵ and with a state of harmony with God’s purpose in creation both of the cosmos and man.⁴⁶ The good life for man, accordingly, is harmonious with this creational expression of God’s goodness,⁴⁷ and gratitude for the goodness of God is what makes possible a realization of the good of mankind in any sphere of life.⁴⁸ “The Lord is good” is a frequent reiteration of the Psalms,⁴⁹ and much as in Confucius, what is good for mankind is regarded as a harmonious correspondence with God as ultimate “good.” The ethical implications, also as with Confucius, are extensive, but in the Old Testament involve not merely obedience to the Law or filial piety but a practice of life in accordance with the totality of the evidence of God’s goodness, so that

He has shown you, O Man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?⁵⁰

Jesus contravenes none of this. Rather, he amplifies it in a way that builds upon the specific social dimension, especially in his relation of love (*agape*) and the “good” (which in Greek nominatively is *agathon*). We see this in one of the few instances in which, for Jesus, a “young ruler” who has admired his teaching, is clearly seeking, much as did Fan Chi of Confucius, to know in what goodness consists,⁵¹ or as did Yan Hui⁵² or Ran Yong.⁵³ The young ruler in his

42 Ibid., 1:2.

43 1 John 4:8, 16.

44 In Hebrew, *tov*.

45 Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, etc.

46 Isaiah 1:19.

47 Isaiah 1:17.

48 Psalms 122:9, 128:5; Proverbs 19:8; Ecclesiastes 3:12-13.

49 Psalms 100:5, 106:1, 107:1, 118:1.

50 Micah 6:8.

51 *Analects*, 6:20.

52 Ibid., 12:1.

53 Ibid., 12:2.

question to Jesus ascribes the Good to Jesus himself, perhaps as a form of flattery: "Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"⁵⁴ Laying aside for a moment the fact that this notion of ultimate Good is characteristically a Jewish way of considering the ontology of the "Good," we see intriguing elements in Jesus' answer. First, he gently rebukes the young ruler, asking about his use of the term, since for a Jew, "No one is Good but the One, that is God."⁵⁵ Jesus then adduces the social commandments of the law: "Do not commit adultery . . . murder . . . theft . . . Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and your mother."⁵⁶ Confucius would agree with all these aspects or approaches to the Good. The young ruler replies that he has adhered to these principles since his youth;⁵⁷ for him, we may say, the "trunk of goodness"⁵⁸ has branched out appropriately. It is clear that Jesus is pleased so far with the young ruler's response; the account of this event in Mark's gospel goes so far as to say that "Jesus loved him" for it. But in none of the gospel accounts (it is prominently presented in all three synoptic gospels) is Jesus yet content. "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Jesus then adds an invitation: if the young ruler also does this more radical deed of generosity to the poor, then he will be freely able to follow in the Way of Jesus.⁵⁹ Alas, the young ruler cannot bring himself to do it and goes sadly away. We may be reminded here about what Confucius said to Fan Chi: "Goodness cannot be obtained till what is difficult has been duly done. He who has done this may be called Good."⁶⁰ But if it is difficult, as Confucius says elsewhere, really to love (*ren*) undividedly, then it is perhaps at least as difficult to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind and one's neighbor as one's self.⁶¹

Here, however, we verge upon a point of distinction in Jesus' teaching about the good. I do not refer simply to the matter of benevolence, for Confucius also enjoins benevolence upon rulers and "gentlemen" alike. I refer to a more radical dialectic of riches and poverty in the teaching of Jesus, by which in temporal affairs it is a kind of un-wisdom or folly to ignore what he calls the "treasury of heaven," divine approval in respect of the Good, especially when one has been

54 Luke 18:18.

55 Luke 18:19.

56 Luke 18:20.

57 Luke 18:21.

58 *Analects*, 1:2.

59 Luke 18:22.

60 *Analects*, 6:20.

61 Matthew 22:37-40.

protecting or acquiring material riches. As his parable of the smug, successful farmer in Luke 12 makes even clearer, all such prosperity is transient. The farmer has a bumper crop; his barns cannot hold all he has. Accordingly, he does what business prudence might suggest; he builds bigger barns, so he can hold back his crop and get a better price later, in a less bountiful year. Agribusiness experts typically would commend, in fact, what Jesus in his story condemns. However, at the height of his success, flushed with self-congratulation and taking his ease, the farmer is unwittingly at the end of his life. Jesus is entirely unsentimental about this: "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you."⁶² What benefit will his excessive riches be to him then? The point is obvious: to neglect one's obligation to distribute to the poor out of the abundance of one's good fortune is both a rejection of benevolence and an omission to act for the common good—ethical folly where wisdom is most needed.⁶³ "One's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses,"⁶⁴ Jesus says, here and everywhere. It is not the rich farmer's wealth in itself that is condemned but, rather, his self-indulgence, his worship of good fortune rather than God, and inferentially therefore his neglect of a great opportunity to help others less fortunate. Confucius has a saying that to some considerable degree pertains: "an exemplary man deliberates on how he may walk in the Way, not upon how he may make a living."⁶⁵

In the light of this strong caution about confusing temporal goods with the true Good, we can begin to appreciate better, I think, the structuring of the "beatitudes" or sayings about the good life, as we find them in the gospel of Luke.⁶⁶ The term for "blessed" is *makarios/makariotes*, and in classical Greek texts from Aeschylus to Aristotle⁶⁷ to the later Stoics, it is proximate to the happiness, even the sense of harmony with the divine, that should attend the objectively good life, *eudaimonia*. Blessedness in this sense is the happy condition of living the good life. But that is hardly how it appears in this text. For many, these sayings of Jesus are among the most paradoxical and difficult of the New Testament. Who is blessed? The poor. Why? Because their possession is the kingdom of God. Who is blessed? Those who don't have enough to eat, for they shall be filled. So also those who weep, for they are later

62 Luke 18:20.

63 Luke 12:15–21.

64 Luke 12:15.

65 *Analects*, 15:31.

66 Luke 6:20–23.

67 Richard McKeon, "Nichomachean Ethics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941, 1968), 935–1126.

to laugh. So also are those who find themselves socially despised, marginalized because of their identification with the Teacher of the Good. Rather than grieve at their oppressed state, they should rejoice, for by their implied pursuit of a spiritual rather than materialistic Good, they have been laying up an eternal reward. Here then is a kind of discourse on *eudaimonia* or happiness that is counterintuitive, yet it certainly proclaims a notion of the Good. The four Beatitudes in Luke's account are answered by a symmetrical "four woes," a kind of *kakodaimonia* that is, ironically, much closer to the "good life" in its temporal conditions, at least as most of Luke's Hellenistic readers would have understood it.⁶⁸ By contrast, Jesus is suggesting that all such notions of the good life have missed the essence of the Good, by confusing mere instrumental goods with the intrinsic Good itself. The effect of the sharp contrast is moral irony: Who ought to see themselves as under judgment? Well, the rich, who have their consolations now but not later; the ones with full bellies who will one day go hungry; the ones who laugh condescendingly at others, for they will *not* have the last laugh.⁶⁹ Who ought to see their calamity coming? Those who now have high public esteem. It is this abiding concern for the poor and disadvantaged, from the beginning of his public teaching⁷⁰ to the end that perhaps most marks a distinctive emphasis in Jesus' virtue ethics and that, perhaps, on this point at least, gives him a little more in common with Marx than with Confucius. Confucius does, however, say that the exemplary man should "help out the needy; he does not make the rich, richer still."⁷¹ It is thus a matter of emphasis, perhaps, but a strong one, and remains a challenge to notions of "the Good Life" among Christians to which not all respond very well, including notably those in some parts of the world who are inclined to think of such as the wealthy farmer as expressing a reasonable wisdom. The wisdom that is derived from the Good according to Jesus is of quite another kind; it requires a love for the poor, a *ren* that, as in some contexts, Confucius seems, even if less emphatically, to suggest must become universal, not merely restricted

68 Hesiod, in his eclectic wisdom poem *Erga Kai Hemera*, or *Works and Days*, opposes his own proffered conditions of philosophical *eudaimonia*, behavior that conduces to a good reputation, to contrary conditions which rob one of such happiness, calling these *katadaimonia* (293-341; cf. 170-201)—idleness, deceit of the neighbor, ill-gotten gains, miscreance with another's wife and all such things as lead to shame (317-320), so that the rhetoric of opposing vices is not unprecedented. See Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ed. with prolegomena and commentary, M.L. West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, 1982).

69 David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 92-101.

70 Luke 4:18-21.

71 *Analects*, 6:4.

to one's own family and people. Here there is an "almost parallel": Confucius commends the poor who are happy in "the Way" and also the rich, who study *li* 禮 (propriety);⁷² this saying to a degree resembles the beatitudes but without the dimension of ultimate reversal of fortune, or "heavenly reward," and is apparently more accepting of the status quo in society. Confucius nonetheless suggests that it is a kind of moral cowardice to leave undone what one has recognized to be the right thing to do,⁷³ a point that is entirely appropriate for Christian practice in the light of this parable.⁷⁴

Ancient Wisdom in Contemporary Settings

With any system of virtue ethics founded upon ancient texts and cultural principles, there is a tendency to experience a certain tension between the texts themselves and subsequent traditions of interpretation and their own prompting cultural interests. As the phenomenologists of the last generation have taught us, it is all too easy to find in texts with recognized moral authority what we are looking for, perhaps only to justify our own preferred views, in effect thereby devising a distortion, relocation, or even diminishment of the original or traditional teaching. Some of this temporizing in interpretation may derive from an inevitable anxiety of influence. Some of it may arise from a worthier motive, namely an imperfect attempt to discover truth in the text despite our long distance, but necessarily acknowledging our limitations of linguistic learning and historical understanding. On the first point, Confucius has a saying that may comfort us (or not), depending on how seriously we take him: "When it comes to goodness, one need not avoid competing with his teacher."⁷⁵ Jesus has a saying worthy of putting alongside it, and it relates to the second motive: "a disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be *like* his teacher."⁷⁶ These sayings address the question of motive in the student and would-be disciple in a way pertinent to our

72 Ibid., 1.15.

73 Ibid., 2.13.

74 Nicholas Wolterstorff argues in his book *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) for a distinction between *agape* and reciprocity stronger, if anything, than I have indicated here, and that Christian ideals of justice are fundamentally shaped by the precedence of *agape*, a point on which we certainly agree. See also his provocative *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

75 *Analects*, 15:35.

76 Luke 6:40.

conversation. What does it mean to be "Confucian"? What does it mean to be "Christian"? The inevitability of new interpretations⁷⁷ makes this a perennial type of question, especially when we are serious about the ideas of the Good Life and the nature of the Good itself in a wisdom tradition.

Various scholars have referred to the Confucian and New Confucian approach to the Good as a kind of "moral metaphysic."⁷⁸ If this is understood to mean an identification of the Highest Good with Supreme Reality, there is something of value in this language. It compares to some degree with what John the Apostle meant when he identified God with love (*agape*). In a second-generation of New Confucianism, such as that represented by Mou Tsung-san (Zongsan), there appear to be elements of neo-platonic idealism in this conception of "moral metaphysic," rooted in the idea that the individual in a modern culture must realize in the self the conception of *ren* or authentic personhood. This New Confucian formulation seems also to have some overtones of Christian influence or, more likely, modernist secularizations of that influence. But to seek such a notion of the Good in personal life and practice, as did Confucius and Jesus, the relational element cannot, I think, be ignored. Moreover, a relationship must be authentic. It may be, as An Yanming says, that true Confucianism narrows the relational aspect to a family love so exclusively that "there is no natural foundation for . . . fathers to give equal love to both their own children and the children from other families"⁷⁹ and that this hierarchical, patriarchal character places Confucianism beyond a full comparison either to Christianity or to any more universal cultural purpose.⁸⁰ On the basis of my reflection, I am less sure that this need be so. *Ren*, said Confucius,

77 Among those studies of which I am thinking here, I include not only of Daniel Bell, but the "American Confucianism" discussed by Degui Cai, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2005); also Robert Neville's *Boston Confucianism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000). More interesting, I think, are the discussions of particular question regarding the topic under discussion here. Among such is Erin Cline, "Two Senses of Justice: Confucianism, Rawls and Comparative Political Philosophy," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 6 (2007); and Bryan William Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. chap. 2 on Confucius and Confucianism.

78 Pilgrim W.K. Lo, "Human Dignity: A Theological and Confucian Discussion," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48 (2009): 169; Young-bae Song, "Conflict and Dialogue Between Confucianism and Christianity: An Analysis of the *Tianzhu shiyi* by Matteo Ricci," *Korea Journal* 39, no. 1 (1999): 235; Swidler, "Confucianism for Modern Persons," 24.

79 Yanming An, "Family Love in Confucius and Mencius," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2008): 52.

80 Swidler, "Confucianism for Modern Persons," 20.

is to “love humans” and, by this means, to know them.⁸¹ The important thing here may be to eschew identifying so closely with one’s immediate family that we are blind to the humanity and needs of anyone else; here, the teaching of Jesus that one should rise above family in pursuit of the kingdom (his high conception of the lived Good) is cautionary.⁸² The concept of “the state,” as Pilgrim W.K. Lo has observed, is expressed in Chinese by combining two words: “land” and “family.”⁸³ If we remember as well the more universal conception, “family of God”—deriving from the teaching of Jesus that God is our universal Father—it can assist us, perhaps, in eschewing the pursuit of more impersonal state interests in preference to the needs of persons who make up the state as well as the wider world.

Confucius, like Jesus, articulates a strong belief in the moral order of the universe. This is a much stronger element than what Daniel Bell has called “vague metaphysical commitments” in early Confucian thought.⁸⁴ Nor does it seem likely that the strong connection between family and the common good as articulated in Confucius is adequately represented in the karaoke bar culture Bell celebrates. Part of the problem for Confucianism now—and for Christianity to some degree also, we must admit—is the dissolution in recent times of any vital notion of family as the basis for a wider community. On this point Confucius is a strong corrective.

Ancient Chinese religion, it has been argued, had a monotheistic religious conception of the divine source of the Good.⁸⁵ Clark has argued that this conception of the divine was then more personal, less abstract than what we see in the *Tian* of Confucius. In Christianity, the personal element actually increases in strength through the course of the Old Testament, and Swidler, Ching, and others are surely right to suggest that “the concrete person of Jesus of Nazareth” (“Jeshua ha Notzri”) is its apogee and precisely what is attractive to “China in the third millennium.”⁸⁶ In a similar way, it seems to me, Confucius the teacher is attractive to Westerners influenced by Jesus; they are more likely than most to be positively disposed to be attentive to his wisdom and his tireless pursuit of the Good. “The difference between the Christian and the Confucian

81 *Analects*, 12:22.

82 Luke 14:26, stated in a hyperbolic manner for emphasis.

83 Lo, “Human Dignity,” 175.

84 Bell, *China’s New Confucianism*, 149.

85 Kelly Clark, “The Gods of Abraham, Isaiah, and Confucius,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2005).

86 Leonard Swidler, “What Christianity Can Offer China in the Third Millennium,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 40 (2003): 153–154.

understanding of God lies principally, therefore, in the Person of Jesus Christ himself—and in his significance for mankind,” if I may quote Julia Ching.⁸⁷ But there is much room for mutual appreciation, I think, between dévotées of Confucius and those devoted to Jesus, and I hope this essay may have given some sense of the scope of that aspiration without exaggerating unduly the points of contact and mutual enlightenment. What is required for “harmony in diversity” to be realized, I think, is that we exhibit the category of transcending love modeled by Jesus and endeavor also to become *junzi* 君子, as Confucius encourages us to do, for, as Confucius has said, “Exemplary persons value harmony but not conformity; petty persons value conformity but not harmony.”⁸⁸ There can be great fruitfulness in our global village if we pursue this mutually appreciative path to becoming exemplary persons.

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87 Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 146.

88 *Analects*, 13:23.

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