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# Expanding the Confucian Framework: Consequences and Character

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## Abstract

Typically, Western moral philosophy has sought to understand questions of right and wrong in the absence of Eastern tradition. Yet, Aristotelian ethics has long been used as a lens with which Chinese philosophy can be read from a Western perspective. Since Confucianism, in particular, seems to acquiesce rather well with a virtue ethics, other moral philosophies are seldom applied to the Confucian canon. In this paper, I apply a consequentialist ethics, in support of existing philosophical papers following a similar consequentialist approach. Through this, Confucianism can be seen as a system designed to optimize collective efficacy in society, by stressing actions which lead to positive consequences. This lens allows for an expansion of consequentialist ethics into Confucian philosophy, while also opening Western moral philosophy to a new perspective.

## Introduction

Drawing bridges between Western and Eastern philosophy does not come without its difficulties, and at times the endeavor is fraught with incompatibility. Yet, if those in the West ever wish to make a more intimate connection to the relevant and pragmatic branches of Chinese philosophy, Western traditions must be used as tools for understanding. This is not to say that Chinese philosophy is impervious to Western civilization's moral sphere, but perhaps disseminating its philosophical tenets will be of significant use if we can fit them into already existing moral dimensions from Western tradition. It should perhaps not be used as an end-goal, since Chinese philosophy deserves to be held in its own regard, but there should be no assumption that a level of uniformity in certain aspects cannot be found. Nonetheless, just as virtue ethics has served as a useful tool for drawing such a bridge, consequentialism may perform a useful task in providing an intriguing new lens into Chinese philosophy. Mengzi states in Book One, "What is the point of mentioning the point of the word 'profit?' All that

matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness.”<sup>1</sup> Although a virtue ethics seems to best describe the totality of Confucian philosophy, I will argue for the consideration of a consequentialist ethics, based in Ivanhoe's concept of a 'character consequentialism', and expanding to other core tenets of Confucian thought.

## Virtue Ethics and Confucianism

As alluded to earlier, virtue ethics as a moral philosophy is comprised of many similar concepts as those of Confucianism. One concept that seems to bear striking resemblance is that of equilibrium, or striking the mean. In virtue ethics, the prime factor in addressing moral questions is the character of the individual moral agent. Aligning oneself with virtuous qualities and actions allows one to partake in more morally sound actions, and happier ones at that. Confucians, like Kongzi, add an element of duty to the concept of virtuous action. Therefore, living in virtue is not a choice made solely out of individual motive or as a way to solve moral and ethical problems, but moreover as an obligation of living as a human. This distinction serves as a way of supporting Kongzi's emphasis on the innate potential of human nature. In the Doctrine of the Mean this concept is highlighted, “While there are stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in a state of equilibrium...This equilibrium is the great root *from which grow all the human actings* in the world, and this harmony is the universal path *which they all should pursue*.”<sup>2</sup> A famous example of this is the bamboo analogy. Bamboo is both firm and flexible, like the *junzi* (superior man); it is firm in principle, and flexible in each context. This example is meant to emphasize a sense of integrity that each individual should hold in her actions. This concept is essentially Aristotelian, since it focuses on reaching the mean between two extremes. Deficiency and excess should be avoided as extremes of action that would lead to negative consequences.

Both order and merit are highly encouraged characteristics, which are inextricably linked with Kongzi's concept of *de*, or virtue. Building character in a variety of different contexts is what comprises a contextual ethics, by definition. For Kongzi, maintaining good character is done through observing one's actions and being vigilant of motives. With this said, it is easy to see how contextuality, character, and virtue are uniform concepts in both Aristotelian virtue ethics and Confucianism. In fact, as well as Confucianism, the Daoists and Buddhists place special emphasis on spontaneity in each distinct context. Rigidity, closed-mindedness, and uncomfotability are states of being which should be best avoided by the individual. This compatibility is useful, since it provides a familiar lens with which we can view how the citizens of a state could

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<sup>1</sup> Lau, D.C., trans. *Mencius*. 2nd ed. Chinese University Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Legge, James, trans. *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean*. New York, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 1971

achieve virtue and live ethically. However, virtue ethics is not the only system which accounts for these concepts in Confucianism, namely the importance of universal law, and societal order from the individual to the state. Virtue ethics would provide a basis which could also be used to understand the stress on order and merit in Confucian philosophy, but consequentialism is able to provide a compelling view on why both Kongzi and Mengzi argued for certain specific characteristics and how they relate to society in general. As will be argued later, a system stressing systematic order must also fulfill the requirement of assessing the consequences of individual and collective action, while promoting states of individual character that allow for flourishing.

### The Consequentialist View

Before elaborating on consequentialism and its relationship to Confucianism, one interesting point can be made on naturalism and utility as a consequentialist concept. Kongzi does not appeal to the supernatural in his claims on human morality and nature, and places the onus on humanity to exhibit good behavior and act virtuously, i.e. through altruistic actions. From an evolutionary standpoint, without the metaphysical implications of a deity, it can be argued that much more focus can then be placed on how happiness is achieved, and what has worked in society up to that point. Of course, this implies an otherwise important link between Confucianism and pragmatism, however, we can see how a society in which there is no supernatural, relies on a populace that is cognizant of its intention, but minimizes bad consequences, and focuses in the meanwhile on what actions consequently lead to order and structural harmony, equilibrium. Pleasure-seeking in the non-hedonistic sense is encouraged, and can be otherwise translated in terms of utility as actions which bring about happiness, in plainer terms, the absence of pain. However, this is a side point for further exploration.

Already existing literature seems to focus on the way emphasis on good character turns into consequentially ethical and moral action. In an article by Manyul Im, the Confucian philosophy, as proposed by Mengzi, is analyzed from a consequentialist perspective. Im describes a passage in Book Six of *Mencius* which tells the story of Mengzi's disagreement with seeking 'benefit' over benevolence and propriety. "If compassion is the basis of benevolence, then acting with benevolence involves responding with an emotional sensitivity, i.e. compassion, to the benefits or harms of another person."<sup>3</sup> Im begins to clarify a key difference between Mengzi's views on how consequences matter through different states of character. "Why is this not acting from the motive of benefit? The proper contrast for Mencius between acting from benevolence and acting with the goal of benefit must lie in the difference between responding to some other particular person or group of people's needs and taking

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<sup>3</sup> Im, Manyul. *Ethics in Early China: An Anthology*. Hong Kong University Press, 2011. Accessed November 8, 2016.

benefit *as such* as the end for which one acts.”<sup>4</sup> Here we see the complexity of Mengzi’s consequentialism epitomized. Through analyzing the motives and intentions of whether one is truly seeking benevolence, or if there is just a benefit/profit motive, one can assess what consequences will be brought about thereafter. It is quite clear, with this example, that although Mengzi does not stand out as an obvious consequentialist, he certainly accounts for the legitimacy of moral intention in terms of the consequences in both individual society and collective flourishing. “Mencius argues that the *widespread adoption* of benefit as a goal is a detriment to the social fabric.”<sup>5</sup> While perhaps the virtue ethicist could excuse the leader of a state for placing an emphasis on *benefit* for the state as a whole, particularly if the character of that leader is one that is palpably virtuous, the consequentialist would view this as a ruinous decision resulting from his very character. As one often sees, following such a consequentialist perspective in Confucianism requires a shift in perspective on moral questions like those of *good* or *right* questions. “Something we might call *Mencian* consequentialism may be construed as including such goods among the things one ought to bring about. In this way, virtues such as benevolence, propriety, or filial piety have both instrumental and intrinsic value.”<sup>6</sup>

Also, cited in Manyul Im’s article is perhaps the best lens with which one can make a case for consequentialism in Confucianism. Philip J. Ivanhoe’s article, *Character Consequentialism: An Early Confucian Contribution to Contemporary Ethical Theory*, outlines how the emphasis on the ‘formation of character’ leads to beneficial consequences. “Character consequentialism is concerned with the long-range results of actions, specifically the effect a given action has on the development of a person’s character.”<sup>7</sup> Ivanhoe’s emphasis on the long-term benefits of character consequentialism, is to say that measuring consequences of particular changes in character, in real time, could not proceed, since it would be without measurement. Therefore, it follows that shifts in character are reflected in individual actions towards others, then towards superiors, the state, etc. Hence, a society in which good character is stressed, would see long-term societal benefit as a product. In talking about Kongzi and his emphasis on the *Dao* (the Way), Ivanhoe writes, “He realized that if one believes in and practices the Way, over the course of his lifetime, this practice will bear fruit; it will result in the formation of virtues, and these will produce certain desirable consequences. These were the consequences that most concerned Confucius.”<sup>8</sup> Ivanhoe juxtaposes this with an example of a key difference in the way corporate business works in the United States and East Asia. The East Asian companies laud fidelity and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Im, Manyul, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Im, Manyul, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Im, Manyul, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ivanhoe, Philip J. "Character Consequentialism: An Early Confucian Contribution to Contemporary Ethical Theory." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 55-70.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 55-70

place the long-term success of the corporation to a much higher priority than companies in America. Favorable effects of this are innumerable, some of which could be happier employees, less risk taking, higher emphasis on integrity, etc. Certain immeasurable short-term consequences of the American scheme would be far less impervious to sudden changes in the market or business strategy. Resoluteness in business planning is an act that bears fruit long-term.

Returning to Ivanhoe's article, he presents a very good case for why individual character matters in a consequentialist ethics. "Human beings simply cannot commit heinous acts without becoming to some degree heinous individuals. Even if our reasons for acting are *purely* altruistic, there still are serious character consequences to consider. If we murder a child to save twenty people, not only have we severely violated social justice, but we ourselves will be deeply scarred."<sup>9</sup> While it is commonly overlooked as an irreconcilable flaw in consequentialism, the point that altruism must be shown to every being equally, whether that person is your mother or a total stranger, can be refuted by a consequentialist as a flaw in 'simple consequentialism', as well as an act that would bring about negative consequences. If a mother, for example, chooses to increase the happiness of a stranger she has just met, in equal amount to the happiness of her kin, this would bring about negative consequences, both for her and society. The mortality rate among infants would certainly rise; evolution dictates the importance of kin selection and familial ties, thus the psychological burden of having no maternal or paternal benefactors would likely cause widespread issues. Moreover, institutions must be in place to care for children that might be subjected to such an obfuscation of individual responsibility, which are often funded by state tax revenue. "Simple consequentialism says to treat everyone equally when calculating the potential 'states of affairs' generated by one's actions, but this denies me, and the people in my society, a wide range of deeply cherished personal goods."<sup>10</sup> Filial piety, a concept stressed heavily by Kongzi, and Mengzi as well, brings the importance of kin selection and relational altruism to light. Ivanhoe also stresses that "we cannot realize certain virtuous traits of character by seeking them only for the benefits normally associated with the possession of such virtues."<sup>11</sup> As Manyul Im mentioned earlier, the pursuit of benefit was seen as ruinous to Mengzi. Ivanhoe states how important it is that improving one's character should be seen as intrinsically desirable to the individual, not merely as a means to an end. This falls in line with the Confucian approach to morality, in that familial ties are most important, and that in order for true benefit to arise through good character one must first cultivate more intimate relationships.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 55-70

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 55-70

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 55-70

## Further Analysis

Although the sanctity of filial piety in Confucianism serves as the basis for altruistic action, altruism should consequently spread from familial relationships to society throughout. While Kongzi believes humans are capable of doing good, and that good must be cultivated in order for it to be expressed properly, Mengzi believes that human beings are good by nature. Mengzi used the terms *Ren*, meaning benevolence/compassion, and *Yi*, meaning righteousness and propriety. *Ren* describes a natural state of benevolence and compassion, and amounts to being receptive to the needs of others. This allows for reciprocity among individuals in society, while also maintaining a sense of propriety within relationships. In *Mencius*, *Ren* is explained in further detail, “The heart of compassion, the finding of suffering in others unbearable, if naturally found in all human beings, will show, according to Mencius, that benevolence has a basis in human nature, and benevolence is the strongest motive to moral action.”<sup>12</sup> In the search for qualities such as benevolence, compassion, propriety, etc., both Kongzi and Mengzi shun extravagance, idleness, and feasting. Mengzi’s view on benevolence seems to strike the mean between universal love and ethical egoism. One should focus on oneself first, build filial relationships, then be benevolent to those in proximity, ultimately expanding to the entire kingdom. In Book Four, Mengzi illustrates an interesting story to expand on this systematic order.

Shun alone was able to look upon the fact that the Empire, being greatly delighted, was turning to him, as of no more consequence than trash. When one does not please one’s parents, one cannot be a man; when one is not obedient to one’s parents, one cannot be a son. Shun did everything that was possible to serve his parents, and succeeded, in the end, in pleasing the Blind Man (Shun’s father). Once the Blind Man was pleased, the Empire was transformed. Once the Blind Man was pleased, the pattern for the relationship between father and son in the Empire was set. This is the supreme achievement of a dutiful son.<sup>13</sup>

Mengzi highlights the importance of one part to the whole in this example. The example shows how bad consequences arise for the individual when respect and honour are not shown to one’s own father. Beneficial consequences arise from maintaining these relationships, which expand to greater societal order.

If Mengzi sets out to establish benevolence (*Ren*) as the strongest motive for moral action, one can see how this would link up to minimizing the number of negative consequences in society. By stressing individual honour, filial piety, and societal order thereafter, individuality is held in high regard, in fact, it is essential to the success of the state. Such virtuous action, and a character consequentialism in general, could be said

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Lau, D.C., 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Lau, D.C., 2003.

to be stressed solely for the character of each individual, but in a system wherein systematic order is stressed, collective benefit must be of significant consequence. John Stuart Mill, one of the founders of Utilitarianism, states in his essay *On Liberty*, “What the State can usefully do, is make itself a central depository, and active circulator and diffuser, of the experience resulting from many trials, its business is to enable each experimentalist to benefit by the experiment of others; instead of tolerating no experiments but its own.”<sup>14</sup> This order is stressed by Confucians because it brings about the best consequences for society. This is what makes Confucianism pragmatic; by respecting the sages, elders, ancestors, and what has worked in the past, a systematic order can be followed and maintained so that society can flourish. The end goal must be the result of virtuous character, fair transaction, and merit-based leaders. While what is pragmatic may not always equal out to what is good and or what the greatest possible happiness could be, it does, in this case, consequently lead to character that minimizes pain and optimizes the ability to pursue pleasure within society. In another excerpt from *On Liberty*, Mill writes a passage that is fitting here, and prevents one from assuming that Confucianism, in its stress on order, reduces individuality and development. “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of inward forces which make it a living thing.”<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

In sum, Confucianism is not explicitly a consequentialist philosophy, nor does it set out to be. Although a virtue ethics seems to best describe the totality of Confucian philosophy, I have argued for the consideration of a consequentialist ethics. Philip J. Ivanhoe’s *Character Consequentialism* provides a compelling account for how Confucianism seeks to bring about the best possible consequences from one’s character, through building certain virtues and cultivating the proper relationships. Good relationships lead to good character, which lead to good actions. Good actions have beneficial consequences, and the results of these actions are what can be seen as desirable. Ivanhoe concludes his article with, “Confucius and Mencius may have been right: the best way, perhaps the only way, to achieve a good society is to work to cultivate a society of strong, principled, caring people.”<sup>16</sup> I maintain, that Confucianism presents immense difficulty in conforming to a Western ethical approach. Perhaps it was never meant to be analyzed in this way. Yet, for those in the West, providing such a framework may prove quite useful in shaping our society and ethics in new ways.

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<sup>14</sup> Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Mill, John Stuart, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Ivanhoe, Philip J., 1991.