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Confucian Moral Realism

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In this paper I construct Confucian moral realism as a metaethical theory that is compatible with, or even derivable from, traditional Confucianism. The paper is at once interpretative and constructive. In my analysis, Confucians can establish the realist's claims on moral properties because they embrace the view of a moralistic universe. Moral properties in Confucian ethics not only are presented as objective, naturalistic properties, but also are seen as 'causally efficacious'. There are several theses commonly endorsed by contemporary moral realists. I will explain how many of the remarks by Confucius, Mencius, in Yijing, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean can be understood as implicit endorsements of these theses. I will also analyze the theses specific to Confucian moral realism. The paper will end with a brief defense of this form of realism.

In this paper, I will construct a Confucian moral realism as a metaethical theory that is compatible with, or even derivable from, traditional Confucianism, though not necessarily manifested in the traditional Confucian philosophy itself. Moral realism is a theory about the ontological and epistemic status of moral facts and moral properties. In its generic form, it shares the two basic claims of realism: (1) existence: there are moral facts and moral properties; (2) independence: moral truths are objective in the sense that they are independent of personal opinions. Contemporary moral realism has often been treated as an issue about language, about the truth-value of moral propositions, and about supervenience or reduction relation between moral language and naturalistic language. None of these approaches could be applied to Confucian ethics. By constructing Confucian moral realism, I am not

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saying that any of the ancient Confucians was engaged in the pursuit of these issues. However, in constructing Confucian moral realism and placing this theory in the context of contemporary ethical theories, we could gain a new understanding of the traditional Confucian ethics. We could also explore a new form of moral realism that is totally devoid of many of the common presumptions of Western ethicists. Furthermore, the generic split between moral realism and moral anti-realism could be an apt way to capture the philosophical differences between the Confucian view of moral values and the Daoist view of moral values. In this paper, I shall choose *Yijing*, Confucius' *Analects*, Mencius' dialogues, *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *The Great Learning* as representatives of classical Confucianism.[1] Neo-Confucianism, in my opinion, continues this adherence to moral realism. But I shall leave Neo-Confucianism for a later treatment.

The major part of this paper will outline and explain general theses of Confucian moral realism, and offer textual supports for such an explanation. The paper will end with a brief defense of Confucian moral realism.

Major Theses of Confucian Moral Realism

In contemporary metaethical discourse, there are many varieties of 'moral realism'. Some fall under the category of *ontological* moral realism; some can be characterized as *semantic* moral realism. The former kind of theories focus on the nature of moral facts and moral properties, as well as their relation to natural facts and natural properties. The latter kind of theories, on the other hand, scrutinize the truth conditions for statements of moral judgments and references of moral terms. Confucian moral realism endorses the following theses of *ontological* moral realism and *semantic* moral realism. These theses constitute what I have described as a 'generic' moral realism.

General Theses of Moral Realism

1. There are moral facts and moral truths (Brink, 1989, p. 7).
2. Moral facts are objective in the sense that they are part of the fabric of the world (Mackie, 1988, p. 95).
3. Moral facts 'are constitutively independent of human opinion' (Miller, 2003, p. 6).
4. Moral truths are evidence-independent. A moral truth is not simply a well-justified moral belief (Brink, 1989, p. 31).
5. Moral statements are the sorts of statements that are (or which express propositions that are) true or false. The truth or falsity of moral statements is largely independent of our moral opinions, theories, etc. (Boyd, 1988, p. 182).
6. Not all moral propositions can be false. Sometimes moral judgments do express truth (Brink, 1989, p. 14).
7. Moral judgments have objective and definitive truth-values that we can cognize. Moral judgments are not mere expressions of one's emotions or sentiments. It is possible for one to make *moral mistakes* (Brink, 1989, p. 29).

However, Confucian moral realism is unique in its metaphysical foundation. Based on the worldview that the universe and the human world are both comprised of, and hence unified by, *qi*, Confucian moral realism does not separate moral properties from natural properties. This is a worldview that most contemporary philosophers no longer endorse. Hence, the following theses of Confucian moral realism are not shared by contemporary moral realists.

8. The universe is a moral universe; natural phenomena have moral attributes.
9. Natural laws and moral laws are of the same origin and have the same content.
10. Moral properties are *real* in the sense that a moral character or a moral deed has causal power *by virtue of* its moral properties.
11. Moral knowledge is possible. It is acquired through one's understanding of the Way of the universe (*Dao*).
12. Even though people have different levels of understanding and different moral judgments, not all levels are equal and not all judgments are right.
13. Human beings have intrinsic moral attributes. Such attributes constitute the essence of human beings as a *moral* kind.
14. Moral assignments are objective. There is a set of moral duties inherent in one's role and one's times.
15. The ultimate moral aim is to restore peace throughout the world. This moral objective holds for all people in all situations.

In what follows, I shall focus on theses 8 to 15, since they constitute the specific doctrine of Confucian moral realism. The doctrine can be divided into four major tenets: (1) pre-scientific ethical naturalism (theses 8 and 9); (2) the causal efficacy of moral properties (thesis 10); (3) moral cognitivism (theses 11–13); (4) moral objectivism (theses 14 and 15). The analysis of each of these four tenets will also show how the first seven theses of moral realism are endorsed by Confucians. I will use textual references to support my summary of the above theses as being derivative from, or at least compatible with, traditional Confucianism.

Pre-scientific Ethical Naturalism

In a general sense, 'natural properties' are 'those which are either causal or detectable by the senses' (Miller, 2003, p. 11). Moral properties are, under Confucianism, natural properties. Confucianism treats moral properties as natural properties both in the sense that they are properties *of Nature*, and in the sense that they are properties that we can observe *in Nature*. Furthermore, moral facts such as a human society's having a good ruler, an individual's striving for self-cultivation, or a moral agent's making the right decision, etc., are all part of the whole causal web in the cosmos. By Gilbert Harman's definition, this is a form of ethical naturalism. Harman says, '[Ethical naturalism] is the doctrine that moral facts are facts of nature. Naturalism as a general view is the sensible thesis that *all* facts are facts of nature'

(Harman, 1977, p. 17). Peter Railton characterizes 'naturalistic realism' in the following way. The reality postulated possesses two characteristics:

> (1) *independence*: it exists and has certain determinate features independent of whether we think it exists or has those features, independent, even, of whether we have good reason to think this;
>
> (2) *feedback*: it is such—and we are such—that we are able to interact with it, and this interaction exerts the relevant sort of shaping influence or control upon our perceptions, thought, and action. (Railton, 1986, p. 172)

I shall explain later how under this characterization, Confucianism can also be seen as a form of naturalistic realism.

A narrower characterization of 'naturalism' is to claim that what is meant by 'nature' is simply 'that which is the subject matter of the natural sciences and also of psychology' (G. E. Moore, quoted in Miller, 2003, p. 4) or to claim that natural facts are simply all the facts that the complete natural sciences will acknowledge. Here the scope of natural properties is restricted by the methodology and theoretical postulates of natural sciences. Under this narrower characterization of 'naturalism', classical Confucian ethics is *not* a form of ethical naturalism since it made no assumption on the explanatory power of natural sciences or psychology. Therefore, I will depict Confucian moral realism as a form of *pre-scientific* ethical naturalism.

In the Chinese tradition, the world of nature includes all natural phenomena: wind, water, sky, cloud, mountain, valley, etc. The Confucian tradition regards everything as having some features worth emulating by humans. In *Yijing, the Book of Changes*, the eight basic trigrams represent heaven, earth, lake, mountain, fire, water, wind and thunder, each having certain moral attributes. The natural phenomenon that classical Confucians most often alluded to as one's moral paradigm is Heaven, or the sun. Heaven exemplifies the attributes of creativity, constancy and steadfastness. As *Yijing* says, 'The movement of heaven is full of power. *Thus* the superior man makes himself strong and untiring' (*Yijing*, 'the Creative', Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 6, italics mine). *The Doctrine of the Mean* also says, 'Sincerity is the Way of Heaven. To think how to be sincere is the way of man' (*Sourcebook*, Chan, 1973, p. 107). The sun, on the other hand, exemplifies the attributes of warmth, kindness and impartiality. For example, the fiftieth hexagram, *Feng*, depicts 'the sun at midday' and asks that the ruler be like it. According to Richard Wilhelm's annotation, the ruler 'must be like the sun at midday, illuminating and gladdening everything under the sun' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 213). Aside from attributing these moral attributes to Heaven and the sun, the basic eight trigrams also include other natural phenomena as signifying moral attributes: *Wind* signifies a gentle penetrating power; *lake* signifies the attribute of joyousness. *Thunder* represents forcefulness and fearfulness; *mountain* represents steadfastness and stillness. *Fire* has the attributes of radiance and clarity; *water* has the attributes of humility and continuity.

From our contemporary perspective, we think that such an ascription must be metaphorical, not literal: how could *Nature* be moral when it has no awareness, no intention and no volition? However, for traditional Confucians, the universe is

indeed a universe with moral attributes; it is a moral universe. Their sense of morality is grounded on their metaphysics of a moral universe. Humans' moral mission is defined in the context of a moral universe. Confucians typically regard the highest moral accomplishments of humans as that of aiding heaven's creation and assisting in earth's furtherance of all life forms. They regard creation and furtherance as the ultimate 'goal' of Heaven and Earth. In this sense Heaven and Earth, as well as the whole cosmos, are rendered *moral* and *intentional*. Human beings are situated between Heaven and Earth; they have a moral commandment to continue the task of Heaven and Earth. As *The Commentary on the Decision* on the twenty-seventh hexagram *Yi* (Providing Nourishment) says, 'Heaven and earth provide nourishment for all beings. The holy man provides nourishment for men of worth and thus reaches the whole people' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 521). *The Doctrine of the Mean* states it even more clearly:

> Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can then fully develop the nature of things. *If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transformation and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.* (*Sourcebook*, Chan, 1973, p. 108, italics mine)

This 'Trinity'—Heaven, Earth, and Man—not only depicts a moral structure of the universe, but also prescribes an ultimate moral duty (to be equal to Heaven and Earth) to human beings. When one attains the supreme status of being one of the Trinity, one becomes a 'counterpart of Heaven' (*The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Sourcebook*, Chan, 1973, p. 112). This is how Confucianism defines 'the sage'; it is also what ancient Chinese expected of a true ruler—the Son of Heaven. Chad Hansen explains this expectation as such: 'The king is the liaison between heaven: nature and human society. He sets society on the ritual path necessary to keep it in harmony with nature. Only that path will result in human flourishing. Human flourishing preservers order. Order preserves nature's approval and [Heaven's] mandate remains' (Hansen, 1992, p. 63).

In *Yijing*, not only do natural phenomena provide moral models for human beings, the relationships among natural phenomena also take up multiple symbolic moral connotations. When the eight trigrams are doubled in various combinations, they form sixty-four hexagrams. The sixty-four hexagrams, as well as the six different lines that make up each hexagram, exhaust all possible situations in the natural world. For example, 'The hexagram of *Qian* represents Heaven; the second hexagram *Kun* represents Earth. The third hexagram *Zhun* indicates the way in which heaven and earth brings forth individual beings' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 16). Human contexts in an abstract way are parallels to these natural contexts. The best way to determine what one should do is to emulate the way of nature in various contexts. For example, the fifth hexagram *Xu* has water on top and heaven below, which signifies clouds rising up in the sky and the impending rainfall. There is nothing one

could do except wait for the rainfall. This image symbolizes a time of waiting in the human context and the proper attitude is not to be anxious or agitated. 'Thus the superior man eats and drinks, is joyous and of good cheer' (*Yijing*, 'Image of Xu', Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 25). Its reverse combination—heaven on top and water below—makes up the sixth hexagram *Song*, which signifies 'conflict' since there are two opposing pulls in the elements: heaven tends upward while water tends downward. The *Image* of the hexagram says, 'Heaven and water go their opposite ways: The image of Conflict. Thus in all his transactions the superior man carefully considers the beginning' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 29). By the same token, all hexagrams represent different contexts for moral decisions that are derived from the symbolic meaning of the different relationships between natural elements. In some cases, the formation of a hexagram consists of the doubling of two identical trigrams. This formation signifies continuation in the passage of time. These various combinations of two trigrams in each hexagram, whether of two identical trigrams or two different ones, are all symbolic of different natural, as well as moral, contexts.

Since morality is derived from Nature, an act is *right* if and only if it accords with the natural law governing the world's states of affairs. For contemporary naturalists, laws of nature are what can be observed by empirical sciences; fundamentally, they are laws of the physical world. For ancient Confucians, on the other hand, the law of nature is the law of *qi*—the law of the operation of *yin* and *yang*. This natural law is called 'the Way' or '*Dao*'. Confucians think that it is the same *Dao* that governs the natural world as well as human society. Moral laws and natural laws thus have the same content. The natural laws governing the universe include the law of cyclical development—things that develop to one extreme would necessarily tend toward the opposite. When the time is right, there is a necessity of *return*. As Wilhelm explains the twenty-fourth hexagram *Return* this way: 'The idea of Return is based on the course of nature. The movement is cyclic, and the course completes itself. Therefore it is not necessary to hasten anything artificially. Everything comes of itself at the appointed time. This is the meaning of heaven and earth' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 98). The law of Nature ordains cyclical development because everything in the universe is constantly changing and transforming (this is exactly the meaning of the Chinese word '*yi*'). Things develop toward harmony, and yet once harmony is achieved, any further development will simply destroy it. 'For it is just when perfect equilibrium has been reached that any movement may cause order to revert to disorder' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 244). Applied to the human world, the moral law is that any excess in value or conduct would lead to its reversal. Therefore, a moral precept is to aim for the *Mean*—the balance between two extremes. If one can avoid excess or paucity, one could prevent an undesirable reversal. Both Confucius and Mencius emphasize the virtue of the *Mean*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean* is an elaboration of this virtue. We can see the close connection between this moral virtue and the natural law of cyclical development.

Another natural law is the law of low resistance, which means that things tend to follow a natural course that meets the least resistance. On hexagram sixteen, *Yu*, Wilhelm writes,

> The inviolability of natural laws rests on this principle of movement along the line of least resistance. These laws are not forces external to things but represent the harmony of movement immanent in them. That is why the celestial bodies do not deviate from their orbits and why all events in nature occur with fixed regularity. It is the same with human society: only such laws as are rooted in popular sentiment can be enforced, while laws violating this sentiment merely arouse resentment. (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 68)

In this respect, Confucians and Daoists have the same moral precept: follow what is natural;[2] do not insist on one's way when it goes against the nature of people and the nature of things. Mencius, for example, explicitly states that rulership lies in following what human nature naturally desires: to have fine food to eat and nice clothes to wear. 'There has never been a case when men of seventy had silk to wear and meat to eat, when the common people were neither hungry nor cold, and yet the ruler did not become the true king of the empire' (*Mengzi* 1A7, *Sourcebook*, Chan, 1973, p. 61).

Finally, a natural law that prescribes the cosmic structure is the hierarchy between Heaven and Earth, between *yang* and *yin*. The *Great Commentary on Yi* (*Da Zhuan*) began with the following description: 'Heaven is high, the earth is low; thus [*Qian*] and [*Kun*] are determined. In correspondence with this difference between low and high, inferior and superior places are established' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 280). The basic structure of the cosmos consists in various levels of the hierarchy. In terms of human society, there is the political hierarchy with the emperor on the top, the ministers in the middle and the people at the bottom; there is also the familial hierarchy of parents and children, husband and wife, and brotherly relationships. The goal of Confucius' moral philosophy is to construct a moral structure for society. Within this structure, everyone has his or her proper social roles that define his or her moral proprieties. Hansen's description is apt: 'Society is the sum of its roles, not the sum of its individuals' (Hansen, 1992, p. 6). One has a moral duty to a natural law that prescribes the cosmic structure in the hierarchy between Heaven and Earth; between *yang* and *yin*; therefore, one has to respect the social hierarchy in political and family relationships. It is only when everyone fulfils his or her moral duty in accordance with this moral structure, that the human society can function properly. Mencius also defines the core Confucian virtues, humanity (*ren*) and righteousness (*li*) in terms of the natural human sentiments of serving one's parents, respecting one's elderly brother and loving one's children. Mencius says, 'The actuality of humanity consists in serving one's parents. The actuality of righteousness consists in obeying one's elder brother' (*Mengzi* 4A27, *Sourcebook*, Chan, 1973, p. 76). If everyone could extend these natural sentiments to other people's elderly and other people's children, then the whole world will be at peace. The Confucian theory of love with distinctions is based on a cosmic structure that is multiply hierarchical.

In summary, Confucian moral realism is based on the conviction that the universe itself is imbued with moral attributes and that Heaven and Earth have their *will* to foster life and growth. Their claim that there are moral facts and these moral facts are part of the fabric of the world is thus very different from the doctrine of contemporary ethical naturalism. It is, nonetheless, a form of ethical naturalism.

The Causal Efficacy of Moral Properties

Ancient Confucians believe that moral deeds can change states of affairs in the world *in virtue of* their moral properties. Thomas Baldwin says, 'For a property to be natural is for it to be causal, that is, to be such that its presence, in suitable conditions, brings about certain facts' (quoted in Miller, 2003, p. 11). In this sense, moral properties are natural under Confucianism, since ancient Confucians do assign causal efficacy to moral properties. For example, in *Yijing*, every line in a hexagram represents a state in the continuing development of a state of affairs. According to Wilhelm's annotation,

> Here it is shown that the way to success lies in apprehending and giving actuality to the way of the universe [*dao*], which, as a law running through end and beginning, brings about all phenomena in time. Thus, each step attained forthwith becomes a preparation for the next. Time is no longer a hindrance but the means of making actual what is potential. (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 5)

Since each line symbolically represents a human context, every moral deed or moral attitude one takes in the given context has the causal contribution to the later development of that state of affairs.

Both Confucius and Mencius clearly stated that the leader's moral properties could transform people: it could promote others' morality and reduce the presence of evil. Confucius says, 'The Virtue of the gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of the petty person is like the grass—when the wind blows over the grass, the grass must bend' (*Analects* 12:19, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 34). Even though Confucius uses a simile of wind over grass here, what he states is that the virtue of a moral agent can effectively transform others. Mencius also says, 'The gentleman simply returns to the standard. If the standard is correct, then the multitudinous people will be inspired. When the people are inspired, then there will be no evil or wickedness' (*Mengzi* 7A37, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 153). The same assumption is reflected in *Yijing* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* as well. For example, the hexagram of *Tai* represents the fact that '[w]hen the good elements of society occupy a central position and are in control, the evil elements come under their influence and change for the better' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 48). *The Doctrine of the Mean* also describes the true ruler as someone who knows the Way of Heaven and the Way of men. 'Therefore every move he makes becomes the way of the world, every act of his becomes the model of the world, and every word he utters becomes the pattern of the world' (*Sourcebook*, Chan, 1973, p. 111).

The notion of *causation* in the moral context is best analyzed as 'making a difference' or 'bringing about change'. How can one's moral characters have any causal impact over others' characters? What is the process in which any difference or change in others' moral attributes can be brought about by a moral agent? Confucius himself only gave a vague answer. He says, 'If you desire good, then the people will also desire good' (*Analects* 12:19, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 34). And, 'If you could just get rid of your own excessive desires, the people would not steal even if you rewarded them for it' (*Analects* 12:19, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 34). In these two passages, he seems to be saying that the ruler's desires would soon become the people's desires. In another passage, Confucius remarks, 'When the ruler loves rightness, then none among the people will dare not to obey. When the ruler loves trustworthiness, then none among the people will dare not to be honest. The mere existence of such a ruler would cause the people throughout the world to bundle their children on their backs and seek him out' (*Analects* 13:4, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 35). In this passage, the real causal power of the ruler's moral character seems to lie in the ruler's political clout, not in his moral attributes themselves. But Confucius certainly did not think that the ruler has to appeal to his authority to instill morality in his people. His theory could not give an adequate answer to the question of how moral causation is possible.

Among ancient Confucians, the only one who attempted to answer these sorts of questions was Mencius. Mencius appeals to a notion of *qi*, some sort of cosmic energy that has a moral dimension. Mencius calls it 'the flood-like *qi*'. He explains,

> It is a *qi* that is supremely great and supremely unyielding. If one cultivates it with uprightness and does not harm it, it will fill up the space between heaven and earth. It is a *qi* that unifies righteousness with the Way. Without these, it starves. It is produced by accumulated righteousness. It cannot be obtained by a seizure of righteousness. If some of one's actions leave one's heart unsatisfied, it will starve. (*Mengzi* 2A2, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 123)

This flood-like *qi* is a certain cosmic energy that permeates the whole universe, penetrating everything as well as residing in everyone. One can expand this flood-like *qi* though one's accumulation of righteousness. Mencius did not elaborate more on what this *qi* could do. But it seems that moral deeds and the expansion of one's flood-like *qi* are causally related. Once an individual's flood-like *qi* is expanded, it can interact with other people's internal flood-like *qi*, hence; one's moral characters and moral deeds can causally affect other people.

Mencius' theory of the flood-like *qi* is not completely developed, but at least he points to a direction for the explanation of the causal efficacy of moral properties. Mencius at times discusses *qi* in the general sense as something that one absorbs in the early hours of the day; he even claims that the evening *qi* could restore one's initial goodness. He says,

> With the rest it gets during the day or night, and the restorative effects of the morning *qi*, their likes and dislikes are sometimes close to those of others. But then

what they do during the day again fetters and destroys it. If the fettering is repeated, then the evening *qi* is insufficient to preserve it. If the evening *qi* is insufficient to preserve it, then one is not far from a bird or beast. (*Mengzi* 6A8, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 145)

If this remark of Mencius is taken literally (which is not the only plausible interpretation), we see that a person's moral character is affected by, and in return affects, the purity of his *qi*. One's internal *qi* is at its purest when one's mind is not disturbed by external affairs; furthermore, one's internal *qi* can be fostered to be 'flood-like' if one performs righteous deeds and entertains ethical thoughts. Such a flood-like *qi* can subsequently causally impact the external environment by enhancing the purity of other people's internal *qi*. If the flood-like *qi* is what gets accumulated by one's righteousness and what spreads to other people, then the connection between one's internal moral traits and the external environment is established through the interaction of *qi*. This kind of interaction can be seen as demonstrating the 'feedback' aspect alluded to earlier in Railton's characterization of 'naturalistic realism'.

Such a notion of 'causal efficacy' is of course too vague to provide a satisfactory account of moral causation. This vagueness is the result of the elusiveness of the notion of *qi*. In ancient (pre-Han dynasty) Confucianism, the notion of *qi* is not fully elaborated. Later in Neo-Confucianism, '*qi*' receives a more uniform interpretation. *Qi* is a material force or energy that pervades everything in the universe; it is what constitutes everything in the universe. However, according to Neo-Confucians, *qi* is not a qualitatively identical material force, but a force that has various degrees of 'purity' or 'murkiness'. Humans are made up of the purest of *qi*; hence, humans possess the highest intelligence and moral attributes. The quality of *qi* is thus reflected in intellectual as well as moral values. This interpretation seems to follow Mencius' usage of '*qi*'. We can surmise that Confucian moral realism asserts the causal efficacy of moral properties. Under Confucian moral realism, a moral agent can indeed make a difference to the world *in virtue of* his or her moral attributes. Such a causal impact is mediated by *qi*. *Qi* is what makes moral causation possible: it is what can carry causal power and what can serve as the means of moral causation. There is no doubt that more work needs to be done to construct a fully developed theory of moral causal efficacy.

Moral Cognitivism

Moral realism is often associated with moral cognitivism, even though one could be a moral cognitivist without being a moral realist (e.g. the Error theorist or a moral skeptic). Moral cognitivism is the view that moral judgments have objective and definitive truth-values that we can cognize. Under this view, moral judgments are not the mere expression of one's emotions or sentiments, and it is possible for one to make *moral mistakes*. A moral realist is one who holds this view along with the conviction that sometimes our moral judgments are true; not all moral judgments

can be in error. In this section, I shall establish the claim that ancient Confucians would embrace a realistic moral cognitivism.

Confucius clearly believes that to conduct oneself in a morally correct way, one needs to learn about the Way (*Dao*). The pursuit of the knowledge of *Dao* is an earnest intellectual quest for truth. Confucius says, 'If one day I could hear about the Way [*Dao*] in the morning, then even if I had to die that evening, it would be alright' (*Analects* 4:8, my translation). He believes that there is some *absolute* truth beyond his personal judgment. So, what is morally right is not simply what *he* himself judges to be right. *Dao* is the moral standard for human conduct; *Dao* sets the moral bounds. For Confucius, Intellect and Virtue are inseparable—Intellect is the understanding of *Dao*, while Virtue is living in accordance with *Dao*. Even Confucius himself did not feel that he could merge Intellect with Virtue until he had reached the age of seventy, when he could 'do whatever his heart desires and not go beyond moral bounds' (*Analects* 2:4, my translation).

For Confucians, moral inquiry is an empirical inquiry, but the empirical inquiry for Confucians has a different methodology from those used in modern sciences. I find Charles Taylor's depiction of the conception of *understanding as attunement*, as applied to the Azande, to be quite pertinent to the Confucians' conception of understanding the universe:

> We don't understand the order of things without understanding our place in it, because we are part of this order. *And we cannot understand the order and our place in it without loving it, without seeing it as goodness, which is what I want to call being in attunement with it.* Not being in attunement with it is a sufficient condition of not understanding it, for anyone who genuinely understands it must love it; and not understanding it is incompatible with being in attunement with it, since this presupposes understanding. (Quoted by Wong, in Wong, 1986, p. 103, my italics)

For Confucians, understanding moral truth presupposes seeing oneself placed in a moral universe, a moral reality. The moral reality and moral truth is there for everyone to *observe*, but one needs proper mental preparation as well as proper behavioral preparation to actually *see* it. Seeing moral reality requires being in attunement with it. Even though both Confucius and Mencius see that different people make different moral judgments, both would reject moral relativism or Perspectivism, which grants the status of truth to a moral judgment relative to each individual's perspective. Confucius and Mencius, as well as later Neo-Confucians, acknowledge that among members of human societies, there are people with the highest moral attributes (the sages); people of superior moral attributes (the superior men); people of petty concerns (the inferior men), and people of vile characters (tyrants and crooks). In contemporary terminology, 'sage' could be rendered as 'the ideal moral agent'. Only moral judgments of the sages are *true*, while those of the superior men are *approximations to truth*. Moral judgments of the inferior men or of those beyond correction are simply *false*. If to know what one ought to do in any given situation, one must know *Dao*, and if the sages alone can see the totality of *Dao*, then to know what one ought to do is to follow the sages' precepts. Confucius thinks

that the ancient kings such as Yao and Shun were real sages. This is why Confucius says, 'I am not the kind of person who is born with knowledge. Rather, I am the kind of person who loves antiquity, and who diligently looks there for knowledge' (*Analects* 7:19, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 21).

Moral cognitivists acknowledge the possibility of moral mistakes; hence, not all opinions could be right and not all opinions could be wrong. There is an objective standard by which we can judge whether a moral judgment is right, or is mistaken. When one debates with others on the merits of one's own moral judgment, one is not merely trying to win the debate, but is trying to settle the truth of the matter. David Brink says, 'If moral mistakes are possible, then moral argument and deliberation are intellectual activities that, at least in principle, always make sense' (1989, p. 30). Under such a view, the point of moral argument is to 'establish truth', not merely to persuade the opponents to adopt one's own moral attitudes.

For Mencius, it is clear that there are genuine moral debates on the truth or falsehood of moral propositions. Mencius says,

> If the Ways of Yang and Mo do not cease, and the Way of Kongzi is not made evident, then evil doctrines will dupe the people, and obstruct benevolence and righteousness. If benevolence and righteousness are obstructed, that leads animals to devour people. I am afraid that people will begin to devour one another! If we defend the Way of the former sages, fend off Yang and Mo, and get rid of specious words, then evil doctrines will be unable to arise ... Anyone who can with words fend off Yang and Mo is a disciple of the sages. (*Mengzi* 3B9, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 132)

It is clear from this passage that when Mencius engaged in a moral debate with his philosophical opponents, he took this debate to be a debate on moral truth, not just a debate on his or their 'moral preferences'.

If moral truth is objective, what warrants success in humans' understanding of moral truth? What guarantees humans' cognitive access to the principle of this moral reality—the so-called '*Dao*'? Mencius has a reply. He thinks that Heaven gives us a moral capacity to know *Dao*, and this moral capacity is a function of the *heart*. He says,

> Things interact with things and simply lead them along. But the office of the heart is to concentrate. If it concentrates, then it will get [Virtue]. If it does not concentrate, then it will not get it. This is what heaven has given us. If one first takes one's stand on what is greater, then what is lesser will not be able to snatch it away. This is how to become a great man. (*Mengzi* 6A15, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 147)

In other words, if the heart focuses on the essential thing and does not get distracted by minor things, then one can intellectually approach *Dao* and be morally advanced. Mencius explains that the essential thing is one's inborn nature, while the minor things are one's sensory desires. He says, 'To fully apply one's heart is to understand one's nature. If one understands one's nature, then one understands Heaven. To preserve one's mind and nourish one's nature is the means to serve Heaven' (*Mengzi* 7A1, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 147). This passage combines

the function of the heart with the understanding of one's nature. Mencius seems to think that moral cognition is a function of the mind, while the object of moral cognition is one's inborn nature.

Why would understanding one's inborn nature advance moral knowledge and one's knowledge of *Dao*? This is again rooted in the Confucian conviction of moral realism: we are by nature moral creatures. Humans are born with moral attributes. This conviction is stated explicitly in *Yijing* as well as in *The Doctrine of the Mean*; it is endorsed by Confucius, and vehemently defended by Mencius. In *Yijing*, it is said that everything receives its true nature from the creative force of *Qian* and keeps being transformed by it until everything 'comes into permanent accord with the Great Harmony' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 371). In *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it is stated that human nature has its root in *Dao*. 'What heaven imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way [*Dao*]' (*Sourcebook*, Chan, 1973, p. 98). Mencius' most notable arguments with his contemporary thinkers are on the innate goodness of human nature. Mencius argues that moral sentiments are *essential* to human beings as a *moral* kind (not just as a natural kind). It is impossible for any 'human being' (morally, not biologically, defined) to lack certain inherent moral sentiments. He says, 'If one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of disdain, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of deference, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of approval and disapproval, one is not a human' (*Mengzi* 2A6, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 125). According to Mencius, these sentiments are the 'sprouts' to one's full-fledged moral virtues. He says,

> People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts but to say of oneself that one is unable to be virtuous is to steal from oneself . . . In general, having these four sprouts within oneself, if one knows how to fill them all out, it will be like a fire starting up, a spring breaking through! If one can merely fill them out, they will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas. If one merely fails to fill them out, they will be insufficient to serve one's parents. (*Mengzi* 2A6, Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2000, p. 126)

For Mencius, the foundation of moral knowledge lies within oneself; it is inherent in one's nature. At the same time, the attainment of moral knowledge and the cultivation of one's innate moral sprouts are combined as one.

The idea that access to the knowledge of the complete moral reality and the absolute moral truth (*Dao*) is through knowledge of one's nature and one's heart becomes the core thesis in Neo-Confucianism. The School of the Mind (Lu-Wang School) advocates the view that the means of moral cognition is one's heart. Because one's heart is the endowment of Heavenly principle, there is no obstacle in moral cognition. The School of the Nature (Cheng-Zhu School) advocates the view that the Heavenly Principle is inherent in one's nature as well as in the nature of everything; thus, to know the Principle one needs to be acquainted with one's own nature as well as to investigate the nature of things. Under either view, the means by which we obtain self-knowledge is at the same time the means by which we obtain knowledge of the moral order of the world.

Moral Objectivism

As mentioned in the previous section, Confucian moralists would reject moral relativism, Perspectivism or any form of Subjectivism. Confucian moral realism asserts that moral judgments are independent of individual opinion. A moral judgment is *true* in an objective sense if and only if it accords with *Dao*. In this section, I shall focus on the issue of moral rightness. For Confucian moral realists, an act is *right* in an objective sense if and only if it is what is best for the given situation and social role. This form of objectivism is not a dogmatic form of moral absolutism or moral universalism, because what is considered right is context-dependent and situation-variant. However, each context and situation must be considered in relation to the whole universe, which is permeated by the same *qi* and governed by the same *Dao*. Therefore, the situational or context-dependent ethical codes share a common goal—to follow *Dao*.

   For Confucians, there is a set of morally correct actions inherent in one's role and one's times. As we have explained, the whole book of *Yijing* is a depiction of various cosmic states and their corresponding human states of affairs. The element of *the time* is prevalent in all hexagrams. *Yijing* often talks about 'the demands of the time'. 'The time' in this book means more specifically the variables in situations. In each given situation, there is a natural development of cosmic elements. When the superior man is placed under a human circumstance that *resembles* the cosmic state, there are certain rules of conduct most appropriate to him. In this sense, the social context *prescribes* the individual's moral conduct. Under each given circumstance, there is *the* correct way to behave oneself. In each and every hexagram, there is always a moral guidance given to the 'superior man'. For example, from the *Image* of the hexagram *Xiao Guo*, 'the superior man derives an imperative: he must always fix his eyes more closely and more directly on duty than does the ordinary man, even though this might make his behavior seem petty to the outside world. He is exceptionally conscientious in his actions' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 241). As Wilhelm explains the moral principle endorsed in *Yijing*,

> Applied to human affairs ... what the hexagram indicates is action in conformity with the situation ... The superior man lets himself be guided; he does not go ahead blindly, but learns from the situation what is demanded of him and then follows his intimation from fate. (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 12)

   This contextual prescriptivism is not moral absolutism in its crudest form since it does not dictate the same moral requirement for everyone in all situations. The time, that is, the various elements in one's external environment, brings about different moral assignments. There are times to take up public offices; there are times to be reclusive. There are times to persevere in one's conduct; there are times to give up one's efforts. There are times to procure fellowships with others; there are times to remain secluded. Furthermore, this contextual prescriptivism does not assign the same moral duty to everyone in the *same* situation. Since different people have

different personality traits (being aggressive or being passive by nature, for example), they should act in accordance with their own strength or weakness. What one ought to do depends on one's given role in one's given environment, which is beyond one's control—hence, it is called 'destiny' or 'fate'. However, this moral constraint is not deterministic. One has a choice to comply with the moral guidance or not. If one acts against the prescribed conduct, one would bring perils to oneself as well as to one's environment. Such, nonetheless, is within one's free choice. Therefore, this form of moral realism is not akin to a dogmatic form of moral absolutism, and it does not lead to moral determinism.

Even though different situations call for different attitudes and conducts, there is a common objective for all people in various situations. Confucian ethic is goal-oriented, and this goal is assigned an objective, universal value, which no Confucian (ancient and Neo-Confucians alike) would think of questioning or rejecting. The goal is not the individual's desired consequences for her own wellbeing. Mencius, for example, explicitly rejected the consideration of one's good consequences (profits) in one's moral deliberation. Confucius also repudiated the concern for one's self-interests and profit as that of the 'petty man'. The common moral objective is rather the public good, which is best characterized in *The Great Learning* as a set of sequential directives: 'cultivate one's personal lives, regulate one's families, bring order to one's country, and finally, restore peace throughout the world' (*Sourcebook*, Chan, 1973, p. 87, with slight modifications). The ultimate moral aim is *peace throughout the world*. This aim becomes the objective standard according to which a particular act in a given context can be judged to be right or wrong.

One could perhaps argue that this contextual determination of moral rightness cannot be derived from the context itself, since contexts themselves do not have any moral connotation. As J. L. Mackie puts it, states of affairs in the world are 'normatively inert'; namely, 'the world contains no moral states of affairs, situations which consist in the instantiation of a moral quality' (Mackie, 2003, p. 117). However, in a Confucian moral universe, there *is* a certain normativity externally set for each context. Contexts are not value-neutral; they have preferred states of affairs—those that follow the cosmic order. All contexts explicated in *Yijing* have their unique moral qualities, and the general precept is to act in accordance with the cosmic order. As the *Image* of the thirty-fourth hexagram *Da Zhuang* says, 'Thus the superior man does not tread upon paths that does not accord with established order' (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977, p. 134). To act in accordance with what the context prescribes is to act in keeping with the cosmic order (*Dao*). This cosmic order is *objective* in the sense that it is independent of individuals' judgments, and it holds whether we humans know it or not. Moral judgments are true only if they correctly depict the cosmic order; they are false if they misrepresent the cosmic order. Confucian moral objectivism is deeply rooted in Confucian moral realism.

A Defense of Confucian Moral Realism

Railton writes:

> A teacher of mine once remarked that the question of moral realism seemed to him to be the question whether the universe cares what we do. Since we have long since given up believing that the cosmos pays us any mind, he thought we should long since have given up moral realism. I can only agree that if this were what moral realism involved, it should—with relief rather than sorrow—be let go. (Railton, 1986, p. 201)

In this paper, I have presented Confucian moral realism as a form of metaethical theory based on the conviction that the universe does 'care' what we do. But I disagree with Railton's sentiment that this is a form of moral realism that we should let go with relief. I think Confucian moral realism is actually the most coherent and hence the purest form of moral realism.

For Confucians, that the universe is a moral universe is a given. Humans are situated in this moral universe, from which we derive our own morality. We *ought to be* moral beings because the world *is* moral. Ancient Confucians often talk about 'Heaven's Mandate'—the moral commandment from Heaven (which is, however, not a conscious being as the Christian God). In this ethical view, the agent-oriented sense of morality and the agent-free morality are merged into one. In contemporary ethics, morality is always agent-oriented. Any non-sentient and non-volitional thing that 'exemplifies' the so-called 'moral attributes' cannot be part of the moral world. To say that there is 'agent-free morality' is like uttering an oxymoron. From the contemporary view, one could of course argue against Confucians that Nature does not *have* moral attributes; rather, Nature is *rendered* moral by humans' moralistic interpretation. Morality is nothing but a human invention. However, once we treat morality as a human invention, then it is difficult to resist the anti-realist's view that morality is merely determined by human conventions and that there are no moral truths independent of human judgments and beliefs. The Confucian worldview is totally different from this contemporary view. It is because Confucians regard the universe as a moral universe that moral facts become objective facts, and moral truths become objective truths. Under this worldview, moral values are not 'queer' in Mackie's sense; that is, they are not 'entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe' (Mackie, 1988, p. 111). On the contrary, moral order and natural order have the same origin and the same content. To know the natural laws of this moral universe and to know the moral laws of human society is a combined intellectual quest. The understanding of one's moral essence and the understanding of the moral essence of the universe can complement each other. This is why the investigation of external things (*ge-wu*) of the world can contribute to the knowledge of one's moral essence (*zhi-zhi*), and vice versa.

This kind of investigation is certainly different from the empirical investigation of modern sciences. As David Wong points out, 'Modern science rejected this view of the world as the possible object of attunement as a comforting illusion. It severed the connection between understanding and attunement' (Wong, 1986, p. 104). Wong

further speculates that 'the ideal of attunement and its intimate connection with understanding played a role in the fact that China, despite its highly developed intellectual traditions, never developed a scientific tradition comparable to that of the modern West' (Wong, 1986, p. 104). Wong seems to take this moralistic understanding of the universe (seeing the universe and its order as *good*) to be a defect in the Chinese thinking—it explains why there was deficiency in scientific developments in ancient China. However, I think that even if the Confucian worldview is indeed incompatible with the basic worldview of modern sciences, such an incompatibility is not necessarily a reason for rejecting the former. They are simply different worldviews—a moral natural world or an *amoral* naturalistic world. It seems that the Confucian worldview can serve as a more solid and objective foundation for human morality.

There are of course many theoretical difficulties with Confucian moral realism. One prominent problem, I think, is the interconnection between the laws and the particulars; between the pattern (the cosmic order) and the concrete, between the agent-oriented morality in human society and the agent-free morality in the natural world: How can the natural law or Heavenly principle be manifested in the myriad things in the world? How can one's moral attributes *bring about* others' moral attributes? How can one's moral deeds *cause* the world to move toward a better state of affairs? What explains the causal relation between the abstract and the concrete; between the moral and the natural? The answers have to be found in the theory of *qi*. I believe that Neo-Confucians, from their study of *Yijing*, were all trying to give a more coherent answer to these questions. The debate between Zhu Xi and Zhang Zai on the connection between principle and *qi*, and Cheng Yi's slogan that 'principle is One while myriad things are all different' can be better understood in this context. Neo-Confucianism is a continuation of classical Confucianism exactly in the sense that it inherits this form of moral realism.

Notes

[1] Xunzi's view is not included since in many ways he deviates from orthodox Confucianism.
[2] However, Daoists and Confucians have quite different interpretations of what constitutes 'the natural'. Daoists do not take Nature to be 'benevolent' or moral as Confucians do; hence, they would not associate moral properties with natural properties.

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