

ARTICLE

The metaphysical background to early Confucian ethics

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Abstract

What is the metaphysical background to early Confucian ethics? Is there a distinctive picture of reality that informs texts such as the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*? Contemporary interpreters disagree on the answer to these questions, a division reflected not just in scholarly debates but in how early Confucian texts are introduced to larger audiences. This article will begin with a discussion of some general methodological issues involved in applying the term “metaphysics” to classical Chinese thought, and then examine a couple of prominent reconstructions of the metaphysical background to early Confucian texts.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Confucius declines to answer questions about the spirits and the afterlife in favor of a concern with how to live and serve other people (*Analects* 11.12). Early Confucian thinkers share the Master's focus on self-cultivation and societal transformation. However, readers of works like the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi* will inevitably be curious about the view of reality as a whole that underlies the ethical teachings found in these texts. When Confucius says that “It is Heaven itself that has endowed me with Virtue” (*Analects* 7.23), or Mencius that “To understand one's nature (*xing* 性) is to understand Heaven (*tian* 天)” (*Mencius* 7A1), we may wonder about the metaphysical presuppositions that inform these passages.¹ Additionally, when these authors employ concepts like “self” (*ji* 己) and “others” (*ren* 人), or set forth values such as *ren* 仁 (“benevolence,” “humaneness”), *yi* 義 (“righteousness”), *li* 禮 (“ritual propriety”), *zhi* 智 (“wisdom”), and *xin* 信 (“trustworthiness”), we may be interested in the implicit views of selfhood and agency that give meaning to these terms. What is the metaphysical background to early Confucian ethics? Is there a distinctive picture of reality that informs the above-mentioned texts?

Scholars disagree on the answers to these questions and have reconstructed different metaphysical frameworks for making sense of early Confucian ideas. This disagreement is not merely a scholarly one, but also affects how these texts are introduced to wider audiences. If a first-time reader turns to the introductory material of her copy of the *Analects* in search of information on these issues, she will get different and even opposed views

depending on which edition of the text she happens to be using.² A consideration of the debates about the metaphysical background is thus necessary for readers at any level who want to make sense of early Confucian ethics. This article will begin with a discussion of some general methodological issues (Section 2) and then examine two prominent interpretations of the metaphysical background, which are linked with competing role ethical and virtue ethical interpretations of early Confucianism (Sections 3 and 4). Although there are other interpretations available (see Li & Perkins, 2015), these two have perhaps been most influential in English-language discussions of Confucian ethics.

2 | SIGNIFICANCE AND MEANING OF METAPHYSICS IN EARLY CONFUCIANISM

We can begin by discussing two methodological questions relevant to the connection between metaphysics and ethics in early Confucian texts. First, given the lack of metaphysical theorizing in early Confucian texts, how important is the metaphysical background to these texts? Second, since there is neither a single term nor a clearly demarcated field of inquiry that corresponds to the Aristotelian science of being *qua* being, what does “metaphysics” mean in any early Confucian context?

Some scholars have held that there is a lack of metaphysics in early Confucianism (see Yu, 2011 for discussion). At the beginning of his seminal *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan notes that Chinese thinkers focus on human affairs rather than metaphysical issues (Feng, 1952: 3). Apart from his apparent indifference to spirits and the afterlife mentioned above, *the Analects* tells us that Confucius never spoke of the Way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道; 5.13) or strange events and the supernatural (7.21). Additionally, he claims to have no esoteric doctrines, but rather to share everything with his students through his own words and actions (7.24). From these passages, we might believe that Confucius' views begin and end with improving relations between particular people in the everyday world, and such do not require specific views about the nature of reality. There is also a hermeneutical side to this argument. If we want to understand the metaphysical underpinnings of Aristotle's ethics, we can turn to treatises like *Categories* and *Metaphysics*, where we not only get an outline of his views but also learn how they differ from those of his predecessors. It is more difficult to answer questions about *tian* and other metaphysically laden concepts in the *Analects*. As Van Norden claims, “there is no evidence that Confucius had detailed theoretical views about cosmology” (2002, p. 22).

Nonetheless, some commentators have maintained that without metaphysics we cannot make sense of early Confucian views. Unless we understand the “fundamental background assumptions” of early Confucian thinkers, we will end up unwittingly transposing our own background beliefs onto the texts.³ According to a view popularized by David L. Hall and Roger Ames, Confucius relies on a pre-established set of presuppositions about what the world is like: “For him, the cosmological ground of his elaborated philosophy was a starting point derived from tradition, largely absorbed intact and simply assumed in his discussions with his followers” (1987, p. 198). On this view, references in the texts to concepts like *dao* and *tian* provide some suggestions about early Confucian metaphysical beliefs, and we can reconstruct the underlying assumptions that inform these beliefs by looking at the broader tradition inherited by these thinkers. Not only was Confucius himself part of this tradition, but he also claimed to be its transmitter (*Analects* 7.1).

Our views about the importance of metaphysics in understanding early Confucianism may depend on how we answer a second question: What is “metaphysics” in the context of classical Chinese philosophy? While this question is much broader than the present article, it is relevant how interpreters make sense of the ethical views in early Confucian texts.⁴ Even in the Western philosophical tradition, metaphysics does not mean just one thing, and commentators who give different meanings to the term may disagree on how the subject is connected to Confucian ethics.

For fixing the meaning of metaphysics in early China, comparison with Western metaphysical thinking has been an important starting point. One tendency has been to use the Greek distinction between being (*ousia*) and becoming

(*genesis*) as a device for making sense of the Chinese view. As the 20th-century Confucian thinker Tang Junyi writes: “The cosmos in the minds of Chinese was only a kind of prevailing, a kind of trends; things in the universe can only be in proceeding, beyond which there is no eternal reality as substratum” (quoted in Zhao, 2006, p. 23). The Platonic preoccupation with the eternal and transcendent is not to be found in classical Chinese thinkers, who identified reality with the visible, natural world. The quote also suggests that Chinese metaphysics is more focused on process and change than its Western counterparts. We will discuss this view further in Section 3 below.

Other scholars have been wary of making too strong a contrast between these worldviews. Jiyuan Yu argues contends that a metaphysics that focuses on process is not necessarily incompatible with one based on substance, since Aristotle's metaphysics itself includes both components (2011, p. 148). May Sim, another scholar who argues for important areas of overlap between Confucius and Aristotle, contends that certain Confucian ethical views require commitment to a substantialist metaphysics (2007, p. 49 ff). We will return to this idea in Section 4 below.

Nonetheless, there is general agreement about the close connection between metaphysics and ethics in early Confucian thinking. Zhao Dunhua uses Kant's distinction between “moral metaphysics” and “metaphysics of nature”—that is, between the non-empirical components of ethics and physics, respectively—to understand how early Confucian metaphysics differs from Western metaphysics (2006, p. 27–28). Yu Weidong and Xu Jin contrast the centrality of the human moral subject in the early Confucian worldview with the emphasis on inquiry into mind-independent reality found in Western metaphysics (2009, p. 367). The quote from Mencius in the opening paragraph of this essay suggests that knowing the Way of Heaven and understanding one's own moral nature are thought to be the same task. For this reason, early Confucian thinking seems best understood as a moral metaphysics.⁵ As Jiyuan Yu puts it, “It has been the Confucian orthodoxy that moral ideas, cosmological insights, and ontological claims cannot be separated” (2002, p. 143).

In the next two sections, I want to look at two different attempts by contemporary scholars to reconstruct early Confucian moral metaphysics.⁶ These reconstructions show the complex possibilities for understanding the early Confucian worldview found in contemporary scholarship as well as the intractability of the debates between competing interpretations.

3 | CORRELATIVE THINKING AND CONFUCIAN ROLE ETHICS

According to one line of thinking, to understand the world as experienced by Chinese in the time leading up to Confucius, we first have to grasp the *Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*. Beginning in the Han Dynasty, the text was held to reflect the entire lineage of the sages, from Fu Xi to King Wen and the Duke of Zhou all the way through to Confucius.⁷ For some contemporary scholars, the link between early Confucianism and the *Yijing* is a central tenet of interpretation. As Chung-ying Cheng puts the point, “All [Confucius'] remarks and observations indicate a heritage of the philosophy of the *Yijing* at work. . . . There is much from the *Yi* tradition that can be traced from Confucius, through Zisi, to Mencius, and then to Xunzi” (2011, p. 23).

The *Yijing* develops a view of the cosmos based on the interlocking concepts of *yin* and *yang*. The scholar Robin Wang identifies six different kinds of *yinyang* relations: contradiction and opposition, interdependence, mutual inclusion, interaction and resonance, complementary or mutual support, and change and transformation. In order from first to last, these represent six stages by which we can explain reality: at first, we may see contradiction, but then this stage gives way to ever-stronger sorts of interdependence, and finally to change (Wang, 2015, pp. 22–26).

In the introduction to Ames and Rosemont, Jr.'s edition of the *Analects* (1999), they present the worldview found in the *Yijing* as a necessary introduction to Confucius' teachings, contending that early Chinese philosophers considered the only reality to be the apparent one in which everything is constantly changing. While much of this change occurs in cycles and happens in integration with other changing phenomena, and much of it is inevitable, to some degree we can affect the process of change. Ames and Rosemont see this worldview as reflected in Chinese language, the grammar of which is suited to express events and interrelationships, rather than the things and their

properties presupposed in English and other Indo-European languages (1999, p. 20 ff.). It is also bound up with a “correlative” style of thinking, with phenomena defined in an ever-shifting pattern of relationships with one another.

In contrast to logical or rational thinking and its reliance on causal implication, analysis, classification, and definition, correlative thinking depends on analogy, making its case through images and metaphors that unfold in a way that is vague yet significant. Hall and Ames give the example of a totem, which rather than signifying that the members of a clan have a fixed essence that can be grasped through use of reason, works by allowing different features of the totem to create meaning in the clan's members, both as individuals and as a community (1995, pp. 124–125). When we apply correlative thinking to the world around us, we start with the unique relationships that are present in the given situation and then use our imagination to envision the different possibilities that are present in these relationships.

A.C. Graham (1986, pp. 8–9) and others have argued that correlative thinking was not present in Chinese thought until the Han Dynasty. The scholar David Keightley, on the other hand, finds evidence for this mode of thinking in Shang Dynasty divination practices. The Shang ruler employed such practices to influence the ancestor-spirits, especially *shangdi*, the “Lord on High,” thought to have power over things like the weather or health and sickness. The diviners would submit certain predictions, or “charges,” to the spirits for their approval and ascertain the spirits' answers by applying heat to shells and bones and reading the cracks formed in the process. They often inscribed both the charge and its opposite (for example, “We will receive millet harvest” and “We may not receive millet harvest”) in the oracle bone, taking great care to balance both the inscription of these charges and the pyromantic cracks associated with each. Keightley thinks this manner of inscription indicates that the Shang elites viewed the world as “a series of balanced dualisms, in which the auspicious and inauspicious, good and bad, harvest and dearth, victory and defeat, flood and drought, were seen as inextricably intertwined possibilities” (Keightley, 2014, p. 130). Such a metaphysical picture, he further argues, came to inform Zhou and Han diviners and philosophers as well.

Other scholars criticize the use of correlative thinking to interpret Chinese philosophy. Michael Puett traces the approach to Max Weber, who argued that Confucianism, unlike Protestantism, had failed to rid itself of magical thinking contained in doctrines like *yinyang* and that it had also neglected to separate the human and divine worlds. Puett sees the use of rationality as a developmental yardstick to measure Chinese and Western cosmological thinking as a recurring feature of 20th-century scholarship, running throughout many of the major works. While scholars such as Hall and Ames reverse Weber's evaluation, they nonetheless maintain his classification. “Building such a contrastive framework,” Puett writes, “requires taking particular texts out of context and reading them as assumptions of the entire cultures being compared” (2002, p. 23). If we treat early Confucian texts as mere instances of a distinctively Chinese type of thinking, then we miss out on what made them important at the time.

Ames thinks, however, that the notion that Chinese texts contain shared cultural presuppositions does not necessarily exclude the idea that specific texts within that culture differ from one another. Whereas Puett himself favors a methodology in which we “make no a priori assumptions regarding single statements made in single texts and the significance of single claims” (2002, p. 25) Ames criticizes this approach as a naïve “view-from-nowhere” realism (2011, p. 22). Like Keightley, he maintains that correlative thinking is the dominant mode of thinking in Confucius and other pre-Qin philosophers and that Han writers simply make the main assumptions of their predecessors explicit. If we fail to understand their basis in correlative thinking, on the other hand, the claims made in these texts will appear arbitrary and irrational. The question regarding the metaphysical background to early Confucianism, as this back-and-forth indicates, is inseparable from a longstanding debate in the West about the methodology of interpreting Chinese philosophical texts.

If it is true that correlative thinking forms the background to early Confucianism, in texts like the *Analects*, we can expect to find a more relational focus and an emphasis on how to creatively and appropriately respond to each new situation. According to Confucian Role Ethics, early Confucianism is best expressed in an ethics that centers on human relationships, especially those between family members, and their improvement.

A fundamental aspect of this view is its relational notion of personhood, or the idea that there is no “substantial self” left over once we take away a person's social relationships. As Hall and Ames write, “the roles are constitutive

of what one in fact is. In the absence of the performance of these roles, nothing constituting a coherent personality remains" (2003, p. 136). Ames and Rosemont, as we shall see further in the next section, criticize interpretations of early Confucian ethics centered on individual character and its attributes for relying too uncritically on a substance ontology that marks off individual entities from one another (2014, p. 26). If the accepted worldview of the time supposes that human experience is constituted by "a particular, dynamic matrix of relations" (Ames, 2015: 94), then we should not be surprised if Confucian morality differs in important ways from what we find in Aristotle's ethical treatises.

4 | THE METAPHYSICS OF VIRTUE

Nonetheless, virtue does appear to play an important role in texts like the *Analects* and *Mencius*, and the concept of virtuous character forms the basis of a second understanding of Confucian moral metaphysics. As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this essay, Confucius notably claims that Heaven is the source of his virtue (*Analects* 7.23). As Jiyuan Yu writes, "If Confucian virtue (*de*) is a matter . . . of embodying in oneself the *dao* of heaven, Confucian virtue ethics inherently requires a metaphysics" (2002, p. 143). Proponents of the virtue ethical interpretation have attempted to unearth the beliefs about virtue and the Way of Heaven found in the tradition prior to Confucius and show how those beliefs inform early Confucian texts.

The virtue ethical interpretation's account of the metaphysical background also begins with Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions, based on the reconstruction of the scholar David Nivison first laid out in lectures at Stanford University in the early 1980s. Nivison's account emphasizes how the ruler who performed the appropriate sacrifices and remained on good terms with the ancestor-spirits was thought to accumulate *de*, "virtue," a kind of power of influence that was visible to those around one. When the Shang king Wu Ding's consort is ill, for example, the king performs a rite in which he offers himself in her place. The result is not only the consort gets well, but the king does not get sick. In performing this act of self-sacrifice, the king's *de* is thereby enhanced, becoming more evident for all to see.

While we are all familiar with the feeling of gratitude as a response to receiving an act of kindness, in the Shang dynasty, this feeling is seen as a kind of power on the part of the person performing the act:

In this kind of society, the compulsion I feel to respond appropriately, now or sometime, when you do something for me or give me something, is a compulsion I feel so strongly that I come to think of it not as a psychic configuration in myself, but as a psychic power coming from you, causing me to orient myself toward you. That power is your *de* . . . (1996, p. 26)

In this sense, then, *de* is a kind of "virtuous power," as Arthur Waley recognized in his translation of the term. And it is, importantly, a "psychic" sort of power appearing to emanate from the person who possesses it.

During the ensuing Zhou dynasty, while the anthropomorphic sky-god *tian*, "Heaven," gradually took precedence over *shangdi*, the interaction between ruler and divine remained intact, with Heaven bestowing its "Mandate" (*ming* 命; also "fate" or "destiny") in the form of virtue on the person it favored to rule. The Zhou rulers came to believe that in order to maintain Heaven's favor, one must not only perform the appropriate rituals, but do so with the right frame of mind. *De* is now conceived further of as a "property of a person," an "inner mental entity"—in the Western Zhou inscriptions, its graph now includes the graph for "heart/mind" (*xin* 心)—with the sacrifice serving as its external manifestation (1996, p. 29). The king must care for and nourish "his" virtue, and doing so fulfills the partnership between Heaven and human.

The references to *de* in the oracle bone inscriptions allow us to see the broader context of early Confucian virtue ethics. By the time Confucius appeared on the scene, virtue was thought of as a kind of power that a person can cultivate, which motivates others to respond with gratitude. Confucius believed, however, that because of disregard for

inner character and the deterioration of ritual practice, the right moral path (*dao*) approved by Heaven and known to the Zhou sage-kings had been lost. He and his followers connected virtue with human nature and its flourishing and laid out a program for its cultivation. In the ethical teachings of the *Analects*, we find an emphasis on the inner component of morality, accessible to any committed person, as a means to transform oneself and one's society. As Philip J. Ivanhoe writes, the early Confucians thought that cultivation of virtue "fulfilled a larger design, inherent in the universe itself, which the cultivated person could come to discern, and that a peaceful and flourishing society could only arise and be sustained by realizing this grand design" (2000, p. 14).

The *Yijing* has had a relatively small role in the virtue ethical reconstruction of early Confucian metaphysics.⁸ Mencius, on the other hand, is a key figure. While some passages in the *Analects* suggest that virtue has a basis in human nature, Mencius offers a teleological account in which living things possess Heaven-endowed standards that they are supposed to realize (2007, p. 345). Since human *de* is the manifestation of the way of Heaven, its root must be contained in our Heaven-endowed nature (Yu, 2007, p. 31). In this regard, the comparison with Aristotle is especially enlightening. As Sim writes: "A metaphysical account that yokes principles of human nature with principles of nature generally helps us to understand that there is an objective basis for the human good above and beyond custom or ritual" (2007, p. 14). Using Aristotle's account as a reference point allows us to see the shape of the early Confucian views.

Since virtue is an inner quality that can be cultivated over a lifetime, proponents of the virtue ethical interpretation argue that early Confucian ethics requires some reference to an individual self in which virtue resides. As Sim writes, "the Confucian self is minimally 'substantial'; it persists through various changes, is the source of agency, and can adopt various roles and perform them more or less well" (2007, p. 57). She criticizes Ames and other role ethicists for not taking into account this "distinct but not separate self." When Confucius says that *ren* comes from oneself and not from others (*Analects* 12.1), this seems to mark a clear contrast between one's own agency and the influence of other people.

Though proponents of role ethics also sometimes use the term "virtue," they contend that these are not virtues in the sense of character traits, but rather a set of generalized terms that the early Confucians use to refer to our always unique conduct in everyday roles. Thus, it is more accurate to conceive of these values as "virtuing" or "the activity of relating itself" rather than as character traits (Ames & Rosemont, 2011, p. 34). Nonetheless, Confucius does appear committed in places to a notion of character that transcends our contextual relations. The virtue of the gentleman will have transformative effects even if he is placed among the barbarian tribes (*Analects* 9.14; Slingerland, 2011, p. 404).

5 | CONCLUSION

Whereas Confucian Role Ethics suggests a worldview that highlights the ability to spontaneously navigate our relationships with others amidst the flux of events, the virtue ethical interpretation gives a view of the moral life in which we must cultivate stable, inner character traits. While these two pictures are not necessarily incompatible, they do focus on very different aspects of our ethical life. As we have seen, they also entail different methodological commitments about how we should read early Confucian texts or interpret Chinese philosophy in general. How may we bridge these different interpretations? And more generally speaking, is it possible to discuss Confucian ethical views while remaining neutral with respect to the overarching metaphysical worldview that informs these views?

One interesting possibility is suggested by exemplarist virtue theory, in which the basic value terms are derived from the conduct of exemplary persons, who are identified by the emotion of admiration (Zagzebski, 2017). Amy Olberding (2012) has applied this idea to the *Analects*, arguing that it is the figure of Confucius himself who grounds the text's moral concepts. Since it is a direct reference to paradigmatic individuals rather than the application of some overarching metaphysical view, which serves as the foundation of this interpretation, exemplarist theory allows us to sidestep many of the above debates while still drawing rich ethical observations from the texts. It is possible that

exemplarist theory can provide a parsimonious basis for Confucian Role Ethics, helping us to understand the importance of roles in the Confucian tradition without committing us to the methodological and philosophical assumptions defended by its current proponents (Connolly, forthcoming, 2020). Nonetheless, if Confucius himself points to Heaven as the source of his own virtue, it seems we are inevitably caught up in questions of metaphysics again.⁹

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Translations of passages from the *Analects and Mencius* are from Slingerland (2003) and Van Norden (2008), respectively.
- ² For instance, the Ames and Rosemont translations of the *Analects* and *Xiaojing* include introductions presenting the interpretation outlined in Section 3 below, whereas the Slingerland translation of the former text begins by introducing readers to the interpretation discussed in Section 4.
- ³ For a discussion of the problem of projection in comparative philosophical methodology, see Connolly (2015).
- ⁴ See Perkins (2015) and Weber (2013) for some of the difficulties in the category of “Chinese metaphysics.”
- ⁵ For a contrasting point of view, see Liu (2011).
- ⁶ For a general discussion of these two interpretations of early Confucian ethics, see Connolly (2016).
- ⁷ On this origins legend, see Lewis (1999): 197 ff., Nylan (2001): 202 ff., and Redmond and Hon (2014): 51 ff.
- ⁸ See Van Norden (2007) for discussion of two passages in the *Analects* that are often taken as references to the *Yijing*. He argues that both references are problematic, concluding that we should not think Confucius had any special interest in the latter text (p. 98).
- ⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for comments on an earlier draft of this essay and to Karyn Lai for her many helpful suggestions throughout the entire writing process.

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