

## FATE IN CONFUCIAN VIRTUE ETHICS AND ITS CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

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*Abstract: Based on the concept of fate in Confucian virtue ethics, this paper discussed three questions successively: (1) What is inevitable or unchangeable? (2) Facing fate, what we can do? (3) Are we able to achieve happiness? Or what are the relations between virtues, external goods, and happiness? To the first question, this paper mentioned four aspects: the natural world and its laws, the natural life process, the ethical nature of human beings, and the conventional environment. To the second, this paper analyzed four actions in Confucianism: to understand fate, to go along with fate, to respect fate, and to rejoice in accepting fate. To the third, this paper distinguished two kinds of happiness: one with external goods, the other with virtues, and only the latter one is real and self-sufficient. The final conclusion is that: the gentleman in Confucianism who knows to go along with and respect fate, will accept the arrangement or consequence of actions with tranquility, or even a joyful mind; meanwhile, he will pursue virtues for entire lifetime, because he knows virtues or the Way are a person's real end or happiness. By nature, or by fate, we are able to or must be moral.*

*Life and death are governed by fate, wealth and honor are determined by Heaven. (Analects 12.5)<sup>1</sup>*

Undoubtedly, we are all powerless to solve specific problems or change circumstances burdened by unfavorable conditions. Whatever has happened to us has happened; no matter good or bad, we cannot change or ignore it. Sometimes we call this our fate or destiny. Therefore, fatalism is apt to be justified by many of us with proper reasons. At least, fatalism is helpful for us in understanding the vulnerability and fragility of human life and dealing with reality with a peaceful mind or tranquility, like Stoics. However, fatalism makes us passive recipients, meaning we cannot pursue happiness or virtues on our own.

In ancient times, fatalism was more popular than in modernity for religious and other reasons, such as a lack of scientific knowledge, including in ancient China. Especially in pre-Qin times, almost all thinkers and theories discussed fate. Based on this concept, they explained the rise and fall of a *polis* and the outcome of a battle and an individual's life and death, wealth or poverty, etc. As Wang Chong said, "Man's success, as well as his troubles, depend upon destiny. It determines his life and his death, and the length of his span, and it likewise provides for his rank and his wealth." (Wang Chong 1907: 144)

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<sup>1</sup> *Analects* 12.5. All citations to this text are from the translation by Edward Slingerland (*Confucius Analects*, Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), which this paper has modified on occasion.

Since Confucianism is the most crucial school of thought in ancient China, and it often mentions the question of fate, does Confucianism also hold a theory of fatalism? Based on Confucian theory, should we believe in the existence of fate, and how do we understand our life? This paper will argue that Confucian virtue ethics are not the same as fatalism; they provided a positive and optimistic attitude regarding fate. A real gentleman will not care about a loss of external goods but will pursue happiness through virtue for an entire lifetime.

Before our discussion, a question emerges immediately: How are we to understand the concept of fate in Chinese? The technical term of fate in Chinese is 命, which has many more meanings than the English word. Briefly speaking, this word has three primary meanings: (a) an order, command or mandate(命令), especially the mandate of the Heaven(天命); (b) fate or destiny(命運); (c) life or living(生命). In this paper, we seem to focus on the second meaning, but all three meanings are related. For example, the mandate of Heaven is something we must obey, and, just like fate, they both are inevitable or unchangeable. Therefore, if we want to explain the concept of fate with all aspects, we have to understand how Confucianists elaborate the mandate of Heaven. We should always keep in mind that both fate and the mandate of Heaven refer to the same concept.

To understand fate in Confucian virtue ethics and its contemporary significance, this paper will discuss three questions successively: (1) As the literal sense of fate implies, what is out of man's control, inevitable or unchangeable? (2) If this kind of inevitable fate exists, what remains for us to do or control? (3) Based on the things we can control, are we able to achieve happiness? Or what are the relations between virtues, external goods, and happiness? By asking these questions, we will analyze fate in Confucian virtue ethics and its significance for our modern life.

### I. What is Inevitable or Unchangeable?

As mentioned above, the concept of fate is deeply related to the concept of Heaven or T'ien (天). Rhetorically speaking, in ancient Chinese, "fate" (命) can be an abbreviation of "mandate of Heaven" (天命), so Heaven and fate can be identical in some cases. In other cases, Heaven can be understood as the metaphysical source of fate. In English, this Chinese character 天 is always translated as Heaven, without any doubt. But as Robert Eno said, "The English word 'Heaven' translates the Chinese term 't'ien', and the translation is elegant because both words can denote a deity and also the sky," but "the pre-Confucian history of the term 't'ien' is marked by some of the same sorts of ambiguity we encounter in the Confucian texts. The origins of the term and its initial meanings are unclear." (Eno 1990: 4)

Even in ancient Chinese, the usage of "T'ien" is various and complex. More recently, the typical and most authoritative explanations of "T'ien" come from Feng Yu-Lan. He distinguished five meanings of this concept: (1) a material or physical T'ien or sky, that is, the T'ien has often spoken of in apposition to earth, as in the common phrase which refers to the physical universe as "Heaven and

Earth”; (2) a ruling or presiding T’ien; (3) a fatalistic T’ien, equivalent to the concept of Fate, a term applied to all those events in human life over which man himself has no control; (4) a naturalistic T’ien, that is, one equivalent to the English word “nature”; (5) an ethical T’ien, that is, one having a moral principle and which is the highest primordial principle of the universe. (Feng 1952: 31)

As far as these five meanings are concerned, (1) is a literal explanation that has little connection with fate, and (2) is a religious explanation that has little connection with our modern world, so we will not discuss these in this paper. The relation between (4) and (5) is very similar to but also different from the connection between nature (φύσις/ *physis*) and convention (νόμος/ *nomos*) in ancient Greece, because both (4) and (5) are the arrangements of Heaven and are objective with authority in ancient Chinese. Most importantly, both (4) and (5) can relate to (3), and they all together defined our fate. Therefore, our fate might be divided into at least two parts: natural and ethical. In light of Confucian classic texts, these two parts could further be divided into four aspects that are inevitable or unchangeable for us: the former, (1) the natural world and its laws, and (2) the natural life process (from birth to death); and the latter, (3) the ethical nature of human beings and (4) the conventional environment in which each of us lives.

### 1.1 The Natural World and its Laws

It is easy for us to understand that the natural world and its laws are inevitable or unchangeable and out of our control. In ancient China, however, some scholars or officials did view certain uncommon natural phenomena as consequences of humans’ actions demonstrating disrespect of gods or ghosts. That is to say, offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors was a method for the ancient Chinese to influence the natural world, meaning nature was seen as changeable. Before the Zhou dynasty, it was common to bury slaves, women, and animals alive during the funeral of a nobleman to express respect to the gods, just as in many other ancient civilizations.

After the establishment of Confucian virtue ethics by Confucius, this kind of brutal convention perished thoroughly. There are two crucial ideas in Confucianism that guaranteed this consequence. First, even if there is a connection between human activities and natural phenomena, it is the lack of benevolence of the rulers toward their peoples. Therefore, Confucius said, “Working to ensure social moralities among the common people, respecting the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance.” (*Analects*, 6.22)

Second, generally speaking, they insisted that the natural world has its own laws, which are predictable and unchangeable, and that we need to rely on ourselves rather than gods. Understanding and following the natural laws are essential for all citizens’ survival and well-being in any ancient agricultural society. No matter what we do, when autumn is here, winter is coming. Therefore, Confucianism had an essential effect on society at that time. That is why Confucius said, “What does Heaven ever say? Yet the four seasons are put in motion by it, and the myriad creatures receive their life from it. What does Heaven ever say?” (*Analects*, 17.19)

Afterward, Xunzi had given a more concrete explanation to emphasize that Heaven or nature has its own course, which does not depend on anyone's will. He said, "The Course of Nature(天) is constant: it does not survive because of the actions of Yao; it does not perish because of the action of Jie";<sup>2</sup> "The constellations follow their revolutions; the sun and moon alternately shine; the four seasons present themselves in succession; the Yin and Yang enlarge and transform; and the wind and rain spread out everywhere. Each of the myriad things must be in a harmonious relation with Nature in order to grow, and each must obtain from Nature the proper nurture in order to become complete." (*Xunzi*, 17.3)

### 1.2 Natural Life Process

Death is inevitable for each of us who is alive,<sup>3</sup> but whether the time or the way of death is changeable is still in question. In this respect, Confucianism seems to believe that time and the way of death are predestined. In *Analects*, Zixia said, "Life and death are governed by fate; wealth and honor are determined by Heaven." (*Analects*, 12.5) Moreover, when Boniu, who was a student of Confucius, fell ill, Confucius went to see him and sighed, "That we are going to lose him must be due to fate." (*Analects*, 6.10)

However, this statement is ambiguous because we do not know whether Confucius means that illness was determined by fate, or simply that humans are mortal. If he meant that illness is inevitable, Confucianism could be understood as expressing a strong fatalism, which means the exact time and cause of death is determined. Moreover, it seems that he did imply we are unable to know death, so we cannot talk about it or think about it. It is beyond our capabilities. "You are not yet able to serve people—how could you be able to serve ghosts and spirits?" "You do not yet understand life—how could you possibly understand death?" (*Analects*, 11.12)

To analyze this question, we should understand what kind of death knowledge Confucius mentioned above. Obviously, according to historical facts, he did not mean that we cannot know about avoiding death—medical knowledge. To be precise, what he said is not the knowledge of death but the knowledge of after death. He emphasized that we should focus on secular life while we are alive and not expressing a fatalist view.

There is further evidence proving Confucianism is not a fatalism of death. In *Mencius*, he said, "There is, for everything, a destiny, but one should follow and accept only what is proper for oneself. Therefore, one who knows destiny does not stand under a wall in danger of collapsing. To die in the course of fulfilling the Way is a proper destiny while dying in manacles and fetters is not a

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<sup>2</sup> *Xunzi*, 17.1. All citations to this text are from the translation by John Knoblock (*Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, Vol. I-III, California: Stanford University Press, 1988, 1990, 1994), which this paper has modified on occasion.

<sup>3</sup> Many emperors and scholars (especially Daoist scholars) in ancient China believed that humans could be immortal, but this topic is irrelevant to our current topic.

proper destiny.”<sup>4</sup> If the time and the way of death are predestined, there is no reason for us to keep our distance from the collapsing wall.

In short, Confucianism did believe humans are mortal, and the natural process of life is inevitable for everyone; this we can call our “fate.” We can have a longer life if we are more prudent, but Confucianism suggests that we should have a peaceful mind to accept it when death comes. Further, in order to achieve specific noble purposes, Confucianists even think choosing death intentionally is more desirable. As Mencius said, “I desire life, and I also desire rightness. If I cannot have both of them, I will give up life and take rightness. It is true that I desire life, but there is something I desire more than life, and therefore I will not do something dishonorable in order to hold on to it. I detest death, but there is something I detest more than death, and therefore there are some dangers I may not avoid.” (*Mencius*, 6A.10)

### 1.3 Human Nature/Ethical Nature

Confucianism believed that human nature is ethical, and it is a property that everyone is born with. We can elaborate on this topic from two different aspects.

First, universally speaking, we have the same and objective nature as long as we are human beings. The typical argument of this aspect comes from *Mencius*: “The sage and we are the same in kind.” (*Mencius*, 6A.7) “All human beings are capable of becoming a Yao or a Shun.” (*Mencius*, 6A.7) “The mind of pity and commiseration is possessed by all human beings; the mind of shame and dislike is possessed by all human beings; all human beings possess the mind of respectfulness and reverence; and the mind that knows right and wrong is possessed by all human beings.” (*Mencius*, 6A.6)

Roughly, this understanding of human nature is similar to Aristotle’s theory of human nature. As the same kind, the nature of a human is what decides their beings. One important difference from Aristotle is that Confucianism does not define the unique human nature compared to plants and animals but traces it back to Heaven or God. In *The Doctrine of The Mean*, there is an expression proving this conclusion very clearly: “That which is ordained by Heaven is called our nature; to lead by our nature is called the Dao.”<sup>5</sup>

Second, individually speaking, Confucianism did believe that each one of us has a different character and talents. Confucianists usually divided humans into three levels in different ways: upper, middle, and lower. At first, this division refers to the social class of an individual when he born. After a reinterpretation through Confucian virtue ethics, this division is more related to intelligence and virtues, especially virtues.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Mencius*, 7A.2. All citations to this text are from the translation by Irene Bloom (*Mencius*, edited and introduction by Philip J. Ivanhoe, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), which this paper has modified on occasion.

<sup>5</sup> Confucius, *The Doctrine of The Mean*, Chapter 1, translated by the author of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> However, due to confusing these two aspects, there is a powerful argument on human nature in history. To clarify this argument, Neo-Confucianists in Song-Ming dynasty introduced two new concepts——“*li*” (Principle or Reason, 理) and “*qi*” (Vital Force, 氣).

In this paper, we will not elaborate on the second aspect. We are trying to emphasize in this section that, from the perspective of Confucianism, the human nature that originates from Heaven is all we have. Because of it, we are human. This connection between our nature and Heaven guarantees that we all can be moral. Therefore, we do not need any reason to be moral, and “to be moral” equals to “be a human.” If an individual becomes evil, he disobeys Heaven's mandate or fate, but the mandate or his nature never changes.

#### 1.4 Conventional Environment/External Environment

When we were born, we had no opportunity to choose our parents, birthplace, motherland, gender, race, the social class we belong to, which dynasty we lived in, whether it is a peaceful or war-torn time, etc. All these conventional circumstances are beyond our control. As Heidegger said, we were “being thrown” (*geworfen*) into the world.

This topic is more important recently, especially when we talk about justice in moral and political philosophy. However, Confucianism did not discuss these topics sufficiently. Due to historical reasons, Confucianists did not pay enough attention to some topics, such as race or gender and so on. Their doctrines, however, did involve the following three situations:

The first situation is that the city-state or the social environment you live in is or is not. Confucianists usually regarded the eras of Yao, Shun, and Yu as perfect times and just, and the times in which they were born were unjust, which is beyond their control. As Confucius said, “Whether or not the Way is to be put into action is a matter of fate. Whether or not the Way is to be discarded is also a matter of fate. What power does Gongbo Liao have to affect fate!” (*Analects*, 14.36) There is little thing to do about it, and we can merely choose different strategies according to different situations. Confucius said, “When the state has the Way, accept a salary; when the state is without the Way, to accept a salary is shameful.” (*Analects*, 14.1) “When the state possesses the Way, be audaciously correct in both word and action; when the state lacks the Way, be audaciously correct in action, but let one's speech be conciliatory.” (*Analects*, 14.3)

The second situation regards personal finance. Confucius did imply that we can improve our financial situation. He said, “Wealth and social eminence are things that all people desire, and yet unless they are acquired in the proper way, I will not abide them. Poverty and disgrace are things that all people hate, and yet unless they are avoided in the proper way, I will not despise them.” (*Analects*, 4.5)

However, as mentioned above, Zixia had said, “wealth and honor are determined by Heaven.” (*Analects*, 12.5) To some extent, this expression shows that the consequence of our striving to make a profit is beyond our control. To be more specific, we do have a good reason to pursue wealth properly, but our success depends on our fate, so we ought to accept any consequence with a peaceful mind. Moreover, whatever the consequence is, we should be joyful all the time. In *Analects*, there is a famous dialogue between Confucius and his student Zigong, “Zigong said, ‘Poor without being obsequious, rich without being arrogant—what would you say about someone like that?’ The Master answered,

‘That is acceptable, but it is still not as good as being poor and yet joyful, rich and yet loving ritual.’” (*Analects*, 1.15)

Third, if you are born as a city-state ruler, is it your fate to rule? As in many other civilizations, blood was an essential factor in deciding one’s social status in ancient China. In most cases, if you were the first son of the King, then it was the fate/the order of Heaven for you to inherit the crown. Some Confucianists, especially after Han Dynasty, justified the legitimacy of the crown for the royal family by the concept of Heaven. In other words, the royal family was obeying the mandate of Heaven to rule the country. Hence, the ruling was their right and was just, with no excuses for rebellion.

However, this interpretation has distorted the classic Confucianism understanding of fate or the mandate of Heaven. The ruler in ancient China was called “the son of heaven” (天子), and the real reason Heaven chose him is he obeyed the mandate of heaven, which is to love and help people, to be benevolent. Therefore, based on classic Confucianism, if it is your fate to be the ruler, it is your fate to win people’s hearts and their support. The mandate of Heaven is not conveyed by Heaven itself but by the voice of the people. In *the Book of Documents*, there is much evidence to prove this, such as: “Heaven sees clearly and hears clearly, originate from my people’s seeing clearly and hearing clearly”; (Li and Wang 2004: 38) “Heaven sees originate from my people’s seeing, Heaven hears originate from my people’s hearing.”<sup>7</sup>

In short, we can judge whether the ruler is the son of Heaven or obeying the mandate of Heaven by public opinions, and public opinions depend on the ruler’s virtues. Therefore, “The Emperor of Heaven has no favorites, but only help those who are virtuous. The affections of the people have no loyalty, but only can be won through kindness.”<sup>8</sup> It is acceptable to say the real son of Heaven will surely win the hearts of the people because they are virtuous, but it is more proper to say it is because of his virtues that he is the son of Heaven. As Confucius said, “One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars.” (*Analects*, 2.1)

### 1.5 Conclusion

Confucianism admitted that many things are up to the mandate of Heaven or fate; therefore, they are inevitable or unchangeable. However, Confucianism is not a form of fatalism, and our life is not predestined absolutely. As human beings, we are not passive recipients receiving everything that happens to us. Instead, we are active agents pursuing virtues because being virtuous roots in our nature, and our nature is inevitable and unchangeable. That is to say; it is our fate to pursue virtues. As far as other aspects of fate are concerned, such as the natural process of human beings and the conventional environment in which we are born, all of them are beyond our control on some level, so the right thing to do is to accept any consequence with a peaceful mind, with tranquility, or even with joy. It is because

<sup>7</sup> Translation and Annotation on *The Book of Documents*, p.199.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.334.

we know our destiny that we can keep this optimistic attitude. Then, knowing what is inevitable or unchangeable, we need to consider the next question: What exactly can we do?

## II. Facing Fate, what We Can Do?

Facing fate, Confucian virtue ethics elaborates four kinds of action that we can do: (1) to understand fate or the mandate of Heaven (“知命”或“知天命”); (2) to go along with fate or obey the mandate of Heaven (“順命”或“遵天命”); (3) to respect or be in awe of fate or the mandate of Heaven (“敬命”或“畏天命”); (4) to rejoice in accepting fate or the mandate of Heaven (“樂天命”). All these actions relate to each other but focus on different dimensions.

### 2.1 To Understand Fate or the Mandate of Heaven

Fate or the mandate of Heaven is inevitable or unchangeable, but it is not mysterious or unknowable. When Heaven refers to the natural world and its laws, there is an obvious way to understand fate or destiny, an empirical approach based on people’s long-term experience. In light of experience, we understood the changes of natural weather and worked in agricultural production accordingly. Therefore, understanding fate could mean that we should learn to labor in spring and harvest in autumn.

Moreover, as mentioned above, Confucianists connected the natural aspects with ethical aspects. When natural disasters occurred, it proved that the political rulers had lost their virtue. In other words, natural disasters have been seen as the result of the rulers’ immoral activities. This causality between them is seen as guaranteed by Heaven or destiny. Based on this, physics and ethics are unified as one, and natural phenomena are attributed to a lack of ethics.

Therefore, in Confucianism, to know fate is to know nature or the laws of nature and know the principles of ethics. As Confucius said, “One who does not understand fate lacks the means to become a gentleman.” (*Analects*, 20.3) Instead, the ethical principle is more crucial than natural laws for people to know fate. Once they know ethical principles, they know fate. It is not easy, however, to achieve this purpose; it took Confucius a long time to have such knowledge, as he said, “At fifty, I understood Heaven’s Mandate.” (*Analects*, 2.4)

### 2.2 Go Along with the Fate or Mandate of Heaven

Without practice,<sup>9</sup> the knowledge of fate is not enough. Xunzi clearly suggested that after we know or understand fate, we should utilize it in practice; as he said, it is better for us to “regulate what Heaven has mandated and using it.” (*Xunzi*, 17.10) Moreover, he provided some measures to do this: “if you strengthen the basic undertakings and moderate expenditures, Nature cannot impoverish you. If your

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<sup>9</sup> Confucianism always emphasizes the connection between knowledge and action. Without practice, knowledge can not be called knowledge. In the Neo-Confucianism of Song and Ming Dynasties, this topic had been discussed more thoroughly.



nourishment is complete and your movements accord with the season, then Nature cannot afflict you with illness. If you conform to the Way and are not of two minds, then Nature cannot bring about calamity.” (*Xunzi*, 17.1)

This section will not list the concrete works because all these works could be understood as one general action, which is called “順天命”. This action manifests the attitude of people when they are using the mandate of Heaven. In this phrase, the Chinese verb 順 is difficult to translate into English. There are two famous sentences to express this action in *Book of Changes*: (1) 順乎天而應乎人, “In accordance with (the will of) Heaven, and in response to (the wishes of) men”;<sup>10</sup> (2) 君子以遏惡揚善, 順天休命, “The superior man, in accordance with this, represses what is evil and gives distinction to what is good, in sympathy with the excellent Heaven-conferred (nature).” (Legge 1899: 285)

In these two sentences, 順 was translated to “in accordance with” and “in sympathy with,” but both of these are inaccurate because this verb explains the relations of Heaven and human beings and has at least two meanings. First, when following the mandate of Heaven, we do not need to or should not be too positive or aggressive, which means their actions are natural or casual and without excess care or thoughts. Second, it implies a hierarchy: Heaven is high above, and human beings are down below. Thus, I am inclined to translate “順” as “go along with” or “obey.”

To obey fate, you cannot do anything against the laws of nature and ethical principles. Mencius said, “The noble person carries out the law and awaits his destiny; that is all.” (*Mencius*, 7B.33) It is a negative statement, but more importantly, you should pursue virtues actively. If you do nothing, it means you also ignore fate or disobey the mandate of Heaven. To go along with fate, you should not care about the outcome of your action, which means you should be satisfied with any consequences that you cannot control. We will talk about this later.

### 2.3 In Awe of or with Respect for Heaven

As mentioned above, there is a hierarchical relationship between Heaven and man, so we should respect or be in awe of fate or the mandate of Heaven. “The ancient kings were always respectful and obedient to the mandate of Heaven.”<sup>11</sup> This dimension shows a religious perspective without doubt and stresses the authority and sanctity of Heaven. However, after Confucius, the religious dimension gradually declined, and the spirit of humanism strengthened. That is to say, respecting Heaven no longer meant respecting a religious god. Rather, it means we should respect the natural laws and ethical principles, especially the ethical principles. By attributing the authority of ethical principles to Heaven, Confucianism has a strong reason to ask everyone to pursue virtues. Confucius

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<sup>10</sup> *The I Ching (Book of Changes)*, translated by James Legge, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1899, p.254. All citations to this text are from this book, which the author has modified on occasion.

<sup>11</sup> Translation and Annotation on The Book of Documents, p.148.

said, “The gentleman stands in awe of three things: The Mandate of Heaven, great men, and the teachings of the sages. The petty person does not understand the Mandate of Heaven, and thus does not regard it with awe; he shows disrespect to great men and ridicules the teachings of the sages.” (*Analects*, 16.8)

Xunzi had a similar thought, but more thorough: “When the gentleman is bold of heart, he reveres Heaven and follows its Way. When faint of heart, he is awe-inspired by his sense of moral duty and regulates his conduct to accord with it.” (*Xunzi*, 3.6) Although he distinguished two kinds of the gentleman, he still reinforced the connection between ethical principles and the mandate of Heaven or fate.

As we can see, “in awe of Heaven” explains why we must obey ethical principles and be virtuous. However, this attitude was not emphasized in Pre-Qin Confucianism and was forgotten for thousands of years. Until the Song and Ming dynasties, Neo-Confucianists re-used this term to express the right way to treat ethical principles and our inner heart, especially Chen Hao. He elaborated the essential position of this term, as in: “Sincerity is the way of Heaven; respect is the foundation of human activities”; (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi 1981: 125) and “Respect are able to conquer all evils.”<sup>12</sup>

#### 2.4 To Rejoice in Knowing and Going Along with Fate

An attitude that accepts or is satisfied with any consequences is the last and most important demand of Confucianism. When facing inevitable or unchangeable fate, Confucianists are not asking us to live with it without other choices but to enjoy or be happy about any consequences. The original phrase to express this attitude is “樂天知命，故不憂” in *Book of Changes*, which literally can be translated to “Rejoices in Heaven and know its mandate, therefore no anxieties.” (Legge 1899: 354) However, the joy does not come from the knowledge of fate or the mandate of Heaven. It is not a theoretical or intellectual joy. Instead, it is a practical joy emphasizing our magnanimity and optimistic mind in our daily life.

The famous model of this kind in Chinese history is Yan Hui, a student of Confucius. In *Analects*, when Confucius talked about Yan Hui, he said, “Living in a narrow alley, subsisting on a basket of grain and gourd full of water—other people could not have born such hardship, yet it never spoiled Hui’s joy.” (*Analects*, 6.11) Of course, Confucius himself was also good at this; he said, “Eating plain food and drinking water, having only your bent arm as a pillow—certainly, there is joy to be found in this!” (*Analects*, 7.16) Hence, this kind of joy is called “the Joy of Confucius and Yan Hui” (孔顏之樂, JCY).

In Chinese history, JCY is crucial in stating the ideal frame of mind of a gentleman. Moreover, JCY explains how we deal with inevitable and unchangeable fate in the modern world. It also shows the theory of Confucianism is not consequentialism but a form of virtue ethics. Based on all the activities we can do when facing fate, Confucian virtue ethics tells us always to pursue virtues

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<sup>12</sup> Completed Works of Two Chengs, p.119.

without concern for any other factors. If we do so, it means we understand, obey, respect, and rejoice in fate.

### III. Virtue, Happiness and External Goods

Facing our fate, we are not merely negative patients but positive agents. According to our nature, we must cultivate our own virtues, which is the mandate of Heaven or our fate. The next question for us in a modern world is whether we can achieve happiness and external goods from the cultivation of virtues. However, in different historical periods, the answer is different.

Roughly speaking, before the Zhou dynasty, people usually believed that virtue, external goods, and happiness are all coincidences, and that, as long as we possess virtues, we would acquire happiness, wealth, and have a long life, etc. Heaven likes a judge to guarantee justice, to reward the good and punish the bad. There are many statements to prove it, such as “Heaven rewards the good and punishes the bad”; (Zuo Qiuming 2002: 68) “God blesses the good and brings disaster to the bad”; (Zuo Qiuming 1990: 821) “Heaven bestows good fortune on those who do good and disasters on those who do what is not good”; (*Xunzi*, 28.8) “Therefore the man who has great virtues would surely have his position, surely have his wealth, surely have his fame, surely have a long life...therefore the man who has great virtues surely receive the mandate of Heaven”; (Zu Xi 1983: 25-26) “Because the King of Xia had too many sins, therefore Heaven orders to kill him.” (Li and Wang 2004: 105)

These statements roughly reflect ancient Confucianism’s ideal theory of justice, which says the virtuous gentleman deserves to be happy and wealthy. However, this is easy to prove wrong and is not realistic. It is not uncommon to see good people suffering and bad people holding a high position with great wealth based on experience. There is a famous paragraph that illustrates this by Sima Qian, a great historian in the Han dynasty:

Some people said, ‘Heaven is not biased, always help good people.’ Like Boyi and Shuqi, should we say they are good people or not? They are benevolent and virtuous consistently to keep their noble conduct, but finally they starved to death! Moreover, of the seventy proud students of Confucius, only Yan Yuan was regarded as a studious man. However, Yan Yuan was always in poverty and could not eat enough food. He died very young. What is the reward of heaven for good people? Bandits kill innocent people. They roast their hearts and liver for meat. They are cruel and indulgent. They gather thousands of members to do anything they want to. They live a long life. What morality does this follow? This is a great and remarkable thing.”; “I am deeply confused. If there is so-called the law of Heaven, then are these obey the law of Heaven, or disobey?(Sima Quan, 1999: 1690)

Therefore, the belief that the virtuous man or gentleman will have external goods and happiness had changed since the Zhou dynasty. In the later years of Confucius’ life, his students had doubted the view of destiny that corresponded to virtue and misfortune. When Confucius and his followers were besieged in the

state of Chen, they were so weak from hunger that they could not even stand. “Upset, Zilu appeared before the Master and said, ‘Does even the gentleman encounter hardship?’ The Master said, ‘Encountering hardship, the gentleman never changes themselves, but the petty man is overwhelmed by it.’” (*Analects*, 15.2) From this conversation, we can see that Confucius believed that there is a gap between virtues and external goods, including wealth, fame, a long life, and so on. That is to say, we may be virtuous, but we still can be poor, unknown, and unlucky in having a short life.

To solve this problem, Confucian virtue ethics denied happiness with external goods as our fundamental or final purpose. That is to say, Confucian virtue ethics distinguished two kinds of purposes: (1) external goods; (2) Virtues or Dao. They did not believe that these are two opposite purposes. It is not an “either/or” question but implies that the latter is an ultimate end. Accordingly, there are two kinds of happiness: (1) happiness with external goods, which the normal person pursues; (2) happiness with virtues, which the gentleman pursues.

As far as the former is concerned, it is human nature to pursue happiness with external goods, but we do not care whether we achieve it. Taking wealth as an example, Confucius said, “If it is the wealth that can be pursued rightly, then I would pursue it, even if that meant serving as an officer holding a whip at the entrance to the marketplace. If the wealth attained wrongly, I prefer to follow that which I love”; (*Analects*, 7.12.) “Wealth and eminence attained improperly concern me no more than the floating clouds.” (*Analects*, 7.16. ) In his view, wealth can be our goal, but we have to pursue it in the right, legal or moral way. “Wealth and social eminence are things that all people desire, and yet unless they are acquired in the proper way, I will not abide them. Poverty and disgrace are things that all people hate, and yet unless they are avoided in the proper way, I will not despise them.” (*Analects*, 4.5.) It can be seen that Confucius denies a position of consequentialism; thus, he does not care about the consequences of these behaviors, whether people can really obtain these external goods.<sup>13</sup>

As far as the latter is concerned, even if the gentleman lost all external goodness, he could still have happiness with virtues or the Way. As long as the gentleman finds the Dao or is virtuous, he is happy or joyful, just like Confucius and Yan Hui. The Master said, “Having in the morning heard that the Way was being put into practice, I could die that evening without regret.” (*Analects*, 4.8.)

Comparing the two kinds of happiness, we can see that the first kind of happiness depends on the consequences, whether we finally obtain wealth, fame, etc. The second kind of happiness depends on the motive, or if we have a will always to pursue virtues or the Way. Therefore, the former is uncertain and influenced by fate, while the latter is fully dependent on the agent himself, that is to say, it is self-sufficient. Therefore, Mencius said, “If through seeking I get it while through neglect I lose it, such seeking is conducive to getting, for what I

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<sup>13</sup> Concerning the consequences or external goods, there are two other terms in Confucianism that express the similar meaning of fate: time (時) and luck (運). However, neither of them has a metaphysical perspective based on Heaven.

seek lies within myself. If, though my seeking is in accordance with the Way, yet getting depends on destiny, such seeking is not conducive to getting, for what I seek lies outside myself.” (*Mencius*, 7A.3) Therefore, fate can only influence the happiness related to external goods, but not the happiness associated with virtues or the Way. A person who knows, obeys and respects fate will not be obsessed with the first kind of happiness but will strive to pursue the second happiness. From the perspective of Mencius, Confucius acts in this way. “Confucius advanced according to ritual and withdrew according to rightness. As to his attaining or not attaining office, he said, ‘There is the Mandate.’” (*Mencius*, 5A.8)

### Conclusion

In short, the gentleman knows to go along with and respect fate, seeing the uncertainty and contingency of the happiness associated with external goods. This person will not fight against fate and accepts the arrangement or consequence calmly and peacefully. On the other hand, the gentleman will pursue virtue and be happy about it because he knows virtues or the Way are a person’s real purpose. Therefore, facing fate, a gentleman will not mind if he gains or loses external goods but pursue virtues for his entire lifetime. In the process of pursuing, this person will fully enjoy “the joy of Confucius and Yan.” Therefore, it is fate that makes us positive in pursuit of virtues and tells us to be happy to accept any gain or loss of external goods. All this shows that Confucian virtue ethics have a positive significance for modern human life.

(1) Psychologically speaking, Confucianism emphasizes an optimistic attitude to accept misfortunes in life. Throughout an entire lifetime, Confucian ethics tell us to work diligently, pursue virtues, and love our family, friends, and even humankind. In the meantime, the ethical person does not care whether they can obtain wealth or power eventually or whether other people know and recognize their name. As Confucius said, “Do not be concerned about whether or not others know you; be concerned about whether or not you know others.” (*Analects*, 1.16) When facing death, the ethical person can feel at ease because they are pursuing virtues consistently.

(2) Morally speaking, Confucianism emphasizes that virtues are essential for us to understand our nature. Facing fate, we should pursue virtues all the time, and during moral self-cultivation, we will be happy or obtain “the Joy of Confucius and Yan Hui.” Confucius is a moral model in this respect because he is “the type of person who is so passionate that he forgets to eat, whose joy renders him free of worries, and who grows old without noticing the passage of the years.” (*Analects*, 7.19)

In a word, the Confucian virtue ethics represented by Confucius and Mencius are not fatalistic. They deal with inevitable and unchangeable fate with a positive and optimistic attitude and accept any consequence of actions with tranquility or even a joyful mind. This treatment toward fate is positive and healthy for all of us in the modern world.

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