

## Material Well-Being and Character Cultivation in Confucianism

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This essay is inspired by Joel J. Kupperman's work on character and the good life. Kupperman writes,

There are certain good things—good food, comfortable surroundings, and the like—that are so widely pleasing that it is possible to talk about pleasure as the end of life and to create the impression that it really does not matter who or what you are as long as you, so to speak, get lucky in such matter as the material conditions of life, your health, your friendships, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

However, he reminds us,

[to] link happiness to goals, although it matches the general human expectation that one will be happy if only one gets what one wants, is to ignore that reality of what people's lives are like when they do attain their goals.<sup>2</sup>

Life is of course not merely about material conditions. What is the connection between material well-being and the moral life? While the value of these two pursuits is seldom questioned, their relationship is by no means intuitive. This essay investigates the relationship between

material well-being in terms of economic prosperity and the cultivation of character in Confucianism.

By "material well-being," I refer primarily to a reasonable level of physical support to a person's life, including food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Such a level should be above the minimum for survival. Perhaps we can speak of a decent and comfortable level, even though such a level of support largely depends on the economic standards of a specific society. Obviously, a homeless person in New York City with adequate McDonald's to eat everyday may seem luxurious to those suffering from famine in Ethiopia. Running water is now a necessity for decent living in a large part of the world whereas emperors of ancient China lived without it. Nevertheless, we can speak of a reasonable level of material support such as adequate food, clothes, and shelter.

Regarding the relationship between a person's material well-being and his moral cultivation, two lines of thought can be found in pre-Qin Confucian thinkers. On the one hand, there are teachings suggesting that people need to have a decent level of material well-being before they engage in moral cultivation effectively. On the other hand, there are also indications that one can become virtuous regardless of economic conditions. There is an apparent tension between these two positions. If people can cultivate themselves morally regardless of material well-being—given that in Confucianism the most important thing in life is to become a virtuous person—why would they need to improve material well-being? Conversely, if people cannot cultivate themselves morally without taking care of material well-being first, can the economically impoverished ever be able to achieve moral refinement? In the latter case, assuming that "ought" implies "can," how is it that the economically impoverished people be subject to any moral requirement? On the basis of Confucius's and Mencius's teachings, I analyze four possible solutions to this relationship and advance the view that, whereas a small portion of people may be able to become morally cultivated without a decent level of material well-being, the large majority need to have material well-being as a foundation for moral cultivation.

I

Pre-Qin Confucian thinkers in general see people's material well-being as an important hallmark of a good society. To that end, they advocate a social policy of "letting people get rich" (*fu min 富民*). In this regard,

Confucian philosophy appears radically different from an early Christian philosophy (at least according to one reading). The Bible presents Jesus as saying that "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:24–25).<sup>3</sup> It also differs from a common understanding of Buddhist teachings which promote a reserved attitude toward material wealth.<sup>4</sup> In Buddhist teachings, suffering is rooted in desires, which include the craving for material gain. The ideal of non-attachment, to say the least, does not promote the pursuit of material riches. In contrast, Confucius unequivocally advocates a social policy of benefiting people materially in ways they wish to be benefited.<sup>5</sup> In the Confucian view, poverty is not a good thing and should be prevented; wealth is usually considered a good thing and is thus promoted. In the *Records of Confucius's Family Teachings*, Confucius is quoted as saying that "the most urgent business for government is to make people rich and to help them live long lives."<sup>6</sup> Presumably, when people have adequate material means they are likely to live not only a decent life but also a long and prosperous life. Specifically, Confucius urges, "if the ruler can spare people from being drafted to labor for the state, and minimize taxes, people will become rich."<sup>7</sup> Becoming rich, evidently, is a good thing for Confucius.

Confucius, however, did not promote such a policy merely for the sake of material well-being. Confucianism takes the virtuous life as the highest ideal. The *Great Learning*, for instance, sets the ultimate goal to be illuminating the world with enlightening virtues (*ming mingde 明明德*, TTC, 1673).<sup>8</sup> The virtuous life, however, is not to be obtained in the absence of material well-being. The *Anzhi* records a conversation between Confucius and his disciple Ran You:

Accompanied by Ran You, Confucius arrived in the state of Wei. He said, "this state is populous." Ran You asked, "now that there is a large population, what should be done?" Confucius said, "make the people rich." Ran You asked again, "what else should be done when people become rich?" Confucius said, "cultivate them."<sup>9</sup>

Here Confucius seems to imply that material well-being should be given priority before moral cultivation. He indicates that the first course of governmental business is to enrich people; after people become well-off, they should become cultivated. The *Kongzi Congzi* records Confucius

saying that "it is rare for people suffering from hunger and cold not to behave badly."<sup>10</sup> Obviously, when people's basic material needs are not met, it is difficult for them to become cultivated morally. Conversely, if society wishes its people to become cultivated, it must first become economically adequate.

Mencius holds a similar idea, expressed in a more explicit way. He developed a philosophy of "benevolent governance" (*ren zheng* 仁政) and the "Kingly Way" (*wang dao* 王道). Such a philosophy contains two core ideas, namely economically enriching people and morally cultivating people. These two ideas are closely linked. Following Confucius, Mencius says, "let people farm in the field and reduce taxes, people will become rich."<sup>11</sup> He maintains that a good government should make people prosperous so that they have grain as abundant as the easy supply of water and fire.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Mencius suggests that when people are affluent, they can become morally good. He says, "when people have as abundant grains as they have the easy supply of water and fire, how can they not become morally good (*ren*)?"<sup>13</sup> We should not read him as saying that, when people have enough food (and other necessities), they will automatically become morally good. Mencius suggests that, when people are affluent, they are more ready and more likely to become morally cultivated.

In another place, Mencius proposes an even stronger connection between material well-being and moral cultivation. He says,

Those with constant means of support will have persevering hearts, while those without constant means will not have persevering hearts. Lacking persevering hearts, they will go astray and get into excess, stopping at nothing. (*Mencius* 3A.3; Lau, 97)

The persevering heart is one with the determination toward a virtuous life. Mencius takes material means of support as a precondition for people to become morally good. Economic means is a foundation for moral refinement. According to his thinking, in order to achieve a virtuous society, government must enable people to become economically prosperous. Mencius says,

When determining what means of support the people should have, a clear-sighted ruler ensures that these are sufficient, on the one hand, for the care of parents, and, on the other, for

the support of wife and children, so that the people always have sufficient food in good years and escape starvation in bad; only then does he drive them towards goodness, in this way the people find it easy to follow him. (*Mencius* 1A.7; Lau, 58-59)

According to this way of thinking, when people are poor, without adequate food, clothes, and shelter, moral cultivation is out of reach. A virtuous society has to be built by prosperous people.

Mencius holds that the Kingly Way begins with letting people satisfy their material needs. He says,

If the mulberry is planted in every homestead of five *mu*,<sup>14</sup> of land, then those who are fifty can wear silk; if chickens, pigs and dogs do not miss their breeding season, then those who are seventy can eat meat; if each lot of a hundred *mu* is not deprived of labor during the busy season, then families with several mouths to feed will not go hungry. Exercise due care over the education provided by the village schools, and discipline the people by teaching the duties proper to sons and younger brothers, and those whose heads have turned grey will not be carrying loads on the roads. When those who are seventy wear silk and eat meat and the masses are neither cold nor hungry, it is impossible for their prince not to be a true king. (*Mencius* 1A.3; Lau, 51-52)

In this passage, Mencius expresses the desirability of a comfortable level of material well-being for ordinary people. When society is economically prosperous, elderly people do not need to engage in heavy labor and they will be able to dress and eat well. In that time, only affluent people could afford to wear silk and to eat meat. Therefore, these are indications of economic prosperity. When the philosophy of "benevolent governance" is practiced successfully, people's material well-being is satisfied. Only then can the ruler be a true king, meaning that the Kingly Way prevails.

Accordingly, the Confucian Kingly Way is not just about making people affluent, but more importantly about making people virtuous. Such a goal of virtuous society cannot be achieved without a material foundation. Material well-being is a precondition for education, which is related intrinsically to the cultivation of virtue in Confucianism. This idea is consistent with a view expressed in the *Mumin* Chapter of the

Granzi, that when their rice granaries are full, people will follow ritual propriety, and when there are sufficient clothes and food, people will have a sense of honor and shame.<sup>15</sup> Since food shortage was the primary cause of social instability, ancient Chinese thinkers generally shared the belief that adequate food supply is a necessary condition for a good society. With adequate supply of food, of course, people would be able to produce other things to enhance their living conditions. And they would be able to engage in the cultivation of virtues. On the relationship between material well-being and morality, this belief translates into the view shared by many that material well-being is an important precondition for moral cultivation, including those views expressed by Confucius and Mencius presented above.

This close connection between material well-being and cultivation of virtues is an important theme in Confucius and Mencius. It is, however, not the only theme. Confucius also emphasizes the need of personal cultivation *regardless* of economic conditions. At quite a few places, Confucius seems to suggest that poverty should not deter people from acquiring moral virtues. In the *Analekts*, Confucius commends his disciple Yan Hui:

What a worthy person Yan Hui is! With a basket of food, a bucket of water, living in a poor street. Other people become distressed, but it has no effect on Yan Hui's cheerfulness. What a worthy person Yan Hui is!<sup>16</sup>

As a good role model, Yan Hui was able to pursue the Way regardless of his poor economic circumstances. Living in poverty did not preclude him from refining his moral character and worthiness. Confucius seems to hold that economic conditions do not matter if one is determined toward moral betterment. He even says that he would not talk to those who wish to pursue the Way while they are ashamed of wearing meager clothes and eating coarse food.<sup>17</sup> He praises Zilu, who in ragged clothes did not feel ashamed when standing side by side with someone in a fancy fur coat.<sup>18</sup> For Confucius, moral determination can overpower economic obstacles.

As a matter of fact, harsh material conditions could even be conducive to a person's moral development. Confucius makes this point with a metaphor that, when the weather turns cold, we realize that the pine and the cypress are the last to droop.<sup>19</sup> Harsh conditions can test people's will and character. While deeply caring about people's well-being, at times Confucius does not seem to be too concerned about poverty. He

seems to think that poverty is a relative notion and to believe that when wealth is evenly distributed in society, there is no problem of poverty.<sup>20</sup> Confucius believes in social harmony.<sup>21</sup> Conceivably, when there are no huge gaps in society, people are more likely to be harmonious with one another. Harmonious people are able to care about one another and to cultivate virtues together. When people are harmonious, society is stable, even if it is poor. Therefore, from this perspective, for Confucius there seems to be no necessary connection between economic conditions (above the level of survival) and moral cultivation.

Mencius also believes that one should become cultivated regardless of economic conditions. His ideal person is one who, when becoming illustrious, will bring benefit to all under Heaven, and when in poor conditions, will take good care of his own moral cultivation.<sup>22</sup> He holds morality to be more important than life. Mencius says,

I desire fish; I also desire bear's palm. When both cannot be obtained at the same time, I give up fish in order to get bear's palm. Life is what I want; so is rightness. When both cannot be retained at the same time, I choose to give up life for the sake of rightness.<sup>23</sup>

If morality is more important than life, it must be more important than wealth and other forms of material well-being. Thus, it follows that a person can acquire moral cultivation even in poverty. Presumably, moral cultivation relies on a person's own effort. One can become morally cultivated regardless of her economic situation. Accordingly, poverty itself does not make moral cultivation impossible. Poor economic conditions should not be used as excuses not to pursue moral improvement.

From the above discussion, it appears that there is a tension between the two views identified in Confucius and Mencius. On the one hand, material well-being is taken to be a precondition for moral refinement. On the other, moral cultivation can be achieved independently of material well-being. Is this a contradiction?

## 2

In this section, I will examine four possible solutions to the puzzle. After examining the inadequacies of the first three, I will advance an interpretation that confirms both positions without a contradiction.

The first and perhaps the *prima facie* most appealing solution is that, material well-being is not a precondition for moral cultivation, but it improves human life in a separate dimension and, therefore, it is good on its own. According to this account, human existence is multifaceted. In addition to moral pursuit, we also have material needs. A fulfilled human life includes fulfilling both people's physical needs and moral (or spiritual) needs. Therefore, material well-being is required regardless of its effects on moral cultivation.

Confucius once said that, "if wealth could be pursued I would pursue it, even if it meant to act as a guard holding a whip at the entrance to a marketplace. If wealth cannot be pursued, then I just do what I enjoy."<sup>24</sup> Although we have reasons to believe that Confucius would not advocate pursuing wealth at the expense of morality, this passage seems to indicate that wealth is a good in itself.<sup>25</sup> Assuming wealth improves a person's material well-being, as it usually does, perhaps Confucius did take material well-being as an independent good—though the passage does not rule out the role of material wealth in facilitating moral cultivation. Perhaps, other things being equal, material well-being is good in itself.

This account separates moral consideration from material consideration in order to justify people's pursuit of material well-being. The strength of this account, as I see it, is also its weakness. First of all, it is not all that clear whether we can justifiably say that, other things being equal, material well-being is good in itself. Suppose, for the sake of argument, wealth does not affect a wicked man as far as moral behavior is concerned, would making him wealthy (hence improving his material well-being) be an independently good thing? The answer is not so obvious, to say the least. To borrow the language from Kantian ethics, it seems that material well-being is a qualified good rather than an unqualified good. A qualified good is not good in itself. Confucians see the good life as a virtuous life. Even though material well-being is good, it seems plausible that its ultimate value has to be realized in becoming an all-rounded virtuous person.

Second, the overall thrust of the Confucian view is that material well-being is not separate from the overall well-being of a person. Neither Confucius nor Mencius separates the material and moral dimensions of a person's life. While taking the virtuous society as the ultimate goal, the Confucian philosophy of government also has people's livelihood (*minsheng* 民生) as a cornerstone. Disconnecting the linkage between material well-being and moral cultivation may undermine the

justification of the priority of people's livelihood in Confucian political philosophy. Confucianism promotes virtue ethics.<sup>26</sup> In that regard, it is radically different from Kantian ethics. Confucian ethics emphasizes developing moral character rather than moral deliberation at crossroads. The latter is usually presented in contemporary moral philosophy as a "snapshot" view of ethical decision—the decision-procedure that is "oriented toward single decisions, viewed as disconnected from other decisions, in a way which ignores or slights the moral importance of continuity of commitment."<sup>27</sup> Moral character matters in Confucianism. A person of character possesses moral knowledge as well as dispositions to act virtuously. In this Confucian view, virtues are acquired through cultivation. Moral cultivation always takes place in specific environments. The formation of character requires habitual practice of certain actions. This requires adequate material conditions. For example, one of the primary Confucian virtues is learning (*xue* 學), including learning about life in general and book-learning in particular. While one can always learn wisdom from others in whatever economic circumstances, book-learning requires a certain level of material provisions in society. Developing such virtues presupposes an adequate level of economic conditions. For most people, such an adequate level of material provisions would imply material well-being. Therefore, in Confucianism, material well-being and cultivation of character are not independent of each other. Although we may not rule it out exclusively, the first solution does carry some serious difficulties.

The second possible solution attempts to eliminate the other horn in the dilemma by confirming that material well-being is a precondition for moral cultivation. It holds that no one can achieve moral cultivation without a decent level of material well-being. Unlike the first answer, this answer is *prima facie* implausible. For the sake of argument, we must examine it as it is nevertheless a logical possibility. There are abundant counterexamples, however, to discredit the claim that moral cultivation is impossible without material well-being, the case of Yan Hui being an obvious one as discussed earlier. Neither Confucius nor Mencius can be said of having committed to such a view. In the end, we have to conclude that this solution clashes directly with many of the sayings by Confucius and Mencius. Therefore it is not a viable solution.

The third answer is that Confucius and Mencius may have different virtues in mind when they say that one needs material well-being in order to cultivate (one set of) virtues and that one does not need material well-being to cultivate (another set of) virtues. They do make

comments that suggest this possibility. For instance, Confucius maintains that if a person is rich and socially elevated, he should do what a rich and socially elevated person should do, and when a person is poor and humble, he should do what a poor and humble person should do. Either way, a good person can behave virtuously in ways appropriate to his circumstances.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it appears that one can be a virtuous person no matter what the circumstances may be. Confucius also discusses such virtues as "no whining when you are poor" and "not haughty when you are rich."<sup>29</sup> Hardships in poverty tend to cause people to complain, whereas material wealth may make people arrogant. Accordingly, poverty provides an environment to develop the virtue of endurance (no whining) and richness offers opportunities for people to improve their virtue of humility. Mencius also suggests a similar point. He says that the great person is not to be corrupted in richness, nor moved off track toward goodness in poverty, nor giving in to power and force.<sup>30</sup> Presumably, the virtue against corruption is tested in richness and the virtue of steadfastness is proved through poverty and hardship. From here we can say that varied personal conditions provide different environments to attain and reinforce respective virtues such as resistance to corruption and steadfastness in the face of overwhelming difficulties.

The main difficulty with the third answer, however, is that it makes poverty and richness equally good for moral cultivation: while wealth is conducive to developing one type of virtues, poverty is conducive to developing a different type of virtues; neither can be said to be better than the other. But, if virtues can be cultivated equally well in either situation, and if the goal is to build a society with virtuous people, then why do we need economic prosperity? Why do Confucius and Mencius go all out in promoting economic prosperity rather than taking a stance of indifference? Furthermore, if people need poverty to cultivate certain virtues more effectively, would that imply that society should provide poverty as such an opportunity? A positive answer to the last question seems implausible.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, if richness and poverty provide opportunities for people to cultivate different sets of virtues, it is difficult to see how anyone can become virtuous in an all-rounded way, which the Confucian supreme virtue of *ren* 仁 requires. Thus, this solution is not as promising as it first appears.

There is a coherent account that preserves both views in the apparent dilemma. The fourth answer differentiates two categories of people and presents a twofold account: Confucius and Mencius hold that people who are already morally cultivated well and people who are so inclined

strongly do not depend on good material conditions for moral refinement, but other people, those who are not already morally so inclined, need to have their material well-being taken care of first before they can become morally cultivated.

Confucius and Mencius are realistic in assessing people's varied levels of willpower toward moral cultivation. Human society is unlike Garrison Keillor's fictional town Lake Wobegon, where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." In the real world, some women are strong and some are weak, some men are good looking and some are rather not so good looking, and some children are just below average. So, social philosophy needs to take into account both above-average, average, and below-average people. Confucius and Mencius are painfully aware of this social reality and have developed their philosophies accordingly.

There is textual evidence in support of this twofold account. For instance, Confucius says, "morally cultivated persons are concerned about the Way, not about poverty."<sup>32</sup> He also says, "morally cultivated persons may be impoverished (while still persevering), but when petty persons are impoverished, they lose all restraints."<sup>33</sup> For those who are already morally well-cultivated or are so inclined strongly, poverty does not alter their moral pursuit. People already with strong moral character can withstand such hardships and keep moving forward on a virtuous path. The *Tan-gong B* Chapter of the *Book of Rites* records a story about a hungry man in the ancient state of Qi. There was a famine. A wealthy man handed out charity food in the street. He saw a poor man approaching and said, in an arrogant tone, "Hey you, come here and eat!" The poor man responded, "I have ended up in this condition precisely because I refuse to eat 'hey you' food like yours!"<sup>34</sup> The poor man chose to starve rather than to be humiliated. Similar to Mencius's comment on choosing between fish and bear's palm, the moral of this story is that a person should retain dignity even if it means he would have to suffer the consequences, including poverty and death. It suggests that lack of living necessities like food and clothes does not mean a person would have to compromise his integrity or morality, not to mention lacking a decent level of material conditions. For this reason, Confucius says that the learned person is not affected by poverty.<sup>35</sup> Mencius maintains that the moral path of the great person will not be altered by poverty or meager status.<sup>36</sup>

However, placing morality above life is rather an unusual ability. Even for most otherwise decent people, when material conditions

worsen, their moral standards for action often deteriorate. For those who have yet to form a strong character or are not so inclined, presumably it is hard to stay in line with rules of propriety when they live in poverty. When in hunger, for example, the morally vulnerable are likely to steal food; when in cold, they are likely to steal clothes or to trespass into other people's places to stay warm. Hence, the morally refined persons' indifference to material well-being may not apply to people in general. We should note that in Mencius's comments about the close connection between having constant material means and moral goodness, he specifically says that it is for the masses (*min* 民).<sup>37</sup> For the masses, material well-being is necessary for moral cultivation. Indeed, one may argue that, precisely because of this, Mencius strongly promotes economic prosperity even though his ultimate goal is moral attainment in society. For Confucius and Mencius, whereas morally inclined people can advance along the right path in varied conditions, average people need to have their material well-being taken care of first before they can engage in moral cultivation in a meaningful way. Thus, according to the fourth solution, when these thinkers say that material conditions do not determine a person's moral cultivation, they refer to one category of people, presumably of a small number; when they maintain that material well-being is a precondition for moral cultivation, they have in mind the large majority of people. Because they have different categories of people in mind, their various sayings, though appear conflicting, are in fact not contradictory.

This kind of apparent conflict appears common in various cultural traditions. In Christianity, for instance, there is the teaching that a person has to follow God's commandments in order to get to heaven. Those who violate God's commandments will be judged accordingly and punished in hell. There is also the teaching, however, that people cannot earn their way to heaven; only God's grace can let people enter heaven. In Buddhism, on the one hand, we find that karma regulates human actions and those doing bad things will produce bad karma and have to pay the price. On the other hand, there is also the teaching that a person can achieve Buddhahood at any time; all it takes is to change one's mindset. One way to make sense of this apparent contradiction is to see different strands of teaching as targeting different kinds of people. It is not farfetched to suppose that the threat of punishment is geared toward people who may do bad things and to prevent them from doing bad things, whereas the salvage strand is to give people with bad records hopes to reform themselves for the better. It would be counterproductive

if the targeted audience were reversed, not rewarding people with good deeds entirely while telling people disposed toward bad actions that what they do does not matter. Similarly, it could be the case that Confucius and Mencius were targeting different audiences in their teaching: for example, encouraging rulers to take care of people's material well-being whereas encouraging the people for moral cultivation regardless of their material conditions. Thus, one may think that these thinkers do "double talk" to different audiences out of strategic considerations.

This "double talk" account, however, has its limitations. It contradicts with the Confucian belief that moral failure is due to a person's internal weakness rather than external conditions. Confucius says, "achieving human excellence depends on yourself. How can it depend on others?"<sup>38</sup> In his eyes, whether a person becomes virtuous or not is due to her internal determination or dispositions, not on external factors such as economic conditions. Mencius seems to follow a similar line of thinking. He holds that virtues are not imposed on people from outside. They are from internal sources. If people pursue these sources, they will foster these qualities and become morally good; if they abandon their effort, they will lose these sources.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, a person's moral refinement is not determined by external conditions, though it may be influenced by them. If this is true with everyone, how can we say that some people need to secure material well-being before they can become morally cultivated? I believe this difficulty can be resolved by introducing the concept of statistical necessity of different categories of people.

In society, there are morally cultivated people and uncultivated people.<sup>40</sup> The uncultivated group should be taken as a category based on a statistical fact. This kind of fact is statistically inevitable. Statistical inevitability is neither logical nor metaphysical. Yet, it is a strong form of inevitability. Indeed, it is so strong that we may call it statistical necessity. Let me give an example for this kind of necessity. The oxygen molecules are distributed randomly in my office. It means that, at any time, a particular oxygen molecule could move away from me out of randomness. So, could all oxygen molecules suddenly move away from where I sit in their random movement and, as a result, I suffocate? It is logically possible for this to happen, but statistically impossible. It is statistically necessary that I will have access to oxygen molecules even though they are randomly distributed. The point can also be made with a familiar case, though at a lesser degree. When someone teaches a mega-sized class, it is safe to presume that some students will receive D's and F's in their grades as a matter of statistical fact. Furthermore, it is safe to presume that the

poorer the circumstances are for the class, such as poor teaching, a badly equipped classroom, and unfortunate timing, the likelier more students will receive these bad grades. Similarly, if a society has a large number of people living in destitution, it is statistically inevitable that some or even most of them will not become educated and morally cultivated.

Now, if most people need an economic foundation in order to become morally cultivated, would that give people in poor economic conditions excuses not to become virtuous? The Confucian response to this question, I think, is twofold. On the one hand, Confucians emphasize the importance of personal effort in moral cultivation. The inevitability of the "uncultivated" category does not mean that any particular individual is born to be in the "uncultivated" group, just as the statistical necessity of my access to oxygen molecules does not imply that any particular oxygen molecule is predetermined to be within my reach. Statistically, people growing up in ghettos are more likely to have trouble with the law and not to live a good life. It is not the case, however, that any particular individual in ghettos is predetermined to grow up in trouble or otherwise. There is an ancient Chinese story about a poor boy who loved learning so much that he borrowed light from his neighbor through a hole in the wall (*zaobi touguang* 凿壁偷光). The boy, whose family was too poor to provide light for his nightly reading, was able to read by poking a hole in the wall so he could use light from his neighbor.<sup>41</sup> The story has inspired Chinese students throughout history. Whether a particular person will become cultivated, regardless of material conditions, depends on personal effort. Some people become cultivated after they make such effort whereas some people do not become cultivated because they refuse to make such an effort. It is not the case that some people are preassigned into one category or another at birth and cannot change. Rather, it is because a person chooses not to, therefore he does not become cultivated and consequently fall into the "uncultivated" category of statistical necessity. In the Confucian view, no one is predetermined to be without virtue. Therefore, if someone does not become virtuous, he himself bears the responsibility.

On the other hand, Confucians hold society and the government in particular, accountable for the failure to create an environment conducive to people's education and cultivation. In reality, few people can be as determined and industrious as the boy in the above story. Most people, after a whole day of hard labor in the field, would simply go to bed. Who can blame them? The vast majority of us need an environment more conducive to moral cultivation. We need external as well

as internal forces in order to become virtuous. In the Confucian view, government has responsibility for the moral failure of the general populace under poor economic conditions. Just as more students are likely to fail in a poorly taught class and more youngsters in ghettos are likely to have trouble with the law, more people are likely to be inadequately educated and poorly cultivated in an impoverished society. Therefore, in order to facilitate people's moral cultivation, society needs to enable people to become economically prosperous.

Thus, if we understand the statistical necessity of the moral failure of impoverished people, we can make sense why Confucius and Mencius maintain that, on the one hand, individual persons can become morally cultivated even in harsh economic conditions, and, on the other, material well-being is a precondition for the moral cultivation of the general population.

In conclusion, Confucians hold that material well-being is important to people's moral cultivation. While a small number of naturally so-inclined or already sufficiently cultivated people may be able to become or remain morally cultivated independently of economic conditions, for most people, however, material well-being is a necessary condition for successful moral cultivation. Therefore, in order to foster a good society, government must help people make a decent living so they obtain the necessary material means for moral cultivation. In this view, the two ideas of Mencius's philosophy of "benevolent governance," economic prosperity and moral refinement, are closely linked.

#### Acknowledgments

This essay was presented at a mini-conference in honor of Joel J. Kupperman on his fiftieth anniversary of teaching philosophy, held in conjunction with the Tenth East-West Philosophers Conference in Honolulu, on May 23 and 24, 2011. I thank the audience for comments and suggestions, and especially Peimin Ni, who carefully read an early version and provided insightful comments. I dedicate this essay to Joel K. Kupperman, my former teacher at the University of Connecticut. Over these years, Kupperman has not only been instrumental in the unfolding of my professional life but also served as a role model for, as Confucians say, becoming a good person (*zuo ren* 做人). Research for this article was supported by a Nanyang Technological University Research Grant M4080394.



## Notes

1. Kupperman 1991, 119-20.
2. Kupperman 1991, 120.
3. Like any other world-tradition, Christianity contains more than one version and is subject to more than one interpretation. Calvinism, for instance, takes a different position on accumulating material wealth.
4. For a recent effort to counter this common interpretation, see David Loy, "Buddhism and Poverty," accessed on 29 March 2011 at <http://www.buddhachannel.tv/portals/spip.php?article3707>. According to another interpretation, the Buddhist Middle-way is not opposed to material wealth, to an extent.
5. *Analects* 20.2; TTC, 2535. "Li 利" literally means profit.
6. 政之急者,莫大乎使民富且壽也 (*Confucius's Family Teachings*, 108). For the Confucian view on longevity, see Li 2010.
7. 省力役,薄賦斂,則民富矣 (*Confucius's Family Teachings*, 108).
8. Character and virtue are closely related. I follow Kupperman and see character as connected directly to the person, whereas virtues can be shared by many people (Kupperman 1991, 9-10).
9. 冉有僕子曰:“庶矣哉!”冉有曰:“既庶矣,又何加焉?”曰:“富之。”曰:“既富矣,又何加焉?”曰:“教之。” (*Analects* 13.9; TTC, 2507).
10. 飢寒切於身而不為非者寡矣 (Fu, 78).
11. 易其田疇,薄其稅斂,民可使富也 (*Mencius* 7A.23; TTC, 2768).
12. *Ibid.*
13. 而民焉有不仁者乎? *Ibid.*
14. A mu is about 666.7 square meters.
15. The original statement appears as 倉廩實,則知禮節;衣食足,則知榮辱。《管子·牧民》(TTC, 91). The statement suggests that abundant supply of material goods is a sufficient condition for morality. When Sima Qian quoted it in the *Records of History*, he changed the word “*ze*則” into “*er*而”(倉廩實而知禮節;衣食足而知榮辱《史記·管晏列傳》); Sima Qian, 2132, making the former just one of the conditions for the latter. Sima Qian's understanding appears more in line with Confucianism.
16. 賢哉回也!一簞食,一瓢飲,在陋巷。人不堪其憂,回也不改其樂。賢哉回也! (*Analects* 6.11; TTC, 2478).
17. 而恥惡衣惡食者,未足與議也 (*Analects* 4.9; TTC, 2471).
18. “與衣狐貉者立,而不恥者,其由也與?不佞不求,何用不臧?”子路終身誦之。子曰:“是道也,何足以臧?” (*Analects* 9.27; TTC, 2491).
19. 然後知松柏之後彫也 (*Analects* 9.28; TTC, 2491). James Legge, D.C. Lau and others have translated the word “彫” as “losing leaves,” which is inappropriate for the pine and cypress. “彫” stands for “凋,” which the Chinese lexicon *Shuowenjiezi* defines as “injured half way 半傷.” I render it as “to droop.”
20. *Analects* 16.1; TTC, 2520.
21. For an account of the Confucian philosophy of harmony, see Li 2013.

22. 得志,澤加於民;不得志,脩身見於世。窮則獨善其身,達則兼善天下 (*Mencius* 7A.9; TTC, 2765).
23. 魚,我所欲也;熊掌,亦我所欲也,二者不可得兼,舍魚而取熊掌者也。生,亦我所欲也;義,亦我所欲也,二者不可得兼,舍生而取義者也 (*Mencius* 6A.10; TTC, 2752). In Chinese cuisine, a bear's palm is considered far more precious than fish.
24. 雖執鞭之士,吾亦為之。如不可求,從吾所好 (*Analects* 7.11; TTC 2482). I thank Peimin Ni for reminding me of this reference.
25. Edward Slingerland has translated the latter part as, “Since it is not worth pursuing, however, I prefer to follow that which I love” (Slingerland, 68). Such a translation would assign Confucius the view that wealth is simply not worth pursuing. This rendering is too liberal. The “如” in “如不可求” is evidently the hypothetical “if” as most translators have followed.
26. See Philip J. Ivanhoe's essay in this volume.
27. Kupperman 1991, 74.
28. 不愿乎其外。素富貴,行乎富貴;素貧賤,行乎貧賤 (TTC, 1627).
29. 貧而無怨,富而無驕 (*Analects* 14.10; TTC, 2511).
30. 富貴不能淫,貧賤不能移,威武不能屈 (*Mencius* 3B.7; TTC, 2710).
31. During the Cultural Revolution in China, the state did provide a similar opportunity for people to eat *yikuyfan* 憶苦飯, or “food for remembering the past hardship.” It apparently did not produce much good.
32. 君子憂道不憂貧 (*Analects* 15.32; TTC, 2518).
33. 君子固窮,小人窮斯濫矣 (*Analects* 15.2; TTC, 2516).
34. 子唯不食嗟來之食,以至於斯也 (TTC, 2314).
35. 富貴不足以益,貧賤不足以損,此則士人也 (*Confucius's Family Teachings*, 37).
36. 富貴不能淫,貧賤不能移,威武不能屈。此之謂大丈夫 (*Mencius* 3B.7; TTC, 2710).
37. 民之為道也 (*Mencius* 3A.3; TTC, 2702).
38. 為仁由己,而由人乎哉? (*Analects* 12.1; TTC, 2502).
39. 非由外鑿我也,我固有之也,弗思耳矣。故曰:“求則得之,舍則失之。”或相倍蓰而無算者,不能盡其才者也 (*Mencius* 6A.6; TTC, 2749).
40. For the sake of argument, here I consider only normal adults and leave out the issue with relative standards and levels of the “cultivated.”
41. 鑿壁偷光:匡衡字稚圭,勤學而無燭。鄰家有燭而不逮,衡乃穿壁引其光,以書映光而讀之 (Cheng and Cheng, 69-70).

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## Materialistic Desires and Ethical Life in the Analects and the Mencius

SOR-HOON TAN

Confucius lamented, "It is not easy to find students who will study for three years without their thoughts turning to an official salary."<sup>1</sup> His student, Zizhang, was described in the text as studying for the purpose of career advancement (2.18). Fortunately, he had at least one student who was free from materialistic motivation.

He has a bamboo of rice to eat, a gourd of water to drink, and a dirty little hovel in which to live. Other people would not be able to endure his hardships, yet for Hui it has no effect on his enjoyment. A person of character [*xian* 賢] is this Yan Hui! (6.11)

Confucius shared with Yan Hui this ability to endure, if not enjoy, poverty, which seems to be part of the character of a Confucian *junzi* 君子, an exemplary person.

The Master said, "Wealth and honor are what people want, but if they are the consequence of deviating from the way (*dao* 道), I would have no part in them. Poverty and disgrace are what people deplore, but if they are the consequence of staying on the way, I would not avoid them." (4.5)

In appearing to choose ethical life over wealth and honor (also 7.12), Confucius seemed to imply that ethical life and materialistic desires are