



Why Does Confucius Think that Virtue Is Good for Oneself?

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Abstract

Is being virtuous good not only for others, but also for the virtuous person herself? Call the “yes” answer to this question “the eudaimonistic thesis.” In this essay, I argue that the most prominent explanation for why Confucius accepts the eudaimonistic thesis should be rejected; this explanation is that he accepts the thesis because he also accepts “naturalistic perfectionism” or that for something to be good for oneself is for it to realize one’s nature and that being a virtuous person realizes human nature. In its place, I propose two alternative explanations: the “hedonistic explanation,” which justifies the eudaimonistic thesis in terms of pleasure, and the “desirability explanation,” which provides a justification rooted in the claims that virtuous people function as normative measures and that they desire that they themselves be virtuous. Finally, I discuss what may have motivated later Confucian philosophers to adopt naturalistic perfectionism.

Keywords Confucius · Well-being · Eudaimonism · Perfectionism · Human nature

1 Introduction

Like his philosophical counterparts in ancient Greece, Confucius embraced the controversial thesis that being virtuous contributes not only to the well-being of others, but also to the well-being of the virtuous person herself (hereafter

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“the eudaimonistic thesis”).¹ This essay will explore why he did so. The most prominent explanation (hereafter “the naturalistic perfectionist explanation”) for why Confucius adopts the eudaimonistic thesis is that he accepts naturalistic perfectionism; that is, he holds that:

- (i) for something to be good for an individual just is for it to realize their nature; and
- (ii) being a virtuous person realizes human nature.²

This is indeed a justification for the thesis that can be found later on in the Confucian tradition, especially in the *Mengzi* 孟子,³ one passage of which can plausibly be read as attributing the second tenet of naturalistic perfectionism to

¹ See, for example, Slingerland 2001: 109; Slingerland 2003: xxiii; Yu 2007: 170–171, 192; Sim 2007: 23–24; Huang 2010: 76, 78; Huang 2018: 219–221; Ivanhoe 2013a: 274; Olberding 2012: 56–57, 62; Kim 2020: 16, 28–30, 60. For a possibly contrasting view, see Munro 1979: 40–41. For a defense of the applicability of the concept of well-being to Confucius’ thought, see Kim 2020: 28–30. For some evidence that Confucius adopted the eudaimonistic thesis, consider *Analects* 4.2, 6.19, 6.30, 12.4, 15.1. Of the chapters in this list, *Analects* 6.19, 6.30, and 15.21 may require some exposition. *Analects* 6.19 is discussed further below. The relevant portion of *Analects* 6.30 reads: “Zigong [子貢] said, ‘If there were one able to broadly extend his benevolence to the common people and bring succor to the multitudes, what would you make of him? Could such a person be called good [or “benevolent,” *ren* 仁]?’ The master said, ‘Why stop at good? Such a person should surely be called a sage! ... Desiring to take his stand, one who is good helps others to take their stand; wanting to realize himself, he helps others to realize themselves.’” (Unless otherwise noted, translations, such as this one, are from Slingerland 2003.) Given the context of the passage, it is clear that Confucius wishes to link the virtuous person’s moral realization of others with benevolent concern for them. But benevolent concern toward others is directed toward their well-being, so virtue and well-being must be connected. For an extended discussion of this implication of the passage, see Huang 2018, especially pp. 223–225. I will discuss this passage further below.

Analects 15.21 reads: “The Master said, ‘The gentleman seeks it (*zhi* 之, from the fusion *zhu* 諸) in himself; the petty person seeks it in others.’” We know that the petty person is characterized by the pursuit of their own interest in the form of external profit (*li* 利; see, e.g., *Analects* 4.11 and 4.16). Since the gentleman seeks the same goal (“it”) as the petty person, except “in himself,” he presumably seeks his own interest in the form of internal goods such as virtue. Suffice it to say here that Confucius endorses the perspective of the gentleman. This point will be discussed in more detail below.

² See, for example, Yu 2007: 31–32, 179–181; Huang 2010: 75–78, 80.

³ See, for example, *Mengzi* 2A6, 4B19, 6A6, 6A11–14, 7A1, 7A38; Ivanhoe 2007: 216–218; Ivanhoe 2013b: 53–55; Huang 2010: 72, 75–77; Huff 2015: 426–428. *The Doctrine of the Mean*, traditionally attributed to Confucius’ grandson, Zisi 子思, is perhaps another example, see the first chapter.

Confucius.⁴ Despite this passage, there are several difficulties with attributing this justification for the eudaimonistic thesis to Confucius. First of all, it has no direct textual support in the *Analects*. And second, it conflicts with the text. The locus of this conflict is *Analects* 5.13, which implies that Confucius did not discuss any such position as naturalistic perfectionism. The chapter states: “Zigong [子貢] said, ‘The Master’s cultural brilliance is something that is readily heard about, whereas one does not get to hear the Master expounding upon the subjects of human nature (*xing* 性) and the way of Heaven (*tian dao* 天道).’” But if Confucius did in fact expound a doctrine of naturalistic perfectionism, then, contrary to *Analects* 5.13, human nature would have been an important part of his ethical teaching.

Now, someone might try to resolve the above conflict by pointing out that Confucius’ adoption of naturalistic perfectionism is logically compatible with *Analects* 5.13. He may, after all, have held it as an unspoken background assumption.⁵ However, this response introduces a new textual conflict with *Analects* 7.24, where Confucius claims he does not hold anything back from his disciples. In order to be consistent with this chapter, we would have to say that Confucius is either unaware that he assumes naturalistic perfectionism or that he is aware that he assumes it, but considers the position to be too obvious to merit discussion. Neither of these options are plausible. Not only is naturalistic

⁴ In 6A6, Mengzi quotes Ode 260 along with Confucius’ praise of it. The ode is reasonably read as implying that virtue realizes human nature, the second tenet of naturalistic perfectionism. We can express this reading of the ode in terms of the following argument:

- (1) Heaven intentionally created human beings (line 1).
- (2) What Heaven intends is correct or ought to be (implied).
- (3) Heaven’s intention for human beings therefore serves as a norm for how one ought to be (line 2).
- (4) The condition in which one realizes this Heavenly intention or norm is virtue (line 4).
- (5) The way that one’s creator intends one to be is one’s nature (unstated but plausible given 1).
- (6) Therefore, virtue realizes human nature (implied conclusion).

If Confucius singled out and praised this ode, and if he understood it as I have outlined above, then he accepts the second tenet of naturalistic perfectionism. This is the best evidence for Confucius’ acceptance of naturalistic perfectionism in the later tradition that I know of.

Someone might also point to *Mengzi* 4B18 as providing further evidence of Confucius’ acceptance of the second tenet of naturalistic perfectionism. The chapter offers an interpretation of Confucius’ elevation of flowing water as an important metaphor (see, e.g., *Analects* 6.23, 9.17). According to Mengzi, Confucius saw flowing water as a metaphor for moral progress or action that stems from a stable source or “root” (*ben* 本). It is true that Mengzi himself considers such moral roots to be aspects of human nature, but Confucius also speaks of moral roots without taking a clear stance on their naturalness (see his discussion of the roots of ritually proper behavior at *Analects* 3.4: while sorrow [*qi* 戚] at one’s parents death is presumably natural, is the same obviously true for being sparing [*jian* 儉] in other ceremonial contexts?). Compare, in this regard, Youzi’s claim that filial piety is the root of goodness (*ren*) at *Analects* 1.12. There is consequently no need to read *Mengzi* 4B18 as attributing the particular Mencian view of moral roots to Confucius as opposed to the general view that moral roots are important (however exactly Confucius understood them).

⁵ LIN Yü-Sheng (1974: 186–8) makes this same point with regard to the second tenet of naturalistic perfectionism, namely, that being a virtuous person realizes human nature. ZHU Xi 朱熹 offers a slightly different response. He claims, implausibly, that Confucius deliberately held back his teaching on human nature and the way of Heaven from most of his students since they were not yet prepared to receive it (see Zhu 1983: 5.13; contrast with the discussion of *Analects* 7.24 below). He even goes so far as to claim that Zigong uttered the statement in *Analects* 5.13 after being initiated into Confucius’ esoteric teaching about human nature and the way of Heaven.

perfectionism not obvious, but it constitutes an account of the nature of well-being, and obtaining nonobvious accounts about the natures of things usually requires self-conscious cognitive effort.⁶ This makes it unlikely that Confucius would have been unaware that he adopted the position.

On the other hand, someone might try to resolve the conflict between Confucius' adoption of naturalistic perfectionism and *Analects* 5.13 by challenging the chapter's reliability. Specifically, someone could point out that, though 5.13 claims that Confucius did not discuss "the way of heaven" (*tian dao*), the *Analects* contains numerous examples of Confucius discussing "Heaven" (*tian* 天; see, e.g., *Analects* 2.4, 3.13, 7.23, 9.5).⁷ But there just is not a comparable exception when it comes to human nature. The term occurs only one other time in the text, in *Analects* 17.2: "The master said, 'By nature (*xing*) people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice.'"⁸ The saying is, moreover, notoriously limited in the information it provides about human nature.⁹ Strictly speaking, it expresses the negative view that it is not the case that human beings are both good *and* bad by nature and attributes to practical action the ability to effect one's moral character. But this view about human nature is compatible with a number of more specific views, including:

- (a) People are good by nature and preserve (or naturally develop) or lose (or hinder the natural development of) their goodness by their actions;
- (b) People are bad by nature and preserve (or naturally develop) or lose (or hinder the natural development of) their badness by their actions;
- (c) People are neither good nor bad by nature; virtue and vice is entirely a matter of practical habituation.

The limited amount of information about human nature that *Analects* 17.2 communicates just goes to show that it fails to provide a counterexample to the claim that human nature was not a sustained topic of discussion for Confucius.¹⁰ Indeed,

⁶ An anonymous referee wonders whether naturalistic perfectionism may itself be theoretically unsophisticated but its later development in the Confucian tradition theoretically sophisticated. Consider the two questions: "What is a triangle?" and "What is human well-being?". Having an answer to the first question is not a mark of any theoretical sophistication. This is presumably because the essential features of a triangle are obvious. By contrast, having an answer to the second question is a mark of theoretical sophistication. This is presumably because the essential features of human well-being are not obvious.

⁷ Edward Slingerland suggests the following resolution: "way of Heaven" refers to the absolute nature of Heaven. By contrast, what Confucius discusses in the *Analects* is Heaven's relation to human practical life (Slingerland 2003: 44).

⁸ Some read *Analects* 6.19 as containing an implicit reference to human nature. Yu Jiyuan, for example, cites with approval CHAN Wing-Tsit's translation of 人之生也直，罔之生也幸而免 as "Man is born with uprightness. If one loses it he will be lucky if he escapes with his life" (see Yu 2007: 55). However, LIN Yü-Sheng has argued convincingly that the parallelism between the two clauses is better preserved if we read *sheng* 生 as having the same sense in both. He suggests: "A man's life should be upright. If a man's life is without uprightness, he will be lucky if he escapes with his life" (Lin 1974: 186 n24). Slingerland adopts a similar translation (Slingerland 2003: 59).

⁹ This point has been frequently noted by commentators; see, for example, Ivanhoe 2000: 9 n8; Yu 2007: 54–55; Van Norden 2007: 126; Olberding 2012: 45.

¹⁰ Compare with Slingerland's observation that "[W]e do not find anywhere in the *Analects* even a dim awareness of the highly developed conceptions of human nature that formed the basis of the debate between Mencius and Xunzi [荀子]" (Slingerland 2000: 139). See, also, Ivanhoe 2000: 1–2.

it is the post-Confucian YANG Zhu 楊朱 who is usually credited with making human nature an important subject in Chinese ethical thought (see Graham 1989: 56).

Despite these difficulties, one could still argue for the correctness of the naturalistic perfectionist explanation by adopting one of at least the following two strategies:

- (i) one could argue that the *Analects* implies that Confucius adopts naturalistic perfectionism though it does not explicitly say he endorses it;
- (ii) one could argue that Confucius' adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis requires *some* explanation and that, despite its lack of direct textual support and apparent conflict with *Analects* 5.13 and 7.24, the naturalistic perfectionist explanation is still the best one available.

There are some scholars who seem to follow the first strategy.¹¹ I do not, however, know of any passage that clearly implies Confucius' adoption of naturalistic perfectionism.¹² More promising, by contrast, is the second strategy mentioned above.¹³ However, whether this strategy is ultimately successful depends on what alternative explanations are on offer and, especially, whether there are alternative explanations that are better grounded in the text. Now, the question of whether there

¹¹ Consider, for example, Yu Jiyuan. Yu observes that Confucius—and others in the *Analects*—sometimes claim that he is on a Heaven-sent mission to restore the *dao* 道 among human beings (see, e.g., *Analects* 3.24, 9.5). Yu then infers from this observation that human *dao* is not only dear to Heaven but is in fact *determined by it* (see Yu 2007: 27–28). Then, relying in addition on several post-Confucius texts (specifically, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Daodejing* 道德經, and *Zhuangzi* 莊子) in conjunction with Confucius' claim in *Analects* 7.23 that Heaven brought the virtue (*de* 德) that is within him into existence, Yu concludes that (i) each thing's well-being depends on whether it follows its Heaven-imparted or "natural" way, and (ii) in the case of human beings, their Heaven-imparted or "natural" way is the realization of *de* or "human virtue" (Yu 2007: 31–32). Yu then bolsters his case for (ii) by arguing that 17.2 only makes sense in its context and by appealing to the reading of *Analects* 6.19 discussed above in note 8 (see Yu 2007: 54–55). For the sake of clarity, I take (i) to correspond to the first tenet of naturalistic perfectionism—that for something to be good for someone is for it to realize their nature—and (ii) to correspond to the second—that virtue realizes human nature. That Yu takes the *Analects* to imply but not explicitly endorse this version of naturalistic perfectionism is suggested by his later remark that "Confucius does not elaborate his view on human nature. His basic line of thinking, however, is developed by Mencius in detail in the theory that human nature (*xing*) is good. In my view, just as the function (*ergon*) argument is the basis for Aristotle's ethics, the Mencian theory that human nature is good brings forth the metaphysical and psychological basis for the ethics of *Confucius*" (Yu 2007: 53; my emphasis).

¹² To continue with the example of Yu Jiyuan from the previous note, none of the passages from the *Analects* that he cites clearly imply (i) or (ii) in the above note. The passages *do* imply that Heaven cares about humanity's achievement of *dao*. But Heaven's caring about something is not equivalent to its creating or determining it. It is true that *Analects* 7.23 could be read as Yu does—namely, that Heaven determines the nature of *de*—but it is more naturally read as claiming that Heaven is responsible for Confucius' acquisition of *de*: "Heaven made virtue grow in me" (*tian sheng de yu yu* 天生德於予, my translation); this reading also makes better sense of the second part of the verse: "What can Huan Tui (桓魋) do to me?" That is, because Heaven has a plan for Confucius, evidenced by its *causing virtue to take root within him*, how could a mere human being such as Huan Tui get in his way (see Slingerland 2003: 71–72)? Similarly, I have already explained in note 8 why I disagree with Yu's reading of *Analects* 6.19, and I have provided an explanation of *Analects* 17.2 that does not rely on naturalistic perfectionism above. Amy Olberding and Richard Kim are similarly skeptical about our ability to reliably infer theories about human nature and well-being from the *Analects* (Olberding 2012: 45–49, 54–59, 213 n11; Kim 2020: 32, 52 n4).

¹³ Huang 2010 offers an example of this strategy. His argument is discussed in more detail below.

are such alternative explanations has not been particularly well explored in the literature. It will therefore be one of the goals of this essay to help fill this gap.¹⁴ To accomplish this, I will spell out two alternative explanations for Confucius' adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis that do not involve naturalistic perfectionism. The first alternative explanation (hereafter "the hedonistic explanation"), which enjoys the advantage of direct textual support, is that Confucius adopts the eudaimonistic thesis because he believes virtue provides the purest and most secure form of enjoyment. This explanation, as well as some responses to possible worries about it, will be spelled out in Section 2 of this essay. Section 3 of this essay will focus on the second alternative explanation (hereafter "the desirability explanation"), which is at least more consistent with the text than the naturalistic perfectionist explanation. This explanation is that Confucius accepts the eudaimonistic thesis because he believes that being virtuous is an intrinsically desirable condition of oneself and that achieving intrinsically desirable conditions of oneself makes one's life go better for oneself. This explanation will turn out to rely on, among other

¹⁴ Recent work by Olberding and Kim can be put together to imply an alternative explanation, though they themselves do not explicitly discuss the issue (Olberding 2013, Kim 2020). In her essay, which draws inspiration from Zagzebski 2006, Olberding claims that ordinary pretheoretical views about a good life include elements that are admirable (i.e., morality) and elements that are desirable (various goods connected to "personal happiness and well-being"; see Olberding 2013: 419). Thus, by her lights, it was an ordinary pretheoretical view that being morally admirable makes one's life better (see, e.g., Olberding 2013: 433, 436, 439). Does she also think that it was an ordinary pretheoretical view that being morally admirable makes one's life *go better for oneself*? Given that she persistently contrasts what is admirable with what is desirable, which I take to be a stand-in for what is good for oneself (see Olberding 2013: 427, 433–435, 438), it does not seem so. Olberding thus seems to hold that it was an ordinary pretheoretical view that being morally admirable makes one's life better (see, e.g., Olberding 2013: 433, 436, 439) while, at the same time, denying that it was an ordinary pretheoretical view that it is (necessarily) good for oneself to live a good life.

Kim, for his part, does not think that Confucius had any arguments to justify his adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis (see Kim 2020: 30). Kim points out that it is possible to distinguish between a good life in the sense of a "choiceworthy life" and a good life in the sense of "a life that is good for me" (Kim 2020: 28; Olberding's position above should presumably be understood in terms of this distinction). He also suggests that, like Ancient Western eudaimonistic thinkers, Confucius does not sharply distinguish between a life that is good in the two ways I mentioned above (see Kim 2020: 28–30). If something makes someone's life go better for them, then it makes their life more choiceworthy, and if something makes someone's life more choiceworthy, then it makes their life go better for them. Now, per Olberding, being a virtuous person is ordinarily recognized as something that makes one's life more choiceworthy; therefore, per Kim, for Confucius and the Ancient Western eudaimonistic thinkers, it is *also* something that makes one's life go better for oneself.

I think this is a promising explanation that deserves further consideration and development, but I will here focus on developing other alternative explanations for two reasons. First, the above explanation is not textually grounded in the *Analects*. Confucius simply does not touch on issues such as the relation between the choiceworthy and the good. So even if we are attracted to this explanation, we would still wonder if there are more textually grounded, alternative explanations for Confucius' adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis. And second, the explanation is tangled up with some difficult issues that would take me beyond the scope of this essay. For example, how intuitive is the distinction between a choiceworthy life and a life that is good for oneself to live? Are there reasons to adopt it? Reject it? Relatedly, if Confucius does not adopt the distinction, should we understand this as a legitimate philosophical position or just an axiological confusion on his part? Addressing these issues would be a worthy task, but it would be its own project. Since I think there are other alternative explanations that do not involve similar complications in value theory, they will be my focus below.

things, Confucius' acceptance of the proposition that virtuous people as such desire that they themselves be virtuous. Since one could well worry that this proposition makes virtuous people unduly self-focused, I will also argue in this section that there are plausible interpretations of both integrity and moral self-cultivation that assign such a desire to virtuous people. Section 4 will discuss whether the above two explanations are preferable to the naturalistic perfectionist explanation. The tentative conclusion of this essay is that they are. While naturalist perfectionism is prevalent in post-Confucian thinkers, we should neither attribute it to Confucius nor rely on it to explain his adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis. Finally, I will conclude this section by speculating about why members of the later Confucian tradition turned to naturalistic perfectionism if Confucius himself did not do so. With respect to the hedonistic explanation, I will suggest that questions about whether virtue possesses an intrinsic benefit as well as whether it is unconditionally better for oneself than vice may have pushed Confucians to develop a theory of well-being to address these questions. With respect to the desirability explanation, I will suggest that dialectical confrontations with members of rival schools would have called into question one of its central premises. This situation may then have motivated Confucians to develop a theory of well-being that they could employ to break through the resulting dialectical impasse.

2 The Hedonistic Explanation

2.1 Virtue and Pleasure

The first alternative explanation is rooted in Confucius' view of virtue and pleasure. It will be best to let the explanation emerge organically from a discussion of his view of the subject. Like Aristotle (see *Nicomachean Ethics* [hereafter "NE"] 2.3), Confucius believes that the things one takes pleasure in are an indication of one's moral character. Numerous passages connect *being virtuous* with experiencing significant *pleasure*, especially in cases where one lives a life of poverty and material deprivation that, for most people, would be uncomfortable and unpleasant. Speaking of himself, Confucius says "Eating plain food and drinking water, having only your bent arm as a pillow—certainly there is joy to be found in this! Wealth and eminence attained improperly concern me no more than the floating clouds" (*Analects* 7.16), and speaking of his favorite disciple YAN Hui 顏回, he says, "What a worthy man was YAN Hui! Living in a narrow alley, subsisting on a basket of grain and gourd full of water—other people could not have borne such hardship, yet it never spoiled Hui's joy. What a worthy man was Hui!" (*Analects* 6.11).¹⁵ So virtuous people experience significant pleasure, and one's ability to sustain pleasure in seemingly uncomfortable circumstances even functions as a

¹⁵ See, also, *Analects* 1.15. For the general principle that a certain sort of pleasure is a sign of virtue, see *Analects* 6.20. I follow Slingerland that the "it" (*zhi* 之) that the best people take pleasure in is the Confucian way (Slingerland 2003: 59).

sign of virtue for Confucius. But what is it, exactly, that the virtuous person takes pleasure in? Consider the example of Aristotle again for a moment. For him, the answer is *acting virtuously* (see NE 2.3). Virtuous people enjoy performing virtuous actions; to this degree, virtue is pleasant and what one takes pleasure in is a sign of one's moral character. This answer does not fit Confucius' examples well, however. Using one's elbow for a pillow or subsisting on a meager amount of bland food do not appear to be examples of acting virtuously, yet the virtuous person experiences moral enjoyment while doing them all the same. On the other hand, if we switch the object of a virtuous person's enjoyment from virtuous action to the possession of virtuous character, then we can well explain Confucius' examples.¹⁶ Suppose that the virtuous person takes pleasure in the fact that *they are virtuous*. Such a pleasure would be available to a virtuous person even in seemingly uncomfortable circumstances, regardless of whether they are morally significant. We could even say that it is exactly in circumstances that are not usually pleasant—even if they lack moral significance—that a virtuous person's pleasure in their own moral character is most conspicuous. This is presumably why Confucius singles out one's ability to continuously experience pleasure in these circumstances as a sign of virtue.¹⁷

2.2 Why the Virtuous Person Takes Pleasure in Their Virtue

But why does the virtuous person take pleasure in the fact that they possess virtue? We can find a plausible answer to this question in Confucius' view of a virtuous

¹⁶ Compare with Mengzi: "There is no greater joy than finding that I have realized myself through self-reflection" (*Mengzi* 7A4, translation from Huang 2010: 72). This is the interpretation of Yu Jiyuan (see Yu 2007: 191); this difference between Confucius and Aristotle is part of his insightful observation that Aristotle places greater importance on the *actualization* of virtue, while Confucius places greater importance on the *possession* of virtue (see Yu 2007: 169–170, 179–180, 192). HUANG Yong, by contrast, understands Confucius' position as similar to Aristotle's and takes the above circumstances to be examples of *refraining* from wrongful material gain (see Huang 2010: 72).

¹⁷ This is not to deny that Confucius thinks that virtuous people take pleasure in acting virtuously. If we follow the suggestion in note 15, the best people take pleasure in the way, which we could plausibly divide into *the way one should be* and *the way one should act*. So understood, the virtuous person would then take pleasure in both aspects. Whether or not this is right, Confucius emphasizes the first aspect in the *Analects*, and it is this more visible aspect of his thinking about virtue and pleasure that I am concerned with here.

An anonymous referee suggests an alternative interpretation: the activities of eating (plain) food when hungry or drinking water when thirsty are naturally pleasant. However, most people would be distressed by the humble circumstances which limit one to such pleasures because of their concern for social status or wealth. The virtuous person, by contrast, devalues social status and wealth (cf. *Analects* 4.9). As a result, their enjoyment of natural pleasures in humble circumstances is unaffected. This is indeed a possible interpretation of *Analects* 7.16. *Le yi zai qi zhong yi* 樂亦在其中矣 can be read either as "pleasures exist also in these things" or as "pleasure exists even in the midst of these things" (my translations; cf. Legge 1877: 157). However, the same interpretation does not fit *Analects* 6.11. There, subsisting on small amounts of rice and water are described as "hardships" (*you* 憂), and it is said that they "do not spoil" (*bu gai* 不改) Hui's pleasure. On the suggested reading, low social status and poverty are the potential spoilers of pleasure and eating plain food and drinking water are the sources of it, but here, eating plain food and drinking water are the potential spoilers and the sources of pleasure lie elsewhere.

person's motivation. He holds that certain motivations or desires belong to the virtuous person as such, and one of these constitutive desires can in turn explain why the virtuous person derives pleasure from the fact that they possess virtue. Consider *Analects* 7.30: "The Master said, 'Is goodness [*ren* 仁] really so far away? If I simply desire goodness, I will find that it is already here.'" A natural interpretation of the chapter is that desiring goodness is sufficient for possessing it: *if* one desires that oneself possess goodness, then one already possesses goodness. Nevertheless, this interpretation ought to be resisted for three reasons.

The first reason is that it makes the acquisition of goodness too easy. Goodness, for Confucius, is the result of a lifetime of self-cultivation (see *Analects* 2.4, 8.7, 9.11, 9.19, 9.30); indeed, it is a moral ideal that he presents himself as diligently in pursuit of but not yet having achieved (see *Analects* 7.17, 7.22, 7.34). If all that were required for achieving goodness is to desire it, then why is achieving it the fruit of a lifetime of effort? This is not to deny that coming to desire goodness may require some effort (see *Analects* 4.6,¹⁸ 9.18), but the difficulty of this task seems disproportionate to the difficulty that Confucius assigns to achieving goodness.

The second reason to reject the natural interpretation of *Analects* 7.30 is that it shrinks the space that would be occupied by the moral learner who practices moral self-cultivation. Those who engage in the lifelong practice of moral self-cultivation presumably desire to achieve goodness. But if just desiring goodness were sufficient for achieving it, then they would already be at the goal rather than *on the way to the goal*. To then preserve some space for moral self-cultivation, one would have to say that it entirely consists in *desiring to desire goodness*, and once one achieves that, one reaches the goal. But this does not fit well with Confucius' remark about YAN Hui: "For three months at a time his heart did not stray from goodness. The rest could only sporadically maintain such a state" (*Analects* 6.7).

The third and final reason to reject the natural interpretation of *Analects* 7.30 stems from the fact that Confucius understands goodness to involve a harmonious balance of various virtues (see, e.g., *Analects* 14.4, 17.6, 17.8). According to the natural interpretation, one can achieve this complex moral condition if one just desires it. But this is not plausible. To achieve goodness, not only does one have to go through the work of acquiring the individual virtues that it involves, one also has to learn how to balance them together in the right way. And one could presumably have the desire to achieve goodness *while undertaking this process*.

In light of these difficulties, I suggest a different interpretation of *Analects* 7.30. Desiring goodness is not sufficient for its possession as a whole; rather, it is sufficient for *one particular aspect of goodness*—namely, desiring goodness. That is, one part of goodness is having certain desires or motivations, and at least one of these desires or motivations is that *oneself be virtuous* (cf. *Analects* 4.2, 4.11, 6.30, 7.15, 9.31¹⁹). So

¹⁸ I read "*hao ren zhe, wu yi shang zhi* 好仁者，無以尚之" in *Analects* 4.6 as "One who loves goodness would prize nothing above it" with Legge (see Legge 1877: 135) rather than as "One who truly loved goodness could not be surpassed" with Slingerland. The second reading would support the interpretation that desiring goodness is sufficient for attaining it. I prefer the first reading for the reasons I mentioned above.

¹⁹ I follow Slingerland in taking Confucius to read the longed-for person in the ode as a stand-in for goodness (*ren*) (Slingerland 2003: 97).

if one desires goodness, then it is present *in part*, just not necessarily in whole.²⁰ Further, this is a part of goodness that is readily achievable. It is therefore fitting to focus one's attention on this fact in those moments, such as the one in *Analects* 7.30, when one is feeling dismayed by the long road to goodness and needs some encouragement (cf. *Analects* 9.11). With this interpretation in hand, we can now explain why virtuous people take pleasure in the fact that they are virtuous. A virtuous person *as such* desires that they themselves be virtuous; consequently, finding this desire fulfilled by the existence of virtue within oneself brings pleasure and satisfaction. I propose that it is this same pleasure that Confucius is referring to when he claims that virtuous people experience enjoyment even in seemingly unpleasant circumstances. And from this point, we can construct the first alternative explanation for Confucius' adoption of the thesis.

2.3 Expanding the Hedonistic Justification

I have argued that Confucius views virtuous self-awareness as pleasant and satisfying. If we then attribute to him the plausible view that feeling pleasure is good for oneself, we immediately arrive at a possible explanation for Confucius' adoption of the thesis. Virtue is good for oneself insofar as it causes one to feel pleasure; specifically, it causes virtuous people to feel pleasure at the awareness of their own virtue. This explanation, however, is not quite complete. HUANG Yong has pointed to an important difficulty for a hedonistic explanation of Confucius' adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis (Huang 2010: 75). He observes that Confucius thinks not only that virtue is good for oneself but that it is *better for oneself than vice* (see *Analects* 4.5, 7.16, 15.9, 16.5). A satisfactory explanation for Confucius' adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis should also be able to explain this further point. Call this "Huang's desideratum." The difficulty is that the explanation as we have so far elaborated it fails to do this. Vice can also produce pleasure for oneself (see, e.g., *Analects* 16.5), and nothing that we have seen so far shows that the pleasure that one takes in one's own virtue is better for oneself than the pleasures that vicious people can provide themselves with. Huang, for his part, turns to a Mengzi-inspired naturalistic perfectionism to fill in this gap: taking pleasure in one's virtue is superior to vice-provided pleasures insofar as what one takes pleasure in—being virtuous—uniquely realizes the distinctively human aspect of one's nature (Huang 2010: 75–76). This appeal to naturalistic perfectionism, however, is not necessary. The *Analects* provides us with the means to develop the hedonistic explanation and satisfy Huang's desideratum.

Confucius makes two further observations that are relevant to the connection between virtue and pleasure. First, he states in *Analects* 4.2 that "Without goodness [*ren*], one cannot remain constant in adversity and cannot experience lasting

²⁰ Mary I. Bockover offers a similar interpretation of the chapter. She takes *ren* to designate both a moral ideal—"perfect goodness"—and a person of moderate goodness who is attempting to approximate this ideal. Thus, if one desires to be *ren* in the first sense, one is *ren* in the second sense (Bockover 2008: 204 n38). I find this division between ideal and moderate senses plausible in terms of *junzi* 君子, but I am less sure that *ren* has a moderate, nonideal sense in the *Analects*, at least if we take this sense to be distinct from "benevolence."

enjoyment (*le 樂*)” (modified Slingerland translation). And second, he observes in several places that virtuous people are free of anxiety and fear (see *Analects* 7.19, 7.37, 9.29, 12.4). We can appeal to these observations to develop the hedonistic explanation and answer Huang’s desideratum. The first observation touches on a more foundational issue, so I will begin there. Let us call aspects of one’s life that are vulnerable to good and bad fortune “insecure.” Moreover, the more that something is under one’s control, the less vulnerable it is to good and bad fortune. By contrast, these aspects of one’s life are “secure.”²¹ I have already argued that Confucius thinks that virtuous people derive pleasure from the fact that they are virtuous. However, whether one is virtuous or not is under one’s control to a high degree. This is because one’s moral character is either developed or preserved by one’s actions (*Analects* 17.2), and one’s actions are under one’s direct control (see *Analects* 4.6, 9.26, 12.1). Virtuous people therefore derive pleasure from a source—their own character—that is highly secure. Vicious people, by contrast, derive pleasure from external goods (see *Analects* 1.14, 4.5, 4.11, 4.16, 15.21), which are highly vulnerable to good and bad fortune. They therefore derive pleasure from a source that is highly insecure. I take *Analects* 4.2 to make exactly this point. It is not that it is impossible for vicious people to experience lasting pleasure; rather, since the sources of their pleasure are highly insecure, their experiencing lasting pleasure is very much a matter of luck. The virtuous person, by contrast, enjoys very secure pleasures.²² Their experiencing lasting enjoyment is therefore much less a matter of luck. This last point provides us with a reason to think that it is more prudent to be virtuous than to be vicious. By being virtuous, one chooses pleasures that are more secure and are less reliant on luck for their persistence.

Confucius’ second observation—that virtuous people are free of anxiety and fear—draws out a second consequence of the fact that one’s possession of virtue is under one’s control to a high degree. I have already mentioned that he thinks that virtuous people *as such* care about their own possession of virtue. To the degree that what one cares about is under one’s control, one is less fearful and anxious about losing it. Let us call a pleasure “pure” if it is free of the admixture of pain and distress. This line of reasoning implies that the pleasure that virtuous people derive from their own possession of virtue is very pure. This is because the source of that pleasure—their own virtuous character—is under their control to a high degree. In comparison to virtue, the possession of external goods is less under one’s control. If one values external goods, then one introduces causes for anxiety

²¹ This is not to say that being under one’s control is necessary for being secure. Some aspects of one’s life are invulnerable to good and bad fortune without being under one’s control. One such example is the fact of one’s own mortality.

²² The pleasure that a virtuous person takes in their own character is not as secure as that character since the pleasure additionally requires that one be alive and conscious, be aware of one’s own virtue, and presumably also not be experiencing great pain. Confucius may think that being aware of one’s own virtue is a necessary consequence of being virtuous, but, however that may be, the other conditions are clearly vulnerable to good or bad fortune (for an extended discussion of Confucius’ view of the vulnerability of virtuous people to fortune, see Olberding 2013). That being said, *Analects* 4.2 still suggests that the pleasure that virtuous people take in their own virtue is the securest pleasure that is available to us.

and fear into one's life. Insofar as vicious people characteristically derive pleasure from external goods, and external goods are a greater source of anxiety and fear, their pleasures are less pure.

On the other hand, it is important not to overstate the degree to which virtuous people experience purer pleasures than vicious people. Amy Olberding has argued persuasively that the *Analects* shows Confucius to both care about external goods and be pained by their absence (see Olberding 2013: 423–426, 432–436). We can also sharpen this point by observing that virtuous people care about certain external goods *insofar as* they are virtuous. Virtuous people are benevolent and filial, both of which require caring about the well-being of others. There is also the virtuous desire that the world embody the way which Confucius himself displays with great fervor (see *Analects* 4.8, 18.6).²³ All of these aspects of virtue attach a virtuous person to external goods and introduce causes for anxiety and fear when these goods are present and pain and frustration when they are absent. Nevertheless, it is reasonable that the high value that virtuous people place on their own character, which, again, is something that is under their control to a high degree, mitigates the painful experiences that attachment to external goods can give rise to.²⁴ Vicious people, by contrast, have no such bulwark. They are fully exposed to these painful experiences (consider *Analects* 15.2).²⁵ To this degree, then, virtuous people experience purer pleasures than vicious people.²⁶

This point allows us to expand our earlier interpretation of *Analects* 4.2. It is difficult for vicious people to experience lasting pleasure not only because the sources of their pleasure are insecure but also because this insecurity gives rise to anxiety and fear that they have no means of mitigating. It also provides us with a reason why Confucius thinks that it is better for oneself to be virtuous than to be vicious; namely, it is better for oneself to enjoy purer pleasures than impurer ones, and virtue, for the reasons just discussed, involves purer pleasures than vice. If we combine this reason with the previous one for thinking that it is more prudent for oneself to be virtuous than it is to be vicious, we can satisfy Huang's desideratum without appealing to naturalistic perfectionism.

²³ See Cokelet 2020: 23–24 for a slightly different case that virtue in the *Analects* requires an attachment to certain external goods.

²⁴ This is how I reconcile Confucius' claims about the virtuous person's freedom from anxiety and fear with his own apparent pain and frustration at the absence of certain external goods; that is, virtuous people should be understood to be *relatively* free of anxiety and fear or *as free of anxiety and fear as a person in this world could hope to be*. Olberding calls attention to this potential inconsistency but does not herself offer a solution (see Olberding 2013: 439).

²⁵ Compare with Cokelet 2020: 38, which focuses specifically on the negative effect of having one's sense of self-evaluation tied to external success.

²⁶ Olberding rejects the claim that virtuous people have access to pure pleasures (Olberding 2013: 434), though her position may ultimately be the same as the one I take here. In comparing the pleasures of virtue with pleasures that derive from external goods, she writes: "These are not joys that trump sorrow but in them are consolations that no mere material success, with its attendant anxieties and compromises of conscience, can afford" (Olberding 2013: 435). Her position thus seems to be that virtuous people experience purer pleasures than vicious people, just not *perfectly pure* pleasures.

2.4 Answering Doubts about the Hedonistic Justification

Though the hedonistic justification outlined above provides a possible explanation for Confucius' adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis, we may have doubts about how effective this justification ultimately is. On the hedonistic justification, virtuous people desire that they themselves be virtuous; consequently, the awareness of one's own virtue provides the virtuous person with pleasure—a pleasure which is both purer and more secure than those that can be achieved through vice. We may doubt:

- (i) that virtuous people desire that they themselves be virtuous;
- (ii) that even if they did, that the virtuous person's awareness of their own virtue would be continually pleasant; and
- (iii) that even if it is generally true that the pleasures associated with virtue are purer and more secure than the pleasures associated with vice, it is still possible that some vicious people experience as much, or more, pleasure than virtuous people.

The first worry is an important one, and I will address it at the end of the next section. The second worry forces us to be clearer about *what exactly* the virtuous person desires. Do they, for example, desire to be virtuous at least once during their lifetime? If this were indeed their desire, then it is plausible that the continual reminder that they satisfied this goal would not be very pleasant. This is not to deny that satisfying this desire might make one more *satisfied* with one's life. But this is presumably different from feeling pleasure or enjoyment; unless we want to attribute to Confucius the Epicurean view that the condition of being free from pain is positively pleasant. The same problem would also arise if the desire of the virtuous person was to maintain their virtue for just some extended period of time (regardless of the particular duration). On the other hand, if we say that virtuous people desire *to live a virtuous life*, then the problem does not occur. Instead, we run into a different problem. This desire is only fulfilled *when one's life is complete*. Now, there is evidence that it is this last desire that Confucius has in mind (see *Analects* 8.3, 8.7, 8.13),²⁷ and if we think carefully, we can see that the second worry can be addressed. It is true that knowingly fulfilling one's desire is pleasant. But so is knowingly approaching the fulfillment of one's desire with the expectation that one will fulfill it. And one typically experiences more pleasure the closer one knowingly comes to achieving what one desires. This, then, is the pleasure that we should say that Confucius has in mind: the pleasure one feels when one recognizes that one is in the process of fulfilling one's ambition to live a virtuous life. It is not implausible that such a desire could be a continual source of pleasure if it was strong enough.

In order to flesh out the third worry, I will grant for the sake of argument that virtue generally provides oneself with purer and more secure pleasures than vice. Nevertheless, it seems possible that some vicious people get lucky and find themselves in the continual possession of the external goods that are the dominant sources of their pleasure; moreover, though their continuous possession of these goods is not

²⁷ Slingerland makes a similar point (Slingerland 2001: 115).

wholly under their control, they may fail to realize this, or, if they do, they may fail to respond with the appropriate degree of anxiety and concern. Does Confucius have reason to think that virtue is better for oneself than vice *even in these circumstances*? When we ask this question, we are asking for an unconditional defense of virtue of the sort that Glaucon asks of Socrates in the *Republic* (see 360e–362c). Before I discuss this issue further, it is important to see that the justification I have so far attributed to Confucius for the eudaimonistic thesis is a reasonable one. If we can show that, rare exceptions notwithstanding, virtue is generally better for oneself than vice, then we have provided a sufficient justification for the claim that “virtue is better for oneself than vice.” Moreover, this justification provides a reason to think that it is more prudent to pursue virtue than vice even if virtue is not in every possible circumstance more pleasant than vice. This is because the pleasures that virtue involves are more secure and rely less on luck. Given that the future is unknown, it is prudent to pursue a good in such a way that one minimizes one’s reliance on luck in order to obtain it.

Nevertheless, the desire for an unconditional defense of virtue gives us motivation to look for an explanation for Confucius’ adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis that also provides such a defense. In fact, such an explanation is already suggested by the details of the hedonistic explanation. That explanation centers on the fact that, since virtuous people desire that they themselves be virtuous, virtuous self-awareness is pleasant. But, even apart from the resulting pleasure, the fact that virtuous people desire to be virtuous might itself provide a reason to think that being virtuous is good for oneself. This possibility will be the topic of the next section.

3 The Desirability Explanation

3.1 Virtue and “The Way”

I argued in the previous section that Confucius thinks that virtuous people, as such, desire that they themselves be virtuous. When this view was introduced, it was in the service of elaborating a hedonistic justification for Confucius’ adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis. Namely, satisfying one’s desire to be virtuous—or to live a virtuous life—brings one a pleasure that is both purer and more secure than the pleasures that vicious people enjoy. In this section, I will argue that Confucius’ view about virtuous motivation can be used to construct a second, nonhedonistic justification for adopting the eudaimonistic thesis. It thus provides us with a second possible explanation for Confucius’ adoption of the eudaimonistic thesis. Moreover, unlike the hedonistic justification, this justification can provide an unconditional defense of virtue over vice. Before proceeding with this explanation, I want to offer a proviso. The desirability explanation is more speculative than the hedonistic explanation. The hedonistic explanation is well grounded in the text. Elements of the desirability explanation are textually grounded, but other elements are not. Some may find this lack of complete textual support disqualifying. But, in terms of textual support, the desirability explanation actually fares no worse than the naturalistic perfectionist explanation, which, as we saw, is only partly supported by the *Mengzi*. In fact,

it arguably fares better insofar as the naturalistic perfectionist explanation conflicts with the text of the *Analects*.²⁸ Therefore, for the sake of having a robust pool of candidate explanations from which to assess the naturalistic perfectionist explanation, and especially one that provides an unconditional defense of virtue over vice, I will proceed with the desirability explanation.

The justification that the desirability explanation appeals to goes as follows. Virtuous people, as such, desire that they themselves be virtuous (see the discussion of *Analects* 7.30 in the previous section). Thus, “being virtuous” is a condition of oneself that is desired by virtuous people. But, for Confucius, as for Aristotle, virtuous people serve as a measure of what is correct or appropriate. The clearest evidence for this is the association of the virtuous person with “the way” (*dao* 道, see *Analects* 8.4, 13.25, 15.32, 17.4, 19.22; cf. Aristotle’s appeal to *dei* “should” in defining the mean that virtue exemplifies at NE 1106b15–23).²⁹ Thus, if the virtuous person is some way *qua virtuous*, then that is the way that one should be. If they desire something *qua virtuous*, then what they desire is not only desired by virtuous people, it is what one *should* desire; that is, it is *desirable*. Therefore, that oneself be virtuous is not just a condition of oneself that is desired by virtuous people, it is a condition of oneself that is *desirable*. Now, for the speculative part of the justification. We add to the above the final premise that if something is a desirable condition of oneself—if it is desirable that oneself be in that condition—then being in that condition is good for oneself; all other things being equal, it makes one’s life go better for oneself.³⁰

3.2 Qualifications: A Desirable Condition of Oneself

Now, some words of qualification are necessary about the speculative final premise in the above justification: “If it is desirable that oneself be in a condition, then being in that condition is good for oneself.” First, the desire involved here is understood to be irreducibly first-personal. The idea is that there are certain ways that one can be that are the appropriate targets of first-personal or “I-desires.”³¹ Second, “a desirable condition of oneself” should be understood as an intrinsically desirable condition of oneself and not a condition of oneself that is (only) instrumentally or constitutively desirable.³² Not only is there strong evidence that Confucius thinks that virtuous people as a matter of fact do desire virtue as an end (see *Analects* 4.2, 4.11)—and therefore

²⁸ This is not to say that the naturalistic perfectionist explanation may not have other advantages. A full accounting of the relative merits of the different explanations will be offered in Section 4.

²⁹ Yu Jiyuan makes a similar observation about virtue and *dao* in the *Analects* and virtue and the mean in Aristotle (Yu 2007: 31–32, 84).

³⁰ Note that this premise is not offering a definition of what is good for oneself; it is only offering a sufficient condition. Given that it is unlikely that Confucius had a theory of well-being, this is an advantage.

³¹ I take the distinction from Bernard Williams (Williams 1973: 260–261).

³² By “constitutively desirable” I mean things that are desirable as constitutive means to things that are desirable as ends. Say, for example, that someone desires to be handsome, and they agree with Aristotle that being tall is a constitutive part of being handsome. They then desire to be tall *in order* to be handsome. But it does not follow that they desire tallness as an end. After all, they could be tall, but hideous, like Frankenstein or Slenderman. Alternatively, one could make a Williams-like distinction between conditions of oneself that are foundationally and nonfoundationally desirable (see Williams 1973: 260–261).

it ought to be desired in this way or is intrinsically desirable—but this qualification is necessary to avoid counterexamples. Suppose, for example, that it is desirable that vicious people be punished. Suppose, also, that there is a vicious person and that punishments are by definition harms. That this vicious person be punished is therefore desirable. But being punished is a condition that this vicious person can be in. Therefore, for this vicious person, being punished is a desirable condition of oneself. But deserved punishments for vice are by definition bad. They make one's life go worse for oneself. We thus have a counterexample to the premise.³³ But notice that, in the case of the vicious person, that oneself be punished is only desirable insofar as it is a part of a state of affairs—the realization of justice in the world—that is itself intrinsically desirable. Or, put differently, that “oneself be punished” is not something that one should desire as an end—that would be a pathological desire for oneself to be harmed; rather, assuming one deserves it, one should only desire one's own punishment as a means to realizing justice in the world, the latter which one should desire as an end. In sum, when I say in the final premise that “if it is desirable that oneself be in a condition...,” I mean a condition that it is intrinsically desirable for one to be in or that one ought to desire oneself to be in as an end.³⁴

³³ This counterexample is inspired by Christine Korsgaard (Korsgaard 2013: 2–3).

³⁴ Just to be clear, I do not mean to suggest that Confucius explicitly made the distinction between what is intrinsically and what is instrumentally or constitutively desirable. I think the premise, “If something is a desirable condition of oneself, then being that way makes one's life go better for oneself” is plausible without any added qualification. It is just that possible counterexamples force us to be clearer and more explicit about what the premise involves.

An anonymous referee worries that the above response is insufficient to deal with two sorts of counterexamples. Take, first, the example of a virtuous person who is willing to die for a worthwhile cause. They knowingly choose a course of action that will lead to their own death. But is not their (courageous) action something that one ought to desire as an end? It follows that it is an intrinsically desirable condition of oneself. But giving up one's own life is *harmful*. The response here is to be very clear about what exactly the virtuous person desires in this situation. Do they specifically desire to sacrifice themselves for a worthwhile cause *or* do they desire to engage in an act of morally meaningful resistance while foreseeing *but not specifically desiring* that such an act will result in their own death? Suppose it is the first. Now, imagine that the virtuous person, all of a sudden, perceives a way to resist in a morally meaningful way without having to die. If the virtuous person specifically desires to sacrifice themselves, then they would still desire to give up their own life in this circumstance. But that would be a pathological desire for one's own death. Therefore, it is the second goal that the virtuous person desires as an end: “morally meaningful resistance.”

The second sort of example relates to the virtue of filial piety. At the death of one's parents, this virtue involves (a) emotional responses of grief and sorrow (see *Analects* 3.26, 19.4) and (b) a prolonged period of mourning in which one deprives oneself of many pleasures and comforts (see *Analects* 17.21). Both of these things are arguably harmful, but it seems that the virtuous person ought to desire to undergo them since they are expressions of filial piety. This case is harder to resolve than the first. It is plausible that the virtuous person desires to “appropriately mourn” their parents as an end. So I think we should concede that some acts of filial piety are *partly constituted* by personal evils. They have to do with how one responds to personal evils in one's life and (therefore) inevitably involve the presence of something bad for oneself. Nevertheless, I do not think it is implausible that virtuously responding to the personal evils in one's life is (to at least some degree) good for oneself. In other words, it prevents these evils from being absolutely unmitigated harms (cf. NE 1100b30–33). Nevertheless, I would not say that this position is plausible either. It strikes me as an open option, intuitively speaking—as neither a point in favor of nor against the desirability justification. Note, also, that this is not to say that it is *overall better for oneself to exercise virtue in this circumstance*—as if it is a stroke of luck for a virtuous person's parents to die so that they can exercise filial piety in mourning them. That would indeed be implausible.

3.3 Expanding the Desirability Justification

So far, we have seen how the desirability explanation justifies the conclusion that being virtuous is good for oneself. We can extend the explanation to provide an unconditional defense of virtue over vice in the following way. I mentioned above that, for Confucius, virtuous people are a measure of what is appropriate. What they desire is therefore appropriately desired or desirable. But virtuous people do not only desire that they themselves be virtuous; they also desire that they themselves be free of vice. Therefore, being free of vice is a desirable condition of oneself. Given the previous premise, this makes being free of vice good for oneself. But if being free of a certain condition is good for oneself, it is plausible that being in this same condition is something that is bad for oneself. We can thus add a second speculative premise about desirable conditions of oneself: if something is a condition of oneself that it is desirable to be free of, then being in that condition is bad for oneself. Since vice is such a condition, it is bad for oneself to be vicious. Now, this is not quite enough to provide an unconditional defense of virtue over vice. While vice may be intrinsically bad for oneself and virtue intrinsically good for oneself, it is still possible that the sorts of benefits one can acquire through vice outweigh both the harm that comes from being vicious and the benefit that comes from being virtuous. I will characterize these benefits as external goods. If we can show that, taking external goods into account, being virtuous is still better for oneself than being vicious, then we have provided an unconditional defense of virtue over vice.

We can provide such a defense if we look more at what Confucius says about the virtuous person's desire for external goods. Though we have seen that Confucius thinks that virtuous people *do* desire external goods, he denies that they will desire them in all circumstances. While they desire external goods that are properly or not immorally acquired and used, those that are immorally acquired or used are not only of no concern to them, but they positively desire to be free of them (see *Analects* 1.14, 4.5, 7.16, 15.32).³⁵ If we combine this with our speculative premise that if something is a condition of oneself that it is desirable to be free of, then being in that condition is bad for oneself, then we can conclude that the immoral acquisition and use of external goods is positively harmful. As a result, the sort of acquisition and use of external goods that is characteristic of vice cannot tip the scales in its favor. This suffices for an unconditional defense of virtue over vice.

³⁵ For an elaboration of this point, see Cokelet 2020: 29–33. There is a complication lurking here. Some external goods can be present for oneself without being either properly or immorally acquired; for example, a parent may spontaneously recover from an illness on their own, without the action of anyone. Suppose that the virtuous person *only* desires properly acquired external goods. They would not desire the well-being of their parents in such a circumstance. Since it is clear that a filial son *would* desire the health of his parent in this circumstance, we had better say that this supposition is false and that virtuous people do straightforwardly care about at least some external goods. I therefore interpret cases where Confucius says things like “the virtuous person only desires this external good when it is properly acquired” to involve a contextual limitation to cases where the existence, possession, or use of the good in question is the result of human action and so will exclusively qualify as proper or immoral. Bradford Cokelet comes to the same conclusion (Cokelet 2020: 18–19, 34–37).

3.4 A Worry about the Desirability Justification

The above explanation rests on Confucius' view that virtuous people, as such, desire that they themselves be virtuous. I mentioned in the previous section that this is a place where one may have doubts. Since the point is foundational to the second explanation, it will be helpful to discuss these doubts as well and how they can be addressed. Why might one doubt that virtuous people, as such, desire that they themselves possess virtue? The most obvious reason is that assigning such a concern to virtuous people makes them unduly self-concerned. That *oneself* be virtuous is a matter of one's own condition. To be concerned about it is therefore to be concerned about one's own condition. But virtuous people are essentially *other concerned*.³⁶ The easiest response to this worry is to point out that being concerned about one's own moral character in no way precludes that one is *also* concerned about other people. Indeed, we see just such a combination of self-directed and other-directed concern in *Analects* 6.30.³⁷ But one could deepen the worry in two ways. First, one could wonder which is the *stronger* concern for a virtuous person: others or their own virtue? If we provide the second response, then one could object that to care more about one's own virtue is to be excessively self-concerned. There is, as a matter of fact, some evidence that Confucius would give this second response.³⁸ However, this feature of Confucius' view would not be necessary for the two explanations discussed above, so it can here be set aside. The second way that one could deepen the worry that virtuous people are being depicted as unduly self-concerned is to claim that, though virtuous people may be self-concerned in various ways, they are not self-concerned *insofar as they are virtuous*; that is, virtue essentially involves other-directed concern while it *does not* essentially involve self-directed concern.

³⁶ By "self-concerned" and "other-concerned" I do not mean to imply that this concern is limited to the well-being of oneself or others. I mean it in the most general sense of being concerned about the condition of oneself or others in some way.

³⁷ An anonymous referee points out that ZHU Xi's reading of this chapter appears to diverge from mine. It is true that ZHU Xi appears to read the chapter as collapsing the distinction between self and other; for example, he quotes with approval CHENG Hao's 程顥 claim that "A person of true goodness regards heaven, earth, and the myriad things as one body. They all are his own self" (Gardner 2003: 58). But ZHU Xi does not actually think that all things are numerically identical with oneself, as he makes clear in his comments on ZHANG Zai 張載, who introduced the idea of treating all things as one body in a Neo-Confucian context (for more on this point, see Shun 2020: 411). Hence ZHU Xi's earlier comment on this same chapter that "Using oneself to approach others [*yi ji ji ren* 以己及人] is the mind-and-heart of the person of true goodness. Looking at it from this point of view, we can see that the heavenly principle [*tianli* 天理] is all-pervasive" (Gardner 2003: 58). That is, things share a common principle and source (*li* 理), but are not thereby numerically identical. Either way, it is unlikely that Confucius himself engaged in the sort of metaphysical speculation that underlies this idea (see note 5).

³⁸ This interpretation seems to me to fit better with the *Analects*' consistent emphasis on one's concern for one's own moral condition. See, for example, *Analects* 4.6, 4.11, 7.15, 14.24, and note that it is the virtuous person's concern with their own condition that is emphasized. But this is a controversial interpretation. HUANG Yong, for example, argues that neither self-concern nor other-concern have priority in Confucius' ethical thinking (see Huang 2018: 229–230).

3.5 First Response to the Worry: Integrity

This worry can be addressed by showing that it is plausible that virtue essentially involves *some* self-directed concern. There are at least two moral phenomena that support this proposition: integrity and moral self-cultivation. I will begin with the integrity-based response. It goes as follows: it is essential to a virtuous person that they possess moral integrity, and concern for one's own moral character is an essential feature of moral integrity.³⁹ Therefore, by virtue of the fact that someone is virtuous, they have some self-directed concern. Now, what exactly the nature of integrity is, is a controversial issue,⁴⁰ and the response above rests on a particular view of one constituent of integrity we can call "the Confucius view of integrity." On this view, when one asks someone "Don't you have any integrity?," at least one of the things that they are asking that person is whether they care about what kind of person they are or about their own moral character. My goal here is not to show that this is the correct account of integrity; rather, it is to show that it is a *plausible* account. If there is a plausible account of integrity that assigns self-directed concern to a virtuous person, then it would be unreasonable to reject the Confucius view of virtuous motivation out of hand. To show that the Confucius view of integrity is plausible, we could claim that it is independently plausible that people of moral integrity, as such, care about their own moral character. We could also appeal to the view's ability to explain other plausible features of integrity; that is, we could provide an abductive reason for adopting the account. One plausible feature of integrity is the ability to stick to one's moral values in light of strong temptations to either abandon or violate them.⁴¹ The Confucius view of integrity thus provides the following explanation for this feature of integrity: virtuous people possess the ability to hold on to their moral values in the face of temptations to the contrary because they value their own moral character—their own holding of these moral values—more than they value the sort of external goods that commonly tempt one to transgress or abandon one's moral values. Consider the example of filial piety (*xiao* 孝). The person who possesses filial piety respects their parents and cares about their well-being (see *Analects* 2.7). But sometimes respecting one's parents, or caring for them, requires one to sacrifice apparent goods. These goods can then tempt one to violate or abandon the values associated with filial piety. But if one *also* desires that oneself possesses filial piety, and if one desires this *more than one desires external goods*, then one has extra motivation to stick to one's moral values. And

³⁹ This is not to claim it *wholly constitutes* integrity; just that it is *one constitutive feature*.

⁴⁰ Helpful overviews of the recent literature on integrity include Scherkoske 2013 and Cox, La Caze, and Levine 2017.

⁴¹ Greg Scherkoske refers to this aspect of integrity as "stickiness" and "resoluteness" (Scherkoske 2013: 29). Theorists who emphasize this aspect of integrity include Lynne McFall and John Bigelow and Robert Pargetter (McFall 1987: 7, 9–11; Bigelow and Pargetter 2007: 43–44). Slingerland also attributes a concern for integrity so-understood to Confucius in the *Analects* (Slingerland 2001: 113–114).

it is this deeper well-spring of motivation that allows virtuous people to reliably preserve their moral values and resist temptations to violate or abandon them.⁴²

3.6 Second Response to the Worry: Moral Self-cultivation and Admiration

The second way to address the worry that virtuous people are not as such self-concerned is to focus on the experience of moral self-cultivation. It is an essential part of moral self-cultivation that one desires that oneself become virtuous. There are two shapes that this desire could take. One could (i) desire generally that there be virtuous people in the world or (ii) desire that *oneself* be virtuous. (i) does not essentially apply to oneself. But, if one believed that oneself becoming virtuous was the best way to fulfill this general desire, then it could motivate one to become so. Now, suppose that someone could either invest their energy in making themselves a virtuous person or making someone else one. Or, if you wish, imagine that a benevolent demon allows someone to choose whether they themselves or another person will be transformed into a virtuous person. According to the first desire, this person would be indifferent between these two outcomes. They may as well flip a coin. But, according to the second desire, they are not indifferent. They are personally invested in *their own* moral development. Let us call the view that moral self-cultivation involves the second desire “The Confucius view of moral self-cultivation” (see, e.g., *Analects* 4.6, 6.7, 6.30, 9.18).⁴³ If the Confucius view is correct, then moral self-cultivation involves the self-directed desire that oneself be virtuous. And if morally developing people desire that they themselves become virtuous, then morally developed people presumably desire that they themselves *continue to be virtuous*; that is, they presumably possess the self-directed desire that we attributed to the virtuous person in the hedonistic explanation, namely, to live a virtuous life. The Confucius view of moral self-cultivation thus supports the proposition that virtuous people, as such, possess some self-directed concern.

I think the Confucius view of moral self-cultivation better captures the nature of moral self-cultivation, but I will not insist on that here. All that is necessary is that this view of moral self-cultivation is a plausible one. One reason for thinking that the view is plausible is the connection between moral self-cultivation and the *admiration* of those who exemplify the moral qualities one strives for. It seems obvious that admiration of moral exemplars or heroes can both help initiate and sustain moral self-cultivation, and this connection is more easily explained if we adopt the Confucius view of moral self-cultivation. Several theorists have observed that the emotion of admiration either involves or gives rise to a desire to emulate those one admires.⁴⁴ But the desire

⁴² This is somewhat similar to the account of Bigelow and Pargetter. They understand integrity to involve the triumph of one’s higher order desires—that one desires not to act from the basis of a certain desire, for example—over one’s lower order desires—one’s immediate desire to do the thing in question (see Bigelow and Pargetter 2007: 43–44). The Confucius account similarly understands integrity to involve a triumph of one sort of desire over another: one’s desires to be a person of moral character over one’s desire to act in ways that would undermine one’s moral character.

⁴³ See Korsgaard 2009: 210–211 for a helpful parallel. In her terms, the Confucius view of moral cultivation sees moral cultivation as involving ambition or a personal project.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Zagzebski 2017: 33–35. Olberding makes this point directly in relation to the *Analects* (Olberding 2012: 64, 86–88).

to emulate is precisely *not* the desire that the world just contain more people like the person one admires; rather, it is a self-directed desire that *oneself be a certain way that another is*. So moral admiration either contains or gives rise to the desire that, on the Confucius view, is essential to moral self-cultivation. And this explains why it can both help initiate, and sustain, moral self-cultivation. On the other hand, if we imagine that moral self-cultivation involves an *impersonal desire that virtuous people exist*, admiration's ability to give rise to and sustain moral self-cultivation becomes more mysterious. This provides us an abductive reason for favoring the Confucius view of moral self-cultivation. We thus have two plausible views of moral phenomena that support the proposition that virtuous people have some self-directed concern insofar as they are virtuous. This is a sufficient response to the worry that virtuous people are not as such self-concerned.

4 Concluding Discussion

4.1 Assessing the Naturalistic Perfectionist Explanation

The previous two sections have presented two alternative explanations for why Confucius believes that being virtuous is good for oneself. Now it is time to compare them to the naturalistic perfectionist explanation. The hedonistic explanation has two clear advantages over the naturalistic perfectionist explanation: it is better grounded in the text and it does not conflict with *Analects* 5.13 and 7.24. So far, the hedonistic explanation compares favorably against the naturalistic perfectionist explanation. Some may, however, be dissatisfied with this explanation because (i) it instrumentalizes the benefit of virtue and (ii) it fails to provide an unconditional justification for why virtue is better for oneself than vice. By contrast, the naturalistic perfectionist explanation satisfies both of these conditions. But so does the desirability explanation. Let us therefore compare it to the naturalistic perfectionist explanation.

Both the naturalistic perfectionist and desirability explanations are partly supported by (different) Confucian texts. The second tenet of the naturalistic perfectionist justification—namely, that virtue realizes human nature—is attributed to Confucius in the *Mengzi*. Similarly, the first premise of the desirability justification—that virtue is a desirable condition of oneself—is well-supported by the *Analects*. The remaining part of each justification, by contrast, attributes an unstated view to Confucius. Both explanations are thus speculative in character. In the case of the naturalistic perfectionist explanation, the unstated view is that for something to be good for oneself is for it to realize one's nature; in the case of the desirability explanation, it is that if something is a desirable condition of oneself, then it is good for oneself. It seems that, if anything, the desirability explanation has a slight edge here insofar as the unstated view that it attributes to Confucius is less theoretically complex—a sufficient condition for something being good for oneself as opposed to a definition.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See note 6 for a defense of this idea.

But I will not insist on that point here. A clearer advantage for the desirability explanation comes into view when we consider not only support by the text but compatibility with it. As we observed earlier, the naturalistic perfectionist explanation conflicts with the text of the *Analects*. The desirability explanation does not. It thus possess a clear advantage when it comes to textual compatibility.⁴⁶

The desirability explanation gains a further advantage when we consider the tension between the *Mengzi*'s report that Confucius accepted the second tenet of naturalistic perfectionism (that being virtuous realizes human nature) and *Analects* 5.13 and 7.24. What explains this tension? If we deny that Confucius accepted naturalistic perfectionism, we can provide the following explanation: given Confucius' position as an authority, there was pressure on Confucian schools to attribute their own (post-Confucius) developments to him. For example, the saying in the *Mengzi* may have been introduced into the heritage of the Confucian school that *Mengzi* himself was a part of.⁴⁷ On the other hand, if we suppose that Confucius accepted naturalistic perfectionism, it is more difficult to find a plausible explanation for this tension. We could claim that some rival anti-naturalistic perfectionist (Zengian?) school inserted those sayings into the *Analects*, but, even if we take this route, there is still the problem of the conspicuous absence of the discussion of human nature throughout the work. Rejecting the naturalistic perfectionist explanation thus provides us with a cleaner explanation of the tension between the *Analects* and the *Mengzi* concerning Confucius' thinking about human nature. In sum, the desirability explanation possesses two clear advantages over the naturalistic perfectionist explanation. If we desire an explanation that (i) attributes an intrinsic benefit to virtue and (ii) provides an unconditional defense of the superiority of virtue to vice, we should prefer the desirability explanation.

4.2 Why Naturalistic Perfectionism?

If the above is correct, then naturalistic perfectionism was a post-Confucius development within Confucianism. It will therefore be fitting to conclude by saying something about how the picture of Confucius' thinking that is sketched in this essay can make sense of this development. If we only accept the hedonistic explanation, then Confucius' followers likely thought that there was more to be said about the benefit of virtue: at the very least, one might want to show that considerations of pleasure and pain are not the *only* relevant considerations for assessing well-being. And if they are not, then one might wonder whether, besides affording pleasure, virtue possessed an intrinsic benefit. And, furthermore, one might wonder, especially when arguing against those who disagreed that virtue is good for oneself, whether virtue is unconditionally better for oneself than vice. All of these concerns could have motivated Confucius' followers to go further into the philosophy of well-being. On

⁴⁶ It does not conflict with the text of the *Mengzi* either. It is just orthogonal to it.

⁴⁷ Traditionally, this is the school of Confucius' grandson Zisi. It is interesting to note in this regard that *The Doctrine of the Mean*, traditionally attributed to Zisi, also has naturalistic perfectionist elements. See note 3.

the other hand, if we accept the desirability explanation, then the motivation would be different. It is true that this explanation provides an unconditional justification for the superiority of virtue over vice, but it relies on a concession—that virtuous people are normatively as they should be—that would have been hopelessly controversial when arguing with rival schools who were skeptical of the value of morality. The Daoists, Yangists, and the School of Strategy, for example, would not have granted this concession. The desire to find a way through the resulting dialectical impasse very well may have motivated later Confucians to develop a fleshed-out theory of well-being in the form of naturalistic perfectionism.

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