



Asian Philosophy

An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East

ISSN: 0955-2367 (Print) 1469-2961 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/casp20>

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To cite this article: Frederick Choo (2019) Telling Others to Do What You Believe Is Morally Wrong: The Case of Confucius and Zai Wo, *Asian Philosophy*, 29:2, 106-115, DOI: [10.1080/09552367.2019.1622843](https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2019.1622843)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2019.1622843>



Published online: 30 May 2019.



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Telling Others to Do What You Believe Is Morally Wrong: The Case of Confucius and Zai Wo

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ABSTRACT

Can it ever be morally justifiable to tell others to do what we ourselves believe is morally wrong to do? The common sense answer is no. It seems that we should never tell others to do something if we think it is morally wrong to do that act. My first goal is to argue that in *Analects* 17.21, Confucius tells his disciple not to observe a ritual even though Confucius himself believes that it is morally wrong that one does not observe the ritual. My second goal is to argue against the common sense answer and explain how Confucius can be justified in telling his disciple to do what Confucius thought was wrong. The first justification has to do with telling someone to do what is second best when the person cannot do what is morally best. The second justification has to do with the role of a moral advisor.

KEYWORDS

Zai Wo; Confucius; moral advisor; moral advice; moral education

Can it ever be morally justifiable to tell others to do what we ourselves believe is morally wrong to do? The common sense answer is no. It seems that we should never tell others to do something if we think it is morally wrong to do that act. This paper has two goals. The first goal is to argue that in *Analects* 17.21, Confucius tells his disciple not to observe a ritual even though Confucius himself believes that it is morally wrong that one does not observe the ritual. Confucius is serious when he does so. The second goal is to argue against the common sense answer and explain how Confucius can be justified in telling his disciple to do what Confucius thought was wrong. The first justification has to do with telling someone to do what is second best when the person cannot at that time do what is morally best. The second justification has to do with playing the role of a moral advisor where the goal is to help others decide for themselves and act accordingly, and to ensure that people can have a clear conscience in making their decision.

1. An interpretation of *Analects* 17.21

In *Analects* 17.21, Zai Wo, a disciple of Confucius, questions the ritual of mourning for one's parents for three years.¹ *Analects* 17.21 records:

“Zai Wo asked about the three-year mourning period, saying, ‘Surely one year is long enough. If the [ideal virtuous person] (*junzi*) refrains from practicing ritual for three years,

the [rituals] will surely fall into ruin; if he refrains from music for three years, this will surely be disastrous for music ... One year is surely long enough.'

[Confucius] asked, 'Would you feel comfortable (*an*) then eating your sweet rice and wearing your brocade gowns?'

[Zai Wo replied,] 'I would.'

[Confucius] replied, 'Well, if you would feel comfortable (*an*) doing so, then by all means you should do it. When the [ideal virtuous person] (*junzi*) is in mourning, he gets no pleasure from eating sweet foods, finds no joy in listening to music, and feels no comfort in his place of dwelling. This is why he gives up these things. But if you would feel comfortable (*an*) doing them, then by all means you should!'

After Zai Wo left, [Confucius] remarked, 'This shows how [not-*ren*] this Zai Wo is! A child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life—this is why the three-year mourning period is the common practice throughout the [Confucian civilized world]. Did Zai Wo not receive three years of care from his parents?'"²

To understand this passage, we need to understand two core concepts in Confucian ethics: *ren* and *li*. *Ren* has been translated in many different ways, such as humaneness, human-heartedness, goodness, benevolence, perfect virtues, and so forth. Kwong-loi Shun notes that *ren* 'is used both more narrowly to refer to one desirable quality among others, and more broadly to refer to an all-encompassing ethical ideal that includes all the desirable qualities' (Shun, 1993, p. 53). *Ren* is the ultimate virtue in Confucianism. When a person is fully *ren*, the person is an ideal virtuous person (*junzi*). The other important concept is *li*, which is often translated as ritual propriety. Ritual proprieties are norms that govern how we should behave. For Confucius, being ethical is about being *ren* and observing *li*. The three-year mourning ritual in *Analects* 17.21 has to do with mourning for one's parents after they die. In order to observe the three-year mourning ritual, a person would not be able to observe the other rituals. Compared to the other rituals, the three-year mourning ritual is much more important within Confucian philosophy. This is because this ritual has to do with filial piety (*Analects* 1.11, 4.20) and Confucius holds filial piety to be the root of becoming a *ren* person (*Analects* 1.2). Indeed, Confucianism is well known for its emphasis on filial piety within its ethical system.

Given Confucius' ethical system, we can understand *Analects* 17.21 better. Confucius thinks that a *junzi* would observe the three-year mourning ritual (and not observe the other rituals). This is because a *junzi* would not have the right emotions to carry out the other rituals and because the three-year mourning ritual is of greater importance. Since Zai Wo lacked the appropriate virtues and emotions to observe the mourning ritual for three years, Confucius declares Zai Wo as not-*ren*.

In *Analects* 17.21, despite telling Zai Wo what the ethical ideal is, Confucius tells Zai Wo to not observe the three-year mourning ritual if Zai Wo is comfortable with it. Confucius does this twice. Taken literally, Confucius thinks that not observing the three-year mourning ritual is wrong and yet tells Zai Wo not to observe the three-year mourning ritual. On this reading, Confucius thinks doing a certain act is wrong and yet tells his disciple to do that act.

2. Alternative interpretations

One might question my interpretation of *Analects* 17.21. One might think that when Confucius tells Zai Wo to not observe the three-year mourning ritual, Confucius is not serious when he says it. Confucius does not mean what he says. In this way, Confucius is not really telling Zai Wo to not observe the three-year mourning ritual. There are at least two possible alternative interpretations that can hold to such a view.

On the first possible alternative interpretation, one might think Confucius has given up on Zai Wo and so tells Zai Wo to do as he pleases. This is similar to cases when we are angry with someone and after we give up on the person, we tell them to just do whatever they want to do. We however do not really mean it. We are not seriously telling them to do whatever they want to do. To see this, suppose Jane is angry with her son who wants to skip school. After intensely arguing, Jane gives up and just angrily says to her son, 'if you want to skip school so much, then go ahead!' Suppose Jane's son skips school. Jane finds out and starts scolding her son. Jane's son, however, says that Jane should not scold him since Jane told him to do it if he wishes. Now surely Jane would say that she did not mean it. She was not seriously telling him to skip school. She was just angry and gave up on him. Similarly, one might say the same of Confucius in *Analects* 17.21. Confucius was not seriously telling Zai Wo to not observe the three-year mourning ritual.

There is in some textual evidence that seems to support this interpretation. In *Analects* 5.10, Confucius compares Zai Wo to rotten wood that cannot be carved and so Confucius says that there is no point in scolding him. One might hence think that Confucius has already given up on Zai Wo and therefore is not serious when he tells Zai Wo to do as he pleases in *Analects* 17.21.

There are however some difficulties with this first possible alternative interpretation. First, while most of the passages in the *Analects* are short, the passage in *Analects* 17.21 is rather long. After hearing Zai Wo's concern, Confucius asks Zai Wo a further question before telling Zai Wo what a *junzi* would do. This suggests that he is unlikely to have given up on Zai Wo. After all, when we have given up on people, we usually do not bother having a longer conversation with them than usual, or ask them more questions or try to tell them what is right. Second, Zai Wo is one of Confucius' disciples and Confucius even uses Zai Wo to speak on his behalf as a kind of diplomat to the states of Qi and Chu (Theobald, 2012). It would be odd for Confucius to give up on such an important disciple who speaks on his behalf. Third, Confucius thinks that everyone has the capacity to become *ren* (*Analects* 4.6) and Confucius wants everyone to become *ren*. If he thinks that everyone can be moral and wants everyone to be moral, then Confucius is unlikely to give up moral teaching, especially to his own disciples. Fourth, in *Analects* 5.10, the problem was that Zai Wo knew what was right, but he was not doing it. It seems reasonable to give up here. After all, Zai Wo is already in agreement with Confucius regarding what he should do, he is just not doing it. This differs from the case in *Analects* 17.21 where Zai Wo is in a moral disagreement with Confucius. It is not clear that Confucius would give up on Zai Wo when it comes to a case of moral disagreement.

On the second possible alternative interpretation, one might interpret Confucius as using a sarcastic or ironic tone when Confucius tells Zai Wo to do as he pleases. This view is held by Qingping Liu who says, 'Confucius says twice in an ironical tone that 'You

may do it if you feel at ease', while making it extremely manifest that the [*junzi*] does not "feel delicious", nor "feel pleased", nor "feel at ease" under the circumstances and thus will not do it at all' (Liu, 2006, p. 175). By using such a tone, Confucius means to convey the opposite meaning to Zai Wo. He is actually telling Zai Wo to observe the three-year mourning ritual.

This seems like a better interpretation than the first possible alternative interpretation as Confucius is still trying to teach Zai Wo. However, this interpretation still faces its own difficulty. All the writings in the *Analects* are reported by his disciples. If Confucius was using an ironic tone to mean the opposite, we should expect this to be part of the report. Consider the following example. Suppose that after Sally takes an hour to solve a simple math sum, Tom sarcastically says 'Sally is so smart.' We would not expect someone reporting the incident to write down 'Tom said Sally is so smart.' This would be an inaccurate report. Instead, we should expect someone reporting the incident to write 'Tom mocked Sally's intelligence' or 'Tom sarcastically said that Sally was smart.' These two latter statements report the incident correctly. Similarly, if Confucius was using a sarcastic or ironic tone to convey the opposite meaning, we should expect the disciples to write in a way that would capture such a tone. Given that the disciples did not report the incident in a way that captures the tone or conveys the opposite meaning, we should think that Confucius was probably not using such a tone. We should accept the report at face value (i.e. Confucius was seriously telling Zai Wo not to observe the three-year mourning ritual if he is comfortable with it).

In contrast to the above two interpretations, my interpretation takes Confucius as being serious when he tells Zai Wo to not observe the three-year mourning ritual. Confucius means what he says and is really telling Zai Wo not to observe the three-year mourning ritual if he is comfortable with it. As we will see in the next sections, I will provide justifications for Confucius' act (under my interpretation). If I am right that there are indeed good reasons for Confucius to act in such a way, then this would further support my interpretation over the other two possible interpretations.

Before moving on, I would like to note that even if I am wrong in my interpretation of *Analects* 17.21, it is still interesting philosophically to think about whether Confucius can be justified if Confucius was really telling Zai Wo to do what Confucius himself thought was wrong. On my interpretation, what Confucius does seem morally objectionable. Most of us would find it intuitive to think that we should not tell others to do something we believe is morally wrong to do. Furthermore, on Confucianism, the most important goal is to make people *ren* and the way to do this is through *li*. Telling someone to do something that is not-*ren* and contrary to *li* seems to go against this goal.

3. Going for second best

If Confucius thinks that not observing the three-year mourning period is wrong, how can he be justified in telling Zai Wo not to observe it? My first line of justification for Confucius' act is that Confucius recognizes that Zai Wo cannot at this time do what is morally best and so Confucius tells Zai Wo to do the next best thing.

On Confucian ethics, acts, and consequences are not all that morally matters. The right acts must be accompanied by the right emotions, attitudes, and intentions. Confucius says that, observing *li* is not morally valuable if one is not *ren* (*Analects*

2.7–2.8, 3.3, 3.26, 17.11). For example, in *Analects* 2.7, Confucius says that if you provide nourishment for your parents without respect, it is not really filial piety because even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. On Confucian ethics, what is important is being the kind of person who would want to mourn for the death of one's parents for three years and to do so according to the mourning rituals. As we can see in *Analects* 17.21, however, Zai Wo lacked the appropriate emotions towards his parents. For Confucius, Zai Wo had already gone wrong since Zai Wo is comfortable with not mourning for his parents for three years. This is why he declares Zai Wo not-*ren*. Since Zai Wo lacked the appropriate emotions towards his parents, Zai Wo cannot do what a *junzi* would do. Zai Wo cannot at that time observe the three-year mourning ritual with the appropriate emotions.

As noted above, Confucius thinks that the three-year mourning ritual takes priority above the other rituals. Confucius thinks that a *junzi* would not have the appropriate emotions to carry out the other rituals and would have the appropriate emotions to mourn instead. Therefore, on Confucius' view, if one's parents die, what would be morally best is to give up the other rituals and instead observe the three-year mourning ritual with the appropriate emotions. Observing the other rituals with the appropriate emotions however would be the next best thing. Given that Zai Wo lacks the appropriate emotions when it comes to the three-year mourning ritual, he cannot do what is morally best. We can see in *Analects* 17.21 however that Zai Wo has the right emotions and attitudes towards the other rituals. So Zai Wo can observe the other rituals with the appropriate emotions. This would be the next best thing.

I propose then that Confucius recognizes that Zai Wo cannot do what is morally best and so Confucius tells Zai Wo to do the second best thing. This can be further supported by the fact that Confucius gives different teachings to cater to his different disciples based on how morally developed they are currently and what they are lacking in. For example, *Analects* 11.22 records both Zilu and Ran Qiu asking Confucius the same question, and Confucius gives them conflicting instructions. When another disciple, Zihua, asks Confucius to explain why he gave them contradictory instructions, Confucius said, 'Ran Qiu is overly cautious, and so I wished to urge him on. Zilu, on the other hand, is too impetuous, and so I sought to hold him back' (*Analects* 11:22). Here, we can see that Confucius is trying to take into account what he knows of his different disciples and cater to their current moral development. Another example can be seen in how Confucius deals with Zigong. In *Analects* 5.12, Zigong talks about the negative golden rule, saying, 'What I do not wish others to do unto me, I also wish not to do unto others.' This is a principle that Confucius held to (*Analects* 5.12, 12.2, 15.24). Confucius however tells Zigong that Zigong is not yet at the level to carry out the negative golden rule. In *Analects* 15.24 however, we see Confucius teaching Zigong to follow the negative golden rule. Based on *Analects* 5.12 and 15.24, we can see how Confucius caters his teachings to Zigong's stage of moral development. He does not tell Zigong to follow the negative golden rule when Zigong is not yet at the level to do so. Similarly then, we can understand Confucius as trying to cater to Zai Wo's stage of moral development in *Analects* 17.21.

Given that Confucius is trying to cater his teachings to Zai Wo's stage of moral development, it would make sense for Confucius to tell Zai Wo what is morally best to do, yet tell Zai Wo to do the next best thing since Zai Wo cannot do what is morally

best given his emotions at that time. This seems justified. After all, if a person cannot at this time achieve the best outcome, he should go for the next best outcome instead, while still being aware of the best outcome and striving towards it over time. Moral development takes time. So given that Zai Wo cannot do what is morally best at that time, Confucius can be justified in telling Zai Wo to do what is second best.

We see a similar idea in Christianity. In Matthew 19:3–9, Jesus was teaching that divorce was wrong. The religious leaders then challenged Jesus by pointing out that the prophet Moses allowed divorce. In reply, Jesus said, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning, it has not been this way.’³ Here, Jesus can be taken as saying that although it was morally best not to divorce, Moses (or God who spoke through Moses) took into consideration the people’s stage of moral development and hence permitted divorce.

One might object here. In contemporary ethics, there is a debate between actualists and possibilists.⁴ Suppose that the best possible state of affairs is that I choose to go to my friend’s performance and choose to be supportive of her as she will be extremely happy. However, suppose I know that my friend performs horribly and so I know that if I choose to go to the performance I would not be supportive of her (even though I could choose to be supportive). She would then get really upset and this would result in the worst possible state of affairs. I could however choose to not go to the performance, and my friend would only be slightly disappointed, resulting in the second best possible state of affairs. The question then is whether I should choose to go to the performance or not. Actualists hold I should choose not to go, doing what is second best. Possibilists however hold that I should choose to go. The possibilist holds that if I can choose to go to my friend’s performance, and I can choose to be supportive of her, then I can choose to bring about the best state of affairs. Therefore, I should choose to go since this is part of bringing about the best state of affairs. So those who belong in the possibilist camp might object by saying that Confucius is not justified in telling Zai Wo to do what is second best. Instead, Confucius should tell Zai Wo to do what is best even if Zai Wo would fail.

In reply, Zai Wo’s case is not one where the agent could do what is best even though he would not. Zai Wo’s case is one in which Zai Wo cannot do what is best. This is because Zai Wo has no control over his emotions. We cannot change our emotions or dispositions at will. Therefore, a possibilist cannot appeal to grounds that Zai Wo could have done what is best to argue that he should do so. Possibilism is compatible with the view that one should do the second best thing when one cannot do what is morally best.

4. The role of a moral advisor

My second line of justification for Confucius’ act is that Confucius is playing the role of a moral advisor. Moral advisors are concerned with (a) helping people think for themselves to make their own decisions, and (b) making sure that people can have a clear conscience. These two considerations may lead a moral advisor to tell a person to do what the moral advisor thinks is not morally best. I will argue that doing so is morally justifiable.

4.1. *Thinking for oneself and acting according to one's own moral beliefs*

Those playing the role of a moral advisor often do not try to enforce their own moral beliefs, but instead, help people to think for themselves and act accordingly. This can be seen in real life cases where philosophers play the role of an ethical consultant for doctors, patients, and their families. Lainie Friedman Ross notes that the common practice of ethical consultants is that they do not tell the doctor what to do, 'but rather they help [doctors] think about options and ways to negotiate compromise.'⁵ When doctors, patients, and their families turn to ethical consultants for advice, they are not just asking the consultant what his or her moral beliefs are. Rather, they are asking for guidance in thinking about the issue at hand so that they can decide for themselves and act accordingly.⁶ When one is playing the role of an ethical consultant, it seems justified for the consultant to tell the doctor, the patient, and their families to act according to their own moral belief (given that they have thought through the various considerations), even if the consultant believes that it is not the morally best act.

This is also similar to philosophy classes where professors help philosophy students think through different moral issues, rather than imposing their own moral beliefs onto the students. Given that the students have thought through the various moral considerations and formed their own moral beliefs, it seems justified for professors to tell them to act accordingly, even if the professor believes that it is not the morally best act.

In the same way, we can understand Confucius as playing the role of a moral advisor. Confucius does not try to enforce his own moral beliefs onto his disciples. Instead, Confucius is concerned with having his disciples think for themselves and act accordingly. Sin Yee Chan notes that 'Confucius always encourages his students to make their own judgments and praises students who take the initiative to think for themselves (*Analects* 7:8 [and 7:11]). And when they judge or choose wrongly, he criticizes but seldom interferes with their carrying out their choices (*Analects* 5:26, [11:26, 17:21])' (Chan, 2000, p. 513). For example, in *Analects* 11.26, Confucius hears what his different disciples want to do. Confucius does not criticize them, but he lets them go their own ways. After they leave, he reveals to another disciple that he thinks they are wrong. From this passage, we can see that Confucius is not trying to enforce his moral beliefs on others. Instead, he is concerned with having people think for themselves and act accordingly. This is why he often says short sayings to his disciples and then leaves, allowing the disciples to discuss it for themselves. Given the role that Confucius is playing, Confucius can be justified in telling Zai Wo to act according to Zai Wo's moral beliefs.

One might not find it intuitive that those playing moral advisory roles (such as ethical consultants and professors) can be morally justified in telling people to follow their own moral beliefs. Let me suggest two further reasons why those playing such roles can be morally justified in doing so. First, it seems that people should in some sense act according to their own moral beliefs, and we should tell them to act accordingly. We often think that people should not do something if they believe it is wrong, even in cases where we ourselves think it is not actually wrong. For example, suppose you think eating meat is morally permissible. Jane believes that eating meat is wrong even after you have thoroughly discussed the issue with her. If she goes to eat meat right after the conversation, surely this is morally objectionable. She should not eat meat given her moral beliefs, and you should tell her not to eat

meat. So there is some sense in which people should act according to their own moral beliefs, and we should tell them to act accordingly. This is why those playing moral advisory roles can be justified in doing so. Apply this to *Analects* 17.21. Since Zai Wo thinks that observing the three-year mourning ritual is wrong, and people should not do what they believe this is wrong, then it follows that Zai Wo should not observe the three-year mourning ritual, and Confucius should tell Zai Wo to not observe the three-year mourning period.

Second, it seems that people should not act according to another person's moral beliefs, even if they regard the person as an expert. In contemporary ethics, there is a growing literature on deferring to a moral expert, and many philosophers have the intuition that forming one's moral belief based on expert testimony is morally objectionable (See, for example, Howell, 2012). For example, suppose you think abortion is impermissible. A philosopher professor whom you regard as an expert on abortion says that it is permissible. It seems that you should not just believe the expert. Neither should you just act according to the expert's moral beliefs. If you go ahead with an abortion on such grounds, this would be morally objectionable. Given that people should not act according to another person's moral beliefs, it would make sense not to tell others to act according to your moral beliefs. Therefore, those playing moral advisory roles can be justified in not telling others to act according to the advisor's beliefs.

4.2. Having clear conscience

Those playing the role of a moral advisor are also often concerned with the emotional state of the one they are advising. They want to ensure that one can live with their decision. The emotional state that is of concern here is not whether one likes or dislikes a certain state of affairs. Rather, the emotion here has to do with morality, such as feeling guilty and having a clear conscience.

Once again consider philosophers who play the role of an ethical consultant for doctors, patients, and their families. When they give advice, they try to ensure that the person can live with their decision. For example, if a patient thinks that abortion is killing a child and cannot have a clear conscience in aborting, it seems that the right advice is to tell the person not to abort the child.

Similarly, we see that Confucius is concerned that Zai Wo can be *an* with his decision in *Analects* 17.21. Also, in *Analects* 14.42, Confucius says that the junzi is concerned with making sure that other people are *an*. The Chinese word *an* has been translated as 'being comfortable,' 'feeling at ease,' 'living in peace,' and 'feeling right.' For Confucius, *an* is often used in the moral context. In Liu's analysis, he argues that *an* is a moral emotion (Liu, 2006, pp. 176–178). Similarly, Ai Yuan says 'the advice on choosing based on [*an*] is not a choice without rational deliberation. Instead, it involves an anticipation and acceptance of the problems, preparation for an adaptive mind to deal with a changing situation, and a moral commitment to one's choice' (Yuan, 2018, p. 150). So Confucius can be justified in telling Zai Wo to act according to Zai Wo's moral beliefs. This is because Confucius role as a moral advisor is to ensure that Zai Wo can be *an* with his decision.

In sum then, my second line of justification for Confucius' act is that Confucius is playing the role of a moral advisor where the goal is (a) to help Zai Wo think for himself and act accordingly, and (b) to ensure that Zai Wo can have a clear conscience.

5. An objection

One might object to my view above by producing a counterexample. Suppose Alice wrongly believes that for the sake of making the world a better place, all prostitutes should be tortured and killed. Suppose Alice tells this to a moral advisor as she wants to carry out such an act. What should the moral advisor do? It seems that the moral advisor would not be justified if he tells Alice, 'if you feel that it the right thing to do, then do it.'

Does the counterexample succeed? I think not. First, my first line of justification is not available in Alice's case. Recall that my first line of justification says that we can tell others to do what is second best when the person cannot at that time do what is morally best. In Zai Wo's case, Zai Wo cannot observe the three-year mourning ritual with the appropriate emotions. Zai Wo cannot do so because he has no direct control over his emotions. In Alice's case, however, Alice can choose to not torture and kill prostitutes. She has control over this act. Therefore, Alice can do what is morally best and so the first line of justification would not apply in her case.

Second, the two justifications I argued for can be defeated by stronger reasons in a scenario. Take, for example, the field of epistemology. It is common to think that testimony that p gives us some justification to believe p . This justification can of course be defeated. For example, if multiple physical evidences at a crime scene go against a testimony, the testimony might be defeated. All things considered, one should then believe *not-p*. This is because the other evidences provide strong enough reason to defeat the testimony. Similarly then, the two justifications I argued for above can be defeated by stronger reasons. In Zai Wo's case, Confucius knows that if Zai Wo does not follow the three-year mourning ritual, Zai Wo would still aim to observe the other rituals. This is not so bad. The justifications above are hence not defeated in Zai Wo's case. In Alice's case, however, we may think that what Alice wants to do is morally wrong to a high degree. It has such a high degree of wrongness that it defeats the justifications I have argued for. So all things considered, one should not tell Alice to go and torture and kill all prostitutes.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that in *Analects* 17.21, Confucius tells his disciple to do what Confucius himself believes is wrong. While this seems morally objectionable, I have provided two lines of justification for this. The first is that it is justifiable to tell people to do what is second best when they cannot at that time do what is morally best. The second is that it is justifiable for moral advisors to tell others to act according to their own moral beliefs.

Notes

1. In some translations of the *Analects*, the same passage can be found in *Analects* 17.19.
2. All translations of the *Analects* in this paper are from Slingerland (2003).
3. Matthew 19:8 NASB.
4. For a summary of the debate, see Timmerman and Cohen (2016).
5. Quoted in American Medical News (2008).
6. Quoted in American Medical News (2008).

Acknowledgments

For suggestions and comments, I like to thank Li Chenyang, Esther Goh and Jonah Branding.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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