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Confucius, Mencius and the Notion of True Succession

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John N. Williams **Confucius, Mencius, and the notion of true succession**

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the kinds of issues that interest historians of ideas, in particular Confucian scholars, is a relation that is sometimes called “true succession.” Some examples of this relation are clear-cut, others less so. Plato was certainly a true successor of Socrates, but one is more hesitant to say that Aristotle was a true successor of Plato. The relation has some interesting features. Nietzsche probably had no true successor and Wittgenstein was not his own true successor. Although Marx was a true successor of Hegel and Lenin was a true successor of Marx, Lenin was not a true successor of Hegel. Zeno was a true successor of Pythagoras, but so too was Parmenides.

Correspondingly, we can raise a host of issues about intellectual successors, such as the question of whether Christ had any true successor or whether Mencius or Hsün Tzu or either were true successors of Confucius. The classical tradition had it that Mencius was not a true successor of Confucius, whereas the Neo-Confucian tradition holds that he was.

In this article I will argue for the classical interpretation. My strategy will be to focus on the broad question of what true succession is and then relate this to the comparatively narrow question of whether Mencius was a true successor of Confucius. The tacit analysis of “true succession” in the literature needs both addenda and corrigenda. The correct and complete analysis of true succession proves fatal to the orthodox arguments that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius. Second, even were this important fact overlooked, the strongest traditional textual evidence for the claim that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius is insufficient to establish it. Third, new textual and logical considerations support the claim that Confucius held that virtue is *not* innate in Man. Given that it is noncontroversial that Mencius held the central doctrine that virtue *is* innate, the weight of evidence is that Mencius was not a true successor of Confucius. This leaves open the possibility that there are more plausible true successors of Confucius—notably Hsün Tzu.

II. THE NATURE OF TRUE SUCCESSION

Although the notion of a true successor appears, in one form or another, in discussions of the relationship of Mencius and Confucius,¹ there has yet to be an attempt to give an explicit account of true succession. However, there are remarks made here and there in the literature from which an account, albeit implicit, can be reconstructed. Philip Ho Hwang suggests that Mencius may have been mistakenly believed to be a true successor of Confucius because Mencius himself believed this. And he believed this because “he [Mencius] really believed that his ideas were *in complete harmony* with those of

Confucius”² (my emphasis). Likewise Whalen Lai supports the view that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius because “he remained faithful to Confucius,”³ and similarly D. C. Lau takes the orthodox view because “. . . what he did was to offer his own theory which is not only consistent with, but can furnish a firm basis to, Confucian thought.”⁴ This suggests that as a necessary condition for B to be a true successor of A, the ideas of A and B are *consistent*; that is, the conjunction of the ideas of both A and B is not a self-contradiction. It should be clear that this view is *almost* correct. But first, it is not *quite* correct. Lenin is a paradigm example of the intellectual successor of Marx, but although there is consistency between the *central* ideas, for example, concerning economics, the class system, and revolution, there are differences. There is, for example, an inconsistency between the ideas *peripheral* to the theses of each thinker. For example, Lenin’s position on the necessity of a transitional dictatorship after the revolution is inconsistent with that of Marx.⁵ Martin Lu, who is more explicitly interested in “true succession,” comments:

A genuine successor-master relationship does not necessarily imply that their ideas and doctrines must be identical or even similar in the minutest details.⁶

This is undoubtedly correct, but too weak. If the central ideas of A and B were in fact identical we would say that at worst one was guilty of plagiarism and that at best, by a rare coincidence, independent minds had arrived at the same view. This would clearly rule out true succession, since an integral idea in succession is that, in some sense, the successor is *influenced* by the predecessor. For this reason history declines to offer a verdict upon whether plagiarism or coincidence is the explanation of the identical production of the infinitesimal calculus by Newton and Leibniz,⁷ but no one would say that either was the intellectual successor of the other. This condition, therefore, needs to be strengthened to the observation that a genuine successor-master relationship *does* necessarily imply that their central ideas are *not* identical. It is important to notice that the condition is, once again, only a condition upon the *central* ideas of predecessor and successor. For one thing, there may be similar claims to be found in different thinkers which play only a *peripheral* role in the corpus of ideas of the works which contain them. A limited similarity can even be found between works that express central theses that are *inconsistent* with each other. For example, the passages in chapter 3 of the *Chung Yung* and the *Analects*, “Never do to others what you would not like them to do,”⁸ are similar to each other but likewise similar⁹ to Christ’s injunction in the Sermon on the Mount, “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them,”¹⁰ but no one would say that the world view of the Bible is consistent with that of the *Analects* or the *Chung Yung*, let alone that Christ was a true successor of Confucius.

A parallel amendment needs to be made by a further important condition suggested by the same writer:

Few people would deny that Plato was a true successor of Socrates *in spite of* the former's elaboration of and *advancement* over the latter's ideas.¹¹ (My emphasis)

But it is at least plausible to suggest that Plato could not have been a true successor of Socrates *unless* his ideas *were* an advancement of those of Socrates. Perhaps the clearest way to put this is that if B is the true successor of A then, *ceteris paribus*, A *would* have written more or less what B in fact *did* write. An alternative formulation is to say that if A had lived and been aware of the central ideas of B, A would more or less have agreed with them. *Both* formulations are subjunctive conditionals, a fact which will shortly become important.

The analysis of true succession is not quite complete, however, since we have already observed that temporal succession is a necessary condition of intellectual succession. Quite trivially, if B is the true successor of A then the central ideas of B are developed *after* those of A.

This gives us the necessary and sufficient conditions of true succession, namely:

1. B is a true successor of A if and only if
 - (a) The central ideas of B were *developed after* those of A.
 - (b) The central ideas of A are *consistent* with those of B.
 - (c) B understood the ideas of A.
 - (d) A would, *ceteris paribus*, have developed more or less the same central ideas as those actually developed by B.
 - (e) The central ideas of A are not identical with those of B.

The analysis explains the strange features of true succession. For example, the late Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*¹² is certainly no true successor of the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*,¹³ the former work being successfully written in explicit repudiation¹⁴ of the latter. Although the relationship between the early and late Wittgenstein satisfies conditions (a), (e), and probably (c), since Wittgenstein was probably in the best position to understand his earlier work, condition (b) is violated. Notably, Wittgenstein at the time of the *Investigations* could not consistently have held on to a tractarian theory of language. It might be objected at this point that condition (d) counts in favor of Wittgenstein being his own true successor. But this is an acceptable conclusion. While condition (d) is satisfied on the grounds that Wittgenstein would have developed his later ideas if he did develop them, it is not sufficient to establish Wittgenstein being his own successor, although indeed it counts towards it. If the ideas of the later Wittgenstein had been a simple witting amendment or

development of the earlier Wittgenstein rather than a repudiation, then surely we *would* admit Wittgenstein as his own true successor.

A further objection might be that (b) is not a necessary condition of true succession because it follows that no thinker can have a true successor if his ideas are themselves internally inconsistent. But again, this conclusion is not unwelcome. For one thing, an original theory that contains a central contradiction is in agreement with any other theory whatever and therefore with no specific theory in particular, since anything and everything follows from a contradiction. It follows that the serious task of deciding between two putative successors will hinge upon how the contradiction in the original theory is to be resolved. For example, the contradictions which I will argue are to be found in the *Analects* can be resolved either in a way that increases the plausibility of Mencius, or in a way that increases that of Hsün Tzu, as a true successor of Confucius.

The correct analysis can now be brought to bear on the question of whether Mencius was a true successor of Confucius.

III. THE TRADITIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR MENCIOUS AS A TRUE SUCCESSOR

I will now apply the analysis of true succession to a strong and popular argument that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius. The argument ostensibly hinges on whether the *Ta Hsüeh* and the *Chung Yung* are reliable expressions of the ideas of Confucius. The assumption which underpins this argument is that if it is established that they are, then given that Mencius was a true successor of the author of these two works, it ipso facto follows that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius. But this line of argument faces three objections.

First, a supporter of this argument faces an empirical difficulty because in order to establish what Confucius' central ideas *actually were* by means of an appeal to the *Ta Hsüeh* and the *Chung Yung*, he needs to establish *whose* ideas are expressed there. It is difficult to establish this in the case of the *Ta Hsüeh*, since, as is well recognized,¹⁵ the authorship of this work is obscure.

Second, he also needs to establish if the author of both works, whoever he or she was, was a true successor of Confucius. It is important to note that he would still need to do this even if he had already conclusively demonstrated that the author of these two works was Confucius himself. In other words, even if we *had* conclusively established that the ideas of the *Ta Hsüeh* and the *Chung Yung* were those of Confucius, we have already noted that this would not ipso facto establish that the Confucius of this period was a true successor of the Confucius of the *Analects*. For as I have already shown, a thinker may not be the true successor of himself.

But third, it is the underpinning assumption which is the more important move in the argument—more important indeed than the question of the reliability of the two works. The assumption is made recently by Lu, who comments:

In the main argument which follows, I shall present the thesis that the Confucian orthodoxy as outlined in the *Ta Hsüeh* and the *Chung Yung* could justifiably be traced back to Confucius and that as Mencius' theory of human nature is a further explanation of this orthodoxy he was without doubt a true successor of Confucius.¹⁶ (My emphasis)

But this assumption is false. The argument is invalid, because true succession is *not a transitive relation*. In other words, the principle to which such an argument appeals, namely, that

1. If C is the true successor of B and B is the true successor of A, then C is the true successor of A

is false. The principle is false for four reasons. No relation is likely to be transitive if the necessary conditions for it to obtain are that some further relation obtains which is itself not transitive. But (b), (c), and (e) refer to the relations of consistency, understanding, and nonidentity, none of which are transitive. Worse still, (d) refers to the satisfaction of a subjunctive conditional, and subjunctive conditionals, unlike their indicative counterparts, are notoriously nontransitive. I will now take these relations in order.

It is false to claim that

2. If p is consistent with q and q is consistent with r, then p is consistent with r.

The thesis "A & B" is consistent with the thesis "B & C," which is in turn consistent with the thesis " \sim A & B & C," but the thesis "A & B" is *not* consistent with the thesis " \sim A & B & C." To make this schema of an example more concrete, suppose for the sake of argument that Confucius' essential view is that Man is innately good and that harmony will result from the rectification of names. Further suppose that Mencius' view is that harmony will result from the rectification of names and that all people are basically equal, and that Hsün Tzu's view is that Man is innately evil, that harmony will result from the rectification of names, and that all people are basically equal. Were all of this the case, then Confucius' view would be consistent with that of Mencius, and Mencius' view consistent with that of Hsün Tzu, but Confucius' view would *not* be consistent with that of Hsün Tzu.

It is false to claim that

3. If A understands the central ideas of B and B understands the central ideas of C, then A understands the central ideas of C.

For one thing, the ideas of C may be expressed in such a way as to preclude A, but not B, from understanding them, whereas the ideas of B are *perspicuous* to A. For another, even if the ideas of all three are consistent with each other, the class of ideas central to C may include, but not exhaust, those of B, and likewise with respect to B and A, so that there are new, possibly fresh, ideas central to C that A does not, or even cannot, understand. For example, it is plausible that

Lenin understood the central ideas of Marx, who in turn understood the central ideas of Hegel, but implausible to suppose that Lenin understood the central ideas of Hegel.¹⁷

Furthermore and quite noncontroversially,¹⁸ it is false to claim that

4. If $A \neq B$ and $B \neq C$, then $A \neq C$.

It is true both that the Prime Minister of Britain is not the President of the U.S.A. and that the President of the U.S.A. is not Margaret Thatcher, but false that the Prime Minister of Britain is not Margaret Thatcher.

Finally, subjunctive conditionals differ interestingly from conditionals in general, in that they are not transitive.¹⁹ A demonstration of the nontransitivity of subjunctive conditionals is afforded by the invalidity of the following argument:

5. If there were dead bodies in every department of the National University of Singapore then there would be dead bodies in the Pathology Department of the National University of Singapore.

6. If there were dead bodies in the Pathology Department of the National University of Singapore then no one would feel disgusted.

7. ∴ If there were dead bodies in every department in the National University of Singapore then no one would feel disgusted.

Yet it is conceivable that (5) and (6) are both true while (7) is false.

This granted, we cannot validly argue from the fact that Confucius would, *ceteris paribus*, have written more or less what the author(s) of the *Ta Hsüeh* and the *Chung Yung* wrote and that these author(s) would, *ceteris paribus*, have written more or less what Mencius wrote, to the conclusion that Confucius would, *ceteris paribus*, have written more or less what Mencius wrote.

IV. TEXTUAL EVIDENCE FOR THE ORTHODOX VIEW OF MENCIOUS AS TRUE SUCCESSOR OF CONFUCIUS

I shall now consider the strongest *textual* arguments for the claim that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius. I will take it as noncontroversial that Mencius' central view of human nature is that virtue is innate in Man. From the discussion of true succession it follows that if Confucius' real view was not that virtue is innate or that virtue is not innate then the weight of evidence is not that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius or that Mencius was not a true successor of Confucius. I will not here discuss other plausible violations of condition (b), for example, that for Confucius, but not Mencius, a justified revolution against the ruling authority is impossible.

A. Lau's Argument for the Orthodox View

D. C. Lau argues that both Confucius and Mencius, but not Hsün Tzu, hold the view that virtue is innate, as follows:

Both Confucius and Mencius repeatedly use the phrase “delighting in the Way.” Once more this emphasizes the naturalness of morality. Delight and joy are usually experienced when a man pursues a natural activity unimpeded. On this point one can see that *Hsün Tzu* is not in the true tradition of Confucius, as he looks upon morality as artificial and therefore unnatural.²⁰

But a number of criticisms can be made of this argument.

Even if we accept Lau’s conclusion that Confucius held that morality is *natural* for Man, we have not thereby accepted the conclusion that Confucius held that morality is *innate* in Man, which is surely the crucial claim. Not everything that is natural is innate. It is natural for babies to learn things about the world after they are born, but although there is no contradiction in saying that the *ability* to learn is innate, it *is* a contradiction to say either that *learning itself* is innate or that the *knowledge acquired as the result* of learning is innate, in both cases because it is logically impossible to learn something that one already knows.

Moreover, it is far from obvious that one who delights in the Way (Tao) is thereby either naturally or innately moral. One interpretation of how Confucius sees “the Way” is that “The Way (Tao) is the moral law or moral order. It is the Way of Heaven, [this latter being] no longer conceived of as . . . the greatest of all spiritual things [but rather as] the origin of all things [that is] the Supreme Reality.”²¹ But it is quite possible to delight in an adherence to morality conceived of as a natural law or an ontological underpinning which is *not* innate in Man. The injunction “one ought to strive to be a gentleman” might not be innate in the consciousness of Man but rather have the status of an objective or law, in the sense that such obligations are ontologically primitive realities. Yet it may be the case that Man delights in the fact that the injunction has this status, in the fact that one follows it, or in the fact that one *learns* to follow or be conscious of it. Even if one conceived of the Way as a moral law that is “Heaven-sent” in a spiritual, metaphysical, or anthropomorphic Way, it is quite consistent to claim both that the law can be a source of delight and that it is not innate in Man. For one thing, one could consistently hold that what is sent to or even what is innate in Man is the knowledge that He must follow the Way if He is to overcome his innate immorality or amorality.²²

Finally, the claim that every natural activity that is pursued unimpeded is usually delightful or joyous is dubious, even if it is intended as a piece of factual psychology. Suitable counterexamples include growing one’s hair without ever cutting it, eating potatoes raw rather than cooked, evacuating one’s bowels, dying of cancer, and bleeding from one’s wounds. Nor is every usually delightful or joyous activity one that is natural or unimpeded. Suitable counterexamples include the wearing of clothes and the use of cosmetics.

B. Textual Evidence that Apparently Supports the Orthodox View

As is well known, the strongest textual evidence for the claim that Confucius held that virtue is innate is found in seven passages in the *Analects*, namely, 4:5,

4:8, 7:22, 7:29, 8:7, 15:8, and, famously, 6:17. I will show that the support that these passages give to the orthodox view of Confucius' beliefs is an illusion. Indeed, close examination reveals two of these passages, namely, 8:7 and 15:8, to be evidence *against* the orthodox claim. I shall deal with each of the six passages in turn:

4:5. "... A superior man never abandons humanity even for the lapse of a single meal. In moments of haste, he acts according to it. In times of difficulty or confusion, he acts according to it."²³

This claim is entirely consistent with the view that a superior man is one who has learned to practice *jen*, or who has learned to overcome his innately evil nature, and that he thus practices, and thus overcomes, consistently throughout his life.

4:8. Confucius said, "In the morning, hear the Way; in the evening, die content!"²⁴

One way of taking this is as the hypothetical claim that if one hears the Way then one can die morally satisfied. But this claim might still be true even if the Way is not innate in Man, that is, if one has to *learn to hear* the Way. One might consistently satisfy the moral demand of "willingly sacrificing one's life for the Way" by satisfying the moral demand that one *acquires* the Way in order to sacrifice oneself to it, in the same manner as some believers who have to *acquire* a religious faith in order to become martyrs.

Moreover, Waley tells us²⁵ to read 4:8 in the same spirit as "Vedi Napoli e poi mori." Read *this* way, the passage is clearly inconclusive. It is absurd to suppose that the sight of Naples could be innate.

7:22. Confucius said, "Heaven produced the virtue that is in me; what can Huan T'ui do to me?"²⁶

To be fair to the orthodox view of Confucius' beliefs, the claim that "Heaven *produced* the virtue that is in me" (my emphasis) does not, surprisingly, entail that virtue is *not* innate in me. It would be naïve to claim that whatever is produced in X is non-innate in X. Heavenly production of virtue would be consistent with its innateness, given that Confucius conceives of Heaven as some organic or teleological force or principle, and that there is no contradiction in the view that some "organically produced" effects are innate to the organism in question. For example, it might be argued that ova are *produced* by the body of an adult woman, but are innate in the sense that the organic process which begins at birth and which realizes its goal in adolescence is innate at birth in a child that is to be a woman. But the fact that this particular sense of heavenly production is *consistent* with the innateness of morality does not establish that it is *implied* by it. It is *also* consistent with the *non*-innateness of morality. For example, the ova of a woman who has had them surgically implanted are not innate in her, but then neither are the ova of a woman who

has undergone surgery as a child to stimulate artificially the production of hormones which eventually terminate their production at adolescence. In order for the “fruits of production” in this sense to be innate, the producing mechanism must also be innate. Even if the producing mechanism is innate, its products are not innate if they are not produced. Ova are not innate in a woman who has innate hormones that work towards their production if she accidentally becomes sterile before adolescence. In the light of these points, it seems more plausible to suppose that if consistent, Confucius’ view is that the *virtue-producing mechanism* is innate in Man, or even that this *is* Heaven. But to claim that the *ability* to be virtuous is innate does not entail that *virtue itself* is innate.

7:29. Confucius said, “Is humanity far away? As soon as I want it, there it is right by me.”²⁷ (In Waley: “As soon as I want it, there it is at hand.”²⁸)

But this claim is consistent with the claim that virtue is not innate. It is consistent to say both that humanity is innately *amoral* or *immoral*, but always accessible to Man, and that since it is accessible to change, from an innately non-moral to a non-innately moral state, this changed state of humanity as moral is likewise accessible. A rich man who has acquired wealth has wealth right by him as soon as he wants it, but not even those who have *inherited* fortunes are innately wealthy.

8:7. Tseng Tzu said, “An officer must be great and strong. His burden is heavy and his course is long. He has taken humanity to be his own burden—is that not heavy? Only with death does his course stop—is that not long?”²⁹

But even if it had been established that Tseng Tzu accurately represented Confucius’ view, then it entails that Man is *not* innately virtuous, and that Man is not naturally virtuous but has to struggle to make himself so. It is difficult to see how morality could be a burden, even in our dealings with others, if we are all naturally moral—especially given Lau’s view that “delight and joy are usually experienced when a man pursues a natural activity unimpeded.”³⁰

15:8. Confucius said, “A resolute scholar and a man of humanity will never seek to live at the expense of injuring humanity. He would rather sacrifice his life *in order to realize* humanity.”³¹ (My emphasis)

First, this does *not* entail that virtue *is* innate. A man who has *learned* to be virtuous and who struggles against reverting to his innately evil ways may never seek to live at the expense of injuring humanity, either in the sense of transgressing against other men or in the sense of allowing his manhood to remain in its original degraded state. Second, the fact that men have to *do* certain things in order to *realize* humanity or virtue is often indicative of their *lack* of humanity or virtue. Moreover, if we further accept the view, à la Lau, that only what is done easily or in an unimpeded manner is done naturally, then since men do not do these things (for example, sacrificing one’s life, or carrying a heavy

burden down a long road) easily, they do not do them naturally. Therefore men naturally lack humanity and virtue. The same point is even more clearly supported by an earlier passage in the *Analects*, “The Master said, Goodness cannot be *obtained* till what is *difficult* has been *duly done*”³² (my emphasis).

C. Passage 6:17

As others have pointed out,³³ the strongest textual evidence for the claim that Confucius held that goodness is innate in Man is 6:17 in the *Analects*. Hwang claims that there are at least three ways of translating the passage into English.³⁴ My claim is stronger. In fact there are *at least four* translations, and even when we have arrived at the English version, with a corresponding increase in clarity,³⁵ such version or versions are *still* ambiguous. The Waley translation reads:

Man’s very life is honesty, in that without it he will be very lucky indeed if he escapes with his life.³⁶

This might well mean that honesty is a *practical necessity* if one is to survive without the intervention of luck, a view shared by Hobbes³⁷ and the Chinese Legalists. But neither of the latter believed that Man is innately virtuous. Again, it might mean that honesty is a *logical necessity* if one is to live without the luck of never having to choose between honesty and dishonesty and yet have one’s integrity or soul survive. But since this view is a tautology, and since the claim that Man is innately moral is at best a contingent truth, the latter *cannot* be identical with, nor entail, the former, since no tautology can be contingent, nor can any tautology entail any contingent proposition, as was famously demonstrated by Lewy.³⁸

The Chan translation reads:

Confucius said, “Man is born with uprightness. If one loses it he will be lucky if he escapes with his life.”³⁹

But, as Chan himself admits, “Confucius’ own position as to whether human nature is originally good is not clear.”⁴⁰ A plausible clarification of this English version of 7:18 is that *the fact of being born at all* is a morally upright thing or that *the fact of being born a Man*, rather than an animal or insect, is a morally good thing. It might even mean that it is a good thing to be *born* as a Man, rather than *unborn as a spirit*. Confucius certainly appeared to believe in this latter possibility, for it is said that “He sacrificed to the dead, as if they were present. He sacrificed to the spirits, as if the spirits were present.”⁴¹ It goes without saying that neither of these views entail that moral goodness is innate either in Man or in men. A further interpretation is that Man is, at the time of his embarkation upon life, either in *possession* of the *prudential* strength to *stand upright* both in a literal and in an extended but still prudential sense, or is faced with the necessity to gain that strength in order to *gain* the title of a

“real man.” Neither view entails that virtue is innate. The translation that Legge prefers is that

The Master said, ‘Man is born *for* uprightness. If a man lose his uprightness, and yet live, his escape from death is the effect of mere good fortune.’⁴² (My emphasis)

This, he claims,⁴³ is preferable to the phrase (used by Chan) “born *with* uprightness.” But there is a clear sense in which saying that A is *born for* X-ness in no way commits one to a view that X-ness is innate to A. One sense is that it is *appropriate for* A to *achieve* X-ness. Thus if we say that Prince William, son of Prince Charles of England, is born *for* sovereignty, we do not imply the absurd thesis that sovereignty is *innate* in him, but simply that it would be appropriate with who he is, were he to become King of England. A related but different sense is that in order to be worthy of the title “Man,” “a *real* Man,” or “Gentleman” one has to be born *to* uprightness in the sense of being born into a family of *real* men or gentlemen. In other words, a necessary condition of *achieving* the social status desired is that one is born to a family of similar social status. This is in fact what one means by saying that a member of the landed gentry must be born to the gentry, or that to be a true or successful farmer, one must be born to the soil. Neither of these senses of being born either *for* or *to* uprightness implies that one is born innately morally upright.

Finally, it is important to note that even if this translation proves that *honesty* is held to be innate, it does not thereby prove that *virtue* is held to be innate, since honesty is only *one* of the virtues. We do not judge that Hitler was evil simply because he was dishonest. Conversely, Ebenezer Scrooge was totally honest about his moral failings, notably his lack of charity and paucity of spirit.

V. NEW TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

A. *Textual Evidence Against the Orthodox View*

I will now present further and independent evidence that Confucius held that morality is not innate in Man.

The first mention of human nature in the *Analects*, namely,

Tzu-kung said, Our Master’s views concerning culture and the outward insignia of goodness, we are permitted to hear; *but about Man’s nature* and the ways of Heaven *he will not tell us anything at all*⁴⁴ (My emphasis)

puts defenders of the traditional interpretation into an embarrassing and logically inescapable dilemma. Either this report of Confucius’ views is correct, in which case Confucius did not express any views about human nature and *a fortiori* did not express the view that human nature is innately good, or this report of Confucius’ views is incorrect, which casts serious doubt upon the reliability of the whole enterprise of reading the *Analects* in order to determine what Confucius’ views were. This is an especially important possibility to note,

since many of the passages in the *Analects* are *second-order* reports of the form “A said that B said that p.”

Finally I present a new textual argument that either Confucius’ views are self-contradictory or they include the view that morality is *not* innate in Man.

First, 7:19 reads:

“The Master said, I for my part am not one of those who have *innate knowledge*. . . .”⁴⁵ (My emphasis)

And if Confucius did not have innate knowledge, then he did not have innate knowledge of right and wrong, and it follows that Man, as opposed to men, does not have such innate moral knowledge.

Second, Confucius clearly did not think that all men are good. For example, 8.3 reads:

The Master said, ‘Impetuous, but tricky, ingenuous, but dishonest! Simple-minded, but capable of breaking promises! To such men I can give no recognition.’⁴⁶

Using “V” to stand for the predicate “is virtuous” we can symbolize this as

9. $\exists x \sim Vx$.

But it follows from this that either not all men have the inborn qualities one would think important for virtue, or that these qualities are not sufficient for virtue. In other words,

10. $\sim x Qx \vee \sim x (Qx \supset Vx)$.

Thus it is false to say either that Man as a whole has these innate qualities or that those innate qualities produce virtue in Man.

We are now faced with three mutually exclusive alternatives. Either Confucius believed that virtue is not innate in Man, and no more, or he *also* believed that virtue *is* innate in Man, in which case the views of the *Analects* are internally inconsistent, or, finally, the views discussed so far are not those of Confucius, and hence the *Analects* are an unreliable guide to what Confucius believed. It should be obvious that any alternative is fatal to the traditional argument that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius. There is, moreover, independent evidence for the second and third approaches.

First, there *are* other obvious contradictions in the *Analects*. For example, in 14:7 we find the claim:

It is possible to be a true gentleman and yet lack Goodness,⁴⁷

whereas in 4:5 the claim is that

“The Gentleman who ever parts company with Goodness does not fulfill that name. Never for a moment does a gentleman quit the way of Goodness.”⁴⁸

Moreover, there is a contradiction in the discussion of the putative virtue-producing qualities. In 12:8, we get this passage:

Chi Tzu-ch'eng said, A gentleman is a gentleman in virtue of the stuff he is made of. Nature cannot make gentleman. Tzu-kung said, I am sorry, Sir, that you should have said that . . . nature is just as important as inborn qualities; and inborn qualities, no less important than culture.⁴⁹

Clearly this view is that certain inborn qualities and culture are both necessary conditions of a Gentleman. Using “G,” “Q,” and “C” to stand for the predicates “is a gentleman,” “has virtue-producing inborn qualities,” and “is cultured,” this can be symbolized as

11. $x(Gx \supset (Qx \ \& \ Cx))$

But Confucius also seems to believe that certain men are both virtuous and uncultured. For example, part of 17:23 reads:

“The Master said, . . . If a *gentleman* has courage but neglects Right, he becomes turbulent. If a *small man* has courage and *neglects* Right, he becomes a thief.”⁵⁰ (My emphasis)

It is clear from the context of this passage that Confucius’ “small man” is not a Gentleman, and there could be no point in talking of *neglecting* Right, unless such men at least *can* sometimes follow Right. Indeed one can only neglect one’s duties if the possibility exists of following them. In fact this is born out by another passage, 4:7, where Confucius is reported as saying

Every man’s faults belong to a set [of qualities which include virtues].⁵¹ If one looks out for faults it is only as a means of recognizing Goodness.⁵²

In effect we now have the claim:

12. $\exists x(Vx \ \& \ \sim Cx)$

Finally there is 14:7, namely:

“. . . there has never yet existed a good man, who was not a gentleman.”⁵³

In other words:

13. $x(Vx \supset Gx).$

Yet the conjunction of these three claims, that is, (11), (12), and (13), is internally inconsistent.⁵⁴

Given that Confucius’ views are internally inconsistent, we can say that his views imply that Man is *not* innately virtuous, since any conclusion follows from an inconsistent set of assertions. It might, of course, be replied that this is an overly *technical* sense of “follows,” but in an intuitively acceptable sense of “follows,” *nothing* really follows from an inconsistent set of claims, and indeed

the two senses of “follows” are less far apart than they appear to be, since a license to say everything in general is no license to say anything in particular. And the consequence of this is that *no* view, including the view that virtue *is* innate in Man, can be inferred from the claims of Confucius until an argued decision has been made for a rejection of one or other of the claims, in order to resolve the inconsistency. What decision should be made, and upon what basis, are questions that fall beyond the scope of this article.

NOTES

1. E. g., in Maurice Cohen, “Confucius and Socrates,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (1975): 160–161, 166; Carson Chang, “Confucian and Platonic Ethical Views,” *Philosophy East and West* 13, no. 4 (January 1964): 298; Antonio S. Cua, “Confucian Vision,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (1984): 234; Chung-ying Cheng, “Conscience, Mind and Individual,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (1974): 8; and Charles Wei-hsun Fu, “Morality or beyond: The Neo-Confucian Confrontation with Mahayana Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West* 23, no. 3 (July 1973): 375, 378–379, 382.
2. Philip Ho Hwang, “A New Interpretation of Confucius,” *Philosophy East and West* 30, no. 1 (January 1980): 49.
3. Whalen Lai, “Kao Tzu and Mencius on Mind: Analyzing a Paradigm Shift in Classical China,” *Philosophy East and West* 34, no. 2 (April 1984): 55.
4. D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), p. 44.
5. See Julius I. Loewenstein, *Marx against Marxism* (London, 1980), p. 130.
6. Martin Lu, “Was Mencius a True Successor of Confucius?” *Philosophy East and West* 33, no. 1 (January 1983): 79.
7. See Samuel Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p. 245.
8. Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), 15:23, p. 198.
9. As Wing-tsit Chan points out in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 101, the context makes the “negative” and “positive” versions identical.
10. Matt. 7: 12 (King James Version).
11. Lu, “Was Mencius a True Successor,” p. 79.
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees, and G. H. von Wright, eds., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1953).
13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, 1922).
14. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Preface, p. viii.
15. James Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893; reprint, New York: Dover, 1971), pp. 26–27.
16. Lu, “Was Mencius a True Successor,” p. 81.
17. Loewenstein, *Marx*, pp. 124–129, especially p. 128.
18. Recognized as far back as L. S. Stebbing, *A Modern Elementary Logic* (London, 1943), p. 84. Stebbing’s term is “different from.”
19. David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 32–33.
20. Lau, *Mencius*, pp. 27–28.
21. Wing-tsit Chan, “Chinese Philosophy,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1967), vol. 2, p. 88.
22. Cf. Hsün Tzu.
23. Chan, *Source Book*, p. 26.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Waley, *Analects*, p. 103, n. 5.
26. Chan, *Source Book*, p. 32.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
28. Waley, *Analects*, 7:29.
29. Chan, *Source Book*, p. 33.
30. Lau, *Mencius*, p. 27.
31. Chan, *Source Book*, p. 43.
32. Waley, *Analects*, 6:20.
33. Hwang, "A New Interpretation," p. 45.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Wing-tai Chan writes: "No two translators of Chinese terms will ever agree entirely on their translations. Since each Chinese character has several meanings, different emphases by different translators are inevitable" (*Source Book*, p. 783).
36. Waley, *Analects*, p. 119.
37. See Roger Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein* (London, 1981), p. 199.
38. Casimir Lewy, *Meaning and Modality* (Oxford, 1976), p. 12.
39. Chan, *Source Book*, p. 29.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Legge, *Confucian Analects*, p. 159.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 190–191, n. 17.
44. Waley, *Analects*, 5:12.
45. *Ibid.*, 7:19.
46. *Ibid.*, 8:3.
47. *Ibid.*, 14:7.
48. *Ibid.*, 4:5.
49. *Ibid.*, 12:8.
50. *Ibid.*, 17:23.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 103, n. 4.
52. *Ibid.*, 4:7.
53. *Ibid.*, 14:7.
54. This can be ascertained by any decision procedure, e.g., truth-trees.