**Journal 4: Kongzi: “The Analects”**

Kongzi’s (also known as Confucius) “The Analects”, is a series of 20 short books, or chapters, that underlines the importance of moral virtue such as filial piety, benevolence, goodness, and trustworthiness. Through the preservation of rites and the practice of virtue, not for personal benefit but because such virtuous actions ought to be followed, “The Master” (Kongzi) believes that the individual, and thus society, will benefit greatly. In fact, Kongzi believes that if rituals are preserved, virtuous action is strived for, and people reach a state of *wuwei,* which is described as “effortless action” (or “nonaction”) “a state of spontaneous harmony between individual inclinations and the sacred Way of Heaven” (Edward Gilman Slingerland, 2), society will find its harmony without the need of harsh laws and punishments. In book 2 Kongzi states “If you try to guide the common people with coercive regulations and keep them in line with punishments, the common people will become evasive and will have no sense of shame. If, however, you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and rectify themselves” (Kongzi-2.3, 5). Kongzi’s central theme of virtuous living can be compared, and contrasted, with the western philosopher Aristotle, as both their theories share many similarities and some differences.

For Kongzi, following the Way is only obtainable through preserving rituals and virtuous living. Knowledge is important to the process, but not if it comes before humility. For example, Kongzi says “Those scholar-apprentices (shi) who, having set their purposes on walking the way (dao), are ashamed of rude clothing and coarse food, are not worth engaging in discussion” (Kongzi 4.9, 91). Kongzi believes that a person’s ego must be set aside to live a virtuous life; if you are still grasping toward external goods like money, clothing, and success you will not be striving toward virtue. In fact, Kongzi states shortly before this passage in book 4 line 5, that wealth and social importance are things that everyone wants but they should only be obtained in an honorable way. Similarly, he states that it is better to be poor and disgraced than to escape those conditions in an unvirtuous way. Kongzi practices humility although he is a very well-respected and educated man. He navigates his behavior to show this humility and respect in different situations as described in line 2 of book 10, “At court, when speaking with officers of lower rank, he was pleasant and affable; when speaking with officers of upper rank, he was formal and proper. When his lord was present, he combined an attitude of cautious respect with graceful ease” (Kongzi-10.2, 28). Another important virtue was that of filial piety, or respecting your parents and elders. Kongzi laments that in his time filiality had become only feeding your parents so their needs are met in old age, he finds this deeply lacking in substance and compares this view of filiality to feeding animals (Kongzi-2.5, 5). The value of filial piety lies in the genuine respect you show towards honoring your parents, this can be seen when Kongzi states that you can see if a son is truly filial if three years after this fathers death the son still maintains the fathers customs (Kongzi-4.20, 93). Furthermore, Kongzi shows the importance of the virtue benevolence. Kongzi replies to Zhonggong in book 12 by saying, “In your public life, behave as though you are receiving important visitors; employ the common people as though you are overseeing a great sacrifice” (Kongzi-12.2, 153).

The focus on virtue by Kongzi is relatable to Aristotle’s theory of the “golden mean”. Both Kongzi and Aristotle view virtuous behavior, and the development of such behavior, as being central to leading a good life. Kongzi states “To live in the neighborhood of the Good is fine. If one does not choose to dwell among those who are Good, how will one obtain wisdom” (Kongzi-4.2, 10). By finding the Good, people who honor the rites and live virtuous lives, Kongzi says you can, and should, model yourself off these people. Aristotle’s virtue ethics also follow a similar road, Aristotle claims that virtues are not intrinsic to human nature and therefore you must model yourself off other figures that have demonstrated virtuous living. Aristotle’s virtues of temperance, honor, trustworthiness, and friendship can be compared to Kongzi’s virtues of self-control, filial piety, loyalty, and benevolence, respectively. According to Kongzi, if you adopt these virtues and live by them you will already be on the path of the Way; similarly, Aristotle believed the only way to be ethically proper was to find the golden mean (or right balance) within these virtues. A main difference between the two philosophers was the Kongzi noted the great impact that individuals following the Way, through virtuous living, could have on society. Political leadership could be, like in the ancient times Kongzi regards as more virtuous, be restored to a respectful and honorable leading instead of leading through punishment and fear. On the contrary, Aristotle’s virtue ethics was much more individualistic and focused on improving the individuals understanding of proper ethical living.

Although it would be impossible to capture the immense amount of information found in Kongzi’s “The Analects” in this short paper, I believe it is key to state that for Kongzi the Way (dao) can be found through virtuous living and sticking to traditional rites. Kongzi was interested in preserving the long-lasting traditions that, in his opinion, had established the harmonious society of the past. Predating Aristotle by a couple hundred of years, Kongzi illuminated, and still to this day illuminates, his students through his teachings of the value of virtues. Although separated by thousands of miles, hundreds of years, and vastly different lifestyles, Aristotle and Kongzi shared many similarities in their beliefs. Ultimately, Kongzi saw a broader use and value for the practice of virtues with its far reaching implications arriving even to the top of government leadership.

**Citation:**

Confucius, et al. *The Analects of Confucius: a Philosophical Translation*. Ballantine Books, 1999.

Slingerland, Edward Gilman. “Chapter 1: Kongzi(Confucius) ‘The Analects.’” *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Van Norden Bryan William, Hackett Publ., 2007, pp. 1–58.

Foot Note on citation- I used two versions of “The Analects” by Kongzi, one from our textbook *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* and another from *The Analects of Confucius: a Philosophical Translation* which has the original Chinese writing along with the translation. I found some sections to be better translated (for my understanding) in one book and others to be better translated (again for my understanding) in the other. This is why sometimes in the text two sections I cited which would otherwise be next to each other (for example, 4.2 and 4.20) are sometimes separated by 80+ pages.