

FIVE

DEATH AND DYING IN THE ANALECTS

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Should we not confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once again living psychologically beyond our means, and should we not rather turn back and recognize the truth?

—Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death”

Human reactions to death play a prominent, diverse, and complex role in motivating, guiding, and shaping religious and philosophical thought throughout the world's cultures. Even if we restrict this claim to straightforward cases, wherein the theme of death is explicit, its range is quite impressive. If we include cases where the influence is more indirect and subtle, the realm over which the claim holds true increases significantly. In a number of Western religious traditions, a belief in life after death has been of such singular importance that our mundane existence here on earth fades dramatically in comparative value. Such a sense of proportional dissonance may yet inform contemporary inheritors of these traditions, appearing now in the guise of various, more-secular beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as well as in a general yearning for something more beyond the lives we live that will somehow make them all worthwhile.

Many religious traditions have regarded the phenomenon of death as an aberration, a profound anomaly crying out for explanation and resolution. However, modern psychological accounts of death tend to insist that such responses to death are forms of denial; according to such views, the threat of death is so overwhelming to our individual egos that it moves us to work mightily to deceive ourselves and banish the obvious fact of death

from consciousness.¹ A desire to live on in some afterlife or to be reborn to live again may well be understood as a kind of denial of death. Many who relish “deflating” religion on this score seem unaware that the self-centered life of eternal consumption that is so widespread in industrialized cultures is but a variation on this theme. Those who display the bumper sticker that reads “He who dies with the most toys wins” can never pause in the frenetic acquisition of toys to ask *what* exactly he wins or the more obvious question of *who* precisely wins. Indeed, smug proclamations about “not needing” religious answers, like declarations of fearlessness by religious fanatics as they joyfully sacrifice themselves “for God,” easily lend themselves to be understood as expressions of a dread of death, more howling than whistling in the dark.

In those cultures that regard death as a breach of cosmic order, we often find myths about how death came into the world. Such stories usually associate the arrival of death with some particular human failing or explain it as a manifestation of an irrevocable tension, dichotomy, or flaw in the fabric of the universe itself. On such accounts, life and death are understood in some sense as shadows or echoes of good and bad. A distinctive feature of the early Confucian tradition is that it offers no account of how death originated or came into the world or, for that matter, when or how the world itself came into being. Early Confucians did not regard the nature or origin of death as a great conundrum in need of explanation.² This is not to say they did not see death as posing profound and vexing problems to human beings; however, the nature of these problems—and the tensions they felt while seeking to understand the relationship between life and death—were conceived of differently. These thinkers were primarily concerned with understanding what place death and our reactions and responses to it play in a well-ordered, meaningful, and noble life, rather than what is the essence or origin of death and its related phenomena.

With these remarks before us, let us turn to the specific case of the founder of the Confucian tradition. How did Kongzi conceive of death?³ How did he think one should react and respond to it? How, if at all, should our conception of and attitude toward death inform our lives? These are the questions I will address by exploring Kongzi’s views on death and dying as found in the text of the *Analecets*.⁴ After presenting my interpretation of Kongzi’s views on death, I will question whether his position suffers from a problem identified by a number of modern Western thinkers. These thinkers, many of whom are associated with the broad category “existentialism,” argue that certain conceptions of the ideal human life amount to an evasion of the most basic fact of the human condition: our finite existence and imminent death. Such flawed conceptions manage to do this by drawing one’s attention away from the concrete facts of human life and focusing instead on the project of bringing something purportedly *really* meaningful into being,

they suggest sacrificing one’s life for some abstract cause or future utopia. In so doing, they allow one to avoid the subjective reality of one’s mortal existence. Hence, they encourage a fundamentally “inauthentic” form of life. I will argue that while Kongzi’s allegiance to the Dao 道 (Way) can appear to present such an evasion, it does not; Kongzi offers a consistent, complex, realistic, and profoundly moving account of human life and death.

Kongzi did not believe in any strong sense of personal survival after death.⁵ Even if one could show that he did hold some form of such a belief, it still was not part of a developed eschatology and played no role in shaping his views about how one should live one’s life. That is to say, if he believed in some form of post-life survival, this was not embedded in a greater web of beliefs about a final judgment, subsequent punishment and reward, or any notion of reincarnation. I find no passages in the *Analecets* to support the idea that Kongzi believed one’s individual personality survived in any form beyond death.⁶ And so, I take him as having held the view that, for all practical purposes, physical death is the end of an individual’s personal consciousness.

A number of thinkers have argued that death, so understood, cannot be considered bad for the person who dies.⁷ If one believes that death really is the complete end of personal consciousness, then it is just a mistake or a kind of lack of nerve to worry about *being* dead, and this holds true whether one is considering the death of another or oneself. This much seems right. If we accept this claim, though, it might appear to present problems for Kongzi. As we shall see, in several places in the *Analecets*, Kongzi at least appears to be worried about death—when contemplating both someone’s actual death and the prospect of death in general. What I mean by “being worried about death” is showing a heightened concern about it, not dreading death but disliking it, wanting to keep it at bay, and finding it—in at least some cases—a source of sadness, regret, and even tragedy. So, the first issue I would like to explore is whether, in worrying about certain cases of death, Kongzi was making a fundamental mistake or showing a lack of nerve. Let us begin with cases of the death of another and then move on to the special case of one’s own death to see first what Kongzi found disturbing about death and second whether we can discern in these examples any legitimate reasons for such concern.

Kongzi was clearly distressed at the deaths and threats of death of several people. In *Analecets* 6.10, he bemoans the terminal illness of his disciple Bo Niu. The passage goes: “Bo Niu was ill and the master went to ask about him. Holding his hand through the window, the master said, ‘It is all over! Is it not simply a matter of fate? But that such a man should have such an illness! That such a man should have such an illness!’”⁸ This is decidedly not the attitude of a Stoic. Kongzi is disturbed by the impending death of Bo Niu and distraught over the nature of his malady (which

commentators suggest was perhaps leprosy). This passage, and others like it, starkly contrast with those in which Kongzi advocates a calm and determined acceptance of mortality.

When Kongzi had to confront the death of his favorite disciple, Yan Hui, we see his distress reaching the point of openly uncontrolled grief. With the loss of Yan Hui, Kongzi wails, "EEE! Heaven has taken him from me! Heaven has taken him from me!"⁹ This leads his disciples to question him, in the following passage, for allowing his mourning to reach such extremes, something he explicitly warns against on other occasions.¹⁰ Kongzi responds by saying, "Have I lost control of myself? If not for this man, for whom then should I lose control?" These and other passages make clear that Kongzi thought that at least some cases of death warrant—or at least allow for—excessive displays of grief.

The two cases I have explored have at least three things in common. First, they involve the death of young people. Second, these young people were morally good; they were leading lives in accordance with the Dao. Third, they died of illnesses. In light of these three factors, Kongzi's excessive grief does not contradict what he says elsewhere about the proper attitude toward mourning, for such cases as Bo Niu's and Yan Hui's represent genuine tragedies. These two young men were morally fine people cut down early in life for no apparent reason and in the service of no greater cause. Their lives end tragically and are thus events that even a cultivated person finds unsettling and disturbing.

It seems fair to speculate that Kongzi would not have been particularly distressed, if at all, by the deaths of Bo Niu and Yan Hui had they been bad people, young or old. In *Analects* 14.46, Kongzi even implies that someone who consistently refuses to engage in self-cultivation would be *better off* dead. We cannot understand Kongzi's response to the deaths of Bo Niu and Yan Hui without appreciating that these were good young men who died tragically; their deaths were a severe blow to the cause of the Dao and all who support it.

Kongzi thinks that we should mourn but not be excessively distressed when a good person dies at a ripe old age. As we shall see when we discuss the case of Kongzi's own death, losing those we love, respect, and admire is always sad—and such sadness is part of even the best human life—but it those who have died have lived proper lives, that is, lives in accordance with the Dao, we should see their deaths as the final act in the greater narrative of their lives and respond with genuine, ritually appropriate mourning. In such cases, "mourning should reach to grief and then stop."¹¹ But when a young person dies for no higher purpose, this pattern is disrupted and the event is much more difficult to accept. The youthfulness of Bo Niu and Yan Hui is therefore significant.

We must also keep in mind that the deaths of these fine young men lacked any special ethical significance. All good people, young and old, must be prepared to risk and even sacrifice their lives for the Way.¹² And those ethical heroes, young or old, who pay the highest price in defense of the Way should be mourned with special reverence and esteem. For example, in *Analects* 16.12, Kongzi praises the moral exemplars Bo Yi and Shu Qi, who sacrificed themselves for the Way, and points out that their self-sacrifice bestowed upon them a kind of worldly immortality: "Duke Jing of Qi had a thousand teams of horses and yet the day he died, the people found no virtue in him to praise. Bo Yi and Shu Qi starved to death at the foot of Mount Shou Yang, yet down to the present day, the people sing their praises . . ." In light of these various observations, we can construct a general understanding of Kongzi's view about the death of another. As will become even more clear later, his view is predicated on a conception of what makes life worth living. A good human life, one that is in accordance with the Dao, is a life well lived. Such a life requires that one be willing to sacrifice oneself in pursuit of the Way should the need arise. Implicit in such a view is the idea that an important constituent of living well is having principles, ideals, and values for which one is willing to die. People who have no such principles, ideals, and values may live longer and more-pleasurable lives, but these lives lack a special sense of dignity, commitment, and honor. If living a morally committed life leads to death, this—like every death—is a source of sadness, but it does not warrant excessive grief. For like the death of a good person who has lived out a full span of years, such a life fulfills the most important part of the true destiny of human beings (that is, the ethical part) and is in this respect proper and fitting. But a promising young person who dies as a result of some calamity such as disease or accident presents a profoundly different case: she is denied the chance to fulfill her true destiny as a human being. Such cases are true tragedies and warrant the excessive grief we see Kongzi express for Bo Niu and Yan Hui.

Since Kongzi has a clear idea of what constitutes a good human life, he can explain what is bad about the death of another, distinguish different kinds of cases, and advocate a range of appropriate responses. Those who are able to live out their years following the Dao completely realize their full destiny as human beings. We mourn them at death because, given the social and relational nature of the Dao, they are part of our lives as well. When they die, we lose not only our personal relationship but also their participation in our greater communal lives. Our loss is greater or less depending on how close they were to us, that is, whether they were parents, relatives, friends, or simply fellow humans.¹³

Those young in age who sacrifice themselves for the Way—for example, people such as Bo Yi and Shu Qi—fulfill their ethical duty to the Way

but are not able to fulfill all of the Way, since the proper goal in following the Way is to live out the natural allotment of human years and fulfill the various role-specific duties that life presents at its different stages. So, it is appropriate to mourn for martyrs to the Way with special reverence and respect and pay tribute to them throughout the ages. Cases in which those dedicated to the Way are cut down in youth, for no apparent reason and in pursuit of no greater cause, present true tragedies. To see a young, good person die of disease or accident is deeply tragic and disturbing and well warrants the profound distress Kongzi displays. This does not contradict his other teachings, nor does it manifest philosophical confusion or any lack of nerve. In each of the cases previously discussed, Kongzi describes a profoundly humane understanding and response to death that reflects the structure of his larger philosophical perspective on the proper form and end of human life.

This larger philosophical perspective also gives Kongzi a way to answer other questions concerning death. Among the most vexing of these is, What makes death not just bad, but bad in a unique and unequivocal way? As noted previously, it cannot simply be the fact that we will not exist—for nothing can be of any consequence to those who do not exist.¹⁴ What is bad about dying is that we will lose what we now have and what we still reasonably might have. With death, the prospect is that these things—all of them—will be gone *and gone for good*.

To understand death and what is had about it is not to understand what the state of death itself is like, for death is not just *like* nothing; to be dead is to *be* nothing. Rather, to understand death and its significance for us is to understand what it will deprive us of. Most generally, of course, death deprives us of life *and all the various things that make life worth living*.¹⁵ This implies that in order to understand the significance of death we must understand, at least in general terms, the meaning of life. If we understand what life is really about, that will provide us with what we need in order to understand the significance of death. This is just what Kongzi implies in *Analects* 11.12. In this passage, the disciple Ji Lu asks Kongzi about how to serve ghosts and spirits. Kongzi replies, "While you are not yet able to serve human beings, how can you serve spirits?" When the disciple goes on to ask about death, Kongzi replies, "While you do not yet understand life, how can you understand death?"

James Legge, in his note to this section of the *Analects*, claims that it is another example where "Confucius [Kongzi] avoids answering the important questions put to him."¹⁶ But in this case, Legge simply missed the point. Kongzi *does* answer the question, saying that if one truly understands the significance of human life, he or she will have attained a full and satisfactory understanding of death—one will know all that there is to know about it.¹⁷ Such a perspective will provide one with an answer to the general question

of what is bad about death (i.e., it deprives one of all those good things that we value in living), and it will help one begin to answer more specific questions such as, "What, if anything, is worth dying for?" So, without ascending into the metaphysical heavens or abandoning ourselves to the overwrought pronouncements of certain existentialist philosophers, we can see how a consciousness of death is indeed an important and an arguably necessary perspective for answering questions about the meaning of life. A sense of the general aims of human life and its normal course and culmination allows one to appreciate the value of those things in life worth seeking, working for, and defending.¹⁸ Such an appreciation of life is what gives death its particular sting.¹⁹ It tells us why and in what senses death is indeed bad. Such a consciousness of death focuses the mind in particularly sharp and revealing ways. Turning this insight around, it is not at all unreasonable to insist that an adult who has never thought deeply about the meaning of death could not possibly have a mature, full, and lively appreciation of the meaning of human life.

These same ideas apply when we turn to the case of one's own death. There are good reasons to worry about one's mortality, just as there are good reasons to mourn the deaths of others and to do so differently in different cases. While it is true that what happens after I am dead *will* be meaningless to me *then* (for I will no longer exist), it is nevertheless true that my death will affect a number of people and states of affairs in the world, and the future fate of these people and affairs is important to me *now* and in whatever time I have left between now and then. This kind of concern is particularly acute in the Confucian tradition, where relational roles and their attendant duties play a large part in one's conception of oneself and in the nature of what one values. Moreover, *how* I die, both the manner in which I face death and what I become in the time between now and then, are also issues of great importance to me. How I conceive of these future states can and should deeply affect and shape the life I still have left to live—what goals I seek to attain and promote and how I go about working for their realization.

These ideas are evident in a remarkable passage that purports to record an occasion when Kongzi was on the verge of death.²⁰ *Analects* 9.12 says:

The Master was seriously ill. Zilu ordered the other disciples to act as retainers. During a period when his condition had improved, the Master said, You [Zilu] has long been practicing deception. In pretending to have retainers when I have none, whom would we be deceiving? Would we be deceiving Heaven? Moreover, would I not rather die in your arms, my friends, than in the arms of retainers? Even if I am not given an elaborate funeral, it is not as if I will be dying by the wayside.²¹

In this deep and profoundly moving passage, we see several distinctive features of Kongzi's views about death and life. In his last moments he is, as always, teaching: living out his particular role in the great Dao. The message he delivers is that the best life for human beings is one of genuine love among fellow humans. While important, the marks of social rank—in this case retainers—are only so in terms of their ability to engender a harmonious social order held together with genuine love and respect for one another. Such outward signs are not to be pursued, much less presumed, for personal glorification. *Analects* 9.12 presents an account of Kongzi living out his beliefs in what appear to be his last moments of life. He displays a wise understanding and courageous acceptance of his own death.

A passage that is remarkably similar in structure though strikingly different in meaning and sensibility is found in the *Zhuangzi*. It is worth citing in full and discussing for the contrast it offers.

When Zhuangzi was dying, his disciples wanted to give him a lavish funeral. Said Zhuangzi, I have Heaven and earth for my outer and inner coffins, the sun and moon for my pair of jade discs, the stars for my pearls, the myriad creatures for my farewell gifts. Is anything missing from my funeral paraphernalia? What would you add to these?"

"Master! We are afraid the crows and kites will eat you!" said one of his disciples.

"Above ground I'll be eaten by the crows and kites; below ground I'll be eaten by the ants and mole-crickets. You rob from one to give to the other. How come you like them so much better?"

In this passage, we find a very different message. While both Kongzi and Zhuangzi sought to end their lives by taking their proper place within the universal pattern of the Dao, for Kongzi this place is in the arms of his disciples, his proper position within the human social order. For Zhuangzi, the proper place is anywhere within the broad bosom of Nature; his community is the vast, unbounded realm of the natural. This open-ended acceptance of things leaves him at home everywhere in the wide world, but he is without Kongzi's special sense of belonging within the deep and precious relationships of human community. Zhuangzi lacks the resources to distinguish and justify the different responses to death that are characteristic of Kongzi's position. The death of anyone at any time is equally acceptable on such a view.²³ This difference represents well what is at stake in the alternative visions sketched by these early Chinese sages. The only kind of death that is improper for Zhuangzi is the one that one brings upon oneself or forces upon others by following the foolish goals of the scheming human mind. Such a death is more pitiful than it is mournful or tragic. Sustained reflection,

and ritualized—that is, shared, communal—mourning finds no place in Zhuangzi's scheme.²⁴

Zhuangzi, too, is teaching with his last breaths, but his lesson is one of a probing skepticism. He seeks to leave his disciples with a final expression of his lifelong theme of humorous doubting by once more poking holes in their complacent certainty about what is right and wrong. He tries to move them out of their familiar frames of reference to look at things from a grander perspective, one in which human beings and their concerns assume a more-diminutive stature against the background of an expansive and comprehensive natural landscape. As always, the lesson is delivered as an amusing and open question. Zhuangzi ends his life as he has lived it, in practice, a playful skeptic.

As I mentioned at the outset, a certain group of thinkers in the Western tradition have argued that many views of death represent a misguided and deforming evasion of the human condition. In a fascinating essay, Michael Slote explores a number of versions of this view, which he argues can be seen as originating with Kierkegaard. Slote explains:

According to Kierkegaard, to have an objective attitude toward one's life is to have the kind of attitude toward one's life encouraged by an Hegelian view of the world. On such a view, one is part of a larger "world-historical" process of the self-realization of Reason or Spirit, and one's life takes on significance if one plays a role, however minor, in that world-historical process.²⁵

This kind of attitude, in a sense deferring one's life in order to bring something *really* meaningful into being or sacrificing one's life for some abstract cause or future utopia, is not restricted to any particular tradition or time. As Slote goes on to note, "One does not have to be an Hegelian to think in this kind of way. One can be thinking in a similar way if, as a scientist or philosopher, e.g., one devotes oneself to one's field in the belief or hope that one's life gains significance through one's contribution to something 'bigger.'" ²⁶ These remarks bring the problem close, for some perhaps too close, to home. Many of us, at least at times, talk in precisely this Hegelian fashion. In the case of my own profession, many find their energies and attention completely absorbed in the task of finishing that next book, article, or presentation. Much of the meaning of such a life seems to consist solely in the effort to "move the field forward." As a result, teaching and personal life often are ignored, suffer, or are sacrificed (or worse, are valued only for the contribution they make to our research and advancement). How, though, can we allow such an ephemeral project as "moving the field forward" (whatever that odd metaphor is taken to mean) to draw us so completely out of our interpersonal obligations and relationships and

the more-immediate tasks and challenges of life: our human subjectivity? There is something particularly perverse about teachers of the humanities allowing—and even advocating—this ongoing sacrifice to some vague project and amorphous future state of affairs. This is not a problem afflicting only academics; people in every walk of life can be heard giving voice to the same kind of attitude.

My present aim is to determine whether Kongzi's view of death, as I have described it, entails such an evasion of subjectivity. In other words, is Kongzi's notion of the Dao like Hegel's notion of *Geist*, a ghostly repository for our greatest hopes and values, something we look up to in order to avoid facing our all-too-human lives, something *really* grand that we hope will inflate and sustain the value of our existence? Is his call to follow the Dao a way of fleeing from our subjectivity and in particular the prospect of our own deaths?

My view is that Kongzi does not display or advocate this kind of "inauthentic" or "false" consciousness. If we consider again the passage that describes him facing his own death, in his final moments, he is not looking away from his imminent demise and toward some Dao that relieves his pain and promises him peace or some greater reward. On the contrary, he is focused upon and pointing his students' attention toward his imminent death and saying he is ready, *happy* to die in their arms and not alone—"by the wayside." While Kongzi sees himself and his life in terms of greater patterns and processes, the Dao is not ideal in the way that *Geist* is for Hegel. Rather than describing a world-historical process, the Dao should be understood in part as a symbol for the ideal form of life that Kongzi aimed to revive and propagate and for our all-too-human struggle to realize the goods represented by the Dao here and now in our own lives.²⁷

Through concerted and ongoing human effort, the Dao can be realized to varying degrees in the world, but there is no other place to be but here, in the world we know, with all its faults, its pains, and even its tragedies. The inevitably imperfect context of human life is part of why we need the humanizing influence of Confucian ritual: to acknowledge and seek to ameliorate the faults we encounter, relieve some of the pain, and offer one another solace and solidarity in the face of tragedy. On such a view of human life, one can understand, endorse, and sympathize with Kongzi's excessive grief for Bo Niu and Yan Hui, for one feels a distinctive senselessness in the deaths of these fine young men.

According to Kongzi, even if one finds oneself living in a severely disordered age, one's work and attention are to be focused on the tasks at hand, not on some future utopia or reward. The Confucian Dao is precious only as it is fulfilled and realized in the course of actual human lives. This is how I understand *Analect*s 15.29: "Human beings can fill out [i.e., fulfill] the Way. The Way cannot fill out human beings." "Like any path, the Way

fulfills its function only when people actually make use of it, when they follow the challenging yet fulfilling course it lays out for human beings. One does not reach one's destination simply by knowing where the proper road is to be found; one must walk the full length of that road.

Kongzi does express a fervent hope for the future revival of a past golden age, one that will herald the return of a kind of utopia here on earth. He is willing and encourages others to make significant sacrifices to realize this grand goal. In regard to our present concerns, much depends on how we understand such exhortations. Even if we grant that on occasion he asks too much of us, it is still clearly the case that this greater project can only be won by working to develop our individual characters in the daily course of our lives and that the realization of this ideal society, however worthy of sacrifice, is not the sole source of value in our lives.²⁹ Quite to the contrary, Kongzi wants us to keep our attention focused always on the challenges and the joys that lie before us; cultivating a heightened awareness of the extraordinary potential of the ordinary is an important, though often neglected, feature of Kongzi's philosophy and of Confucian thought in general. This concern for the everyday wonder and delight to be found in a well-lived life is evident throughout the text. For example, when, in *Analect*s 11.24, Kongzi asks various disciples to express their greatest aspiration, the one he approves of most is Dian, who suggests, "In the waning days of spring, wearing the new clothes of the season, with five or six young men and six or seven boys, to bathe in the River Yi, dry ourselves in the gentle breezes to be found at the Altar of Rain and then, together, to return home chanting."

Kongzi's joyful appreciation of such simple pleasures is a critical aspect of his larger philosophical view. While he hopes and works for a brighter future, this never leads him to lose sight of the everyday, for the only way to the former goal is through an ongoing effort to improve and complete the latter. This ability to comprehend and balance opposing tensions and concerns, to understand the extremes and yet hold to the mean, is part of the subtle power of his vision. And so, we should not be at all surprised to find that Kongzi's understanding of human life includes a realistic and humane understanding of its inevitable conclusion in death.

NOTES

²⁷ An earlier, shorter version of this essay appeared with the same title in Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Confucian Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 1:220–232. Thanks to Erin M. Cline, Amy L. Olberding, and Michael Slater for helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

²⁹ In addition to Freud's, one of the most eloquent and compelling arguments for this effect is offered by Ernest Becker; see *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperback, 1973).

2. By "early" Confucians I mean those who lived prior to the unification of China under the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE.

3. I employ the romanization "Kongzi" 孔子, literally "Master Kong," rather than the latinized name "Confucius" for the founder of the Confucian tradition.

4. Excellent, though at times imaginatively exuberant, work has been done on the text of the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*) in terms of arguing for different strata, their different dates, and possible origins. See, in particular, the work of Bruce E. and Taeko A. Brooks, *The Original Analects*, rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). However, I am interested in Kongzi as a character in the received text of the *Analects* and in the views attributed to him. I believe the passages that concern death and dying hang together in a consistent manner and offer an enlightening perspective on the nature and meaning of both life and death; that is enough to treat them, as they have been treated throughout the Confucian tradition, as parts of a single, unified work.

5. A number of scholars have said and continue to say that Kongzi is an agnostic about spiritual beings, citing *Analects* 6.22 in support, but when Kongzi encourages us to "respect ghosts and spirits but keep them at a distance," he seems to be expressing a belief in their existence along with an admonition that they should not be one's primary concern. If one does not believe in ghosts and spirits, what would be the point of respecting them or keeping them at a distance? The critical issue for my purposes, though, is not whether he believed in the existence of ghosts and spirits but what exactly his belief in such beings entailed. My position is that it did not entail any strong sense of personal survival.

6. Kongzi does seem to allow that "spirits" do survive, but their identities are not personal and appear to be role-specific. Scholarly consensus indicates that the early Chinese believed that the spirits of different classes of people survived different lengths of time but that all gradually lost their individual personalities and eventually faded away. For a good discussion of this topic, see Yu Ying-shih, "'O Soul, Come Back!' A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47.2 (1987): 363-395.

7. Classical examples are thinkers such as Epicurus in his *Letter to Menoeceus* and Stoics such as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Among modern thinkers, Spinoza is famous for claiming, "A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is not a meditation upon death but upon life" (*Ethics*, Prop. LXVII). One might argue though that even the most thorough meditation on "life" that ignores the fact of human mortality is inadequate.

8. All translations of Chinese material are my own.

9. See *Analects* 11.9. These lines might be—and indeed have been—read as saying, "Heaven is destroying me! Heaven is destroying me!"

10. His remarks about Yan Hui seem to go against claims such as "I do not complain against Heaven nor do I blame men" (*Analects* 14.35). They also apparently contradict his teaching that "mourning should reach to grief and then stop" (*Analects* 19.14). It is interesting that Kongzi's state of mind is described as *tong* 慟 (moved or upset with grief), which graphically, phonetically, and semantically is a close relative of *dong* 動 (moved or unsettled). Of course, Mengzi is renowned for *shu* 守 (adhering) and promoting the attainment of a *bu dong xin* 不動心 (an unmovable heart/mind). What, though, he meant by this is perhaps less clear than some assume.

11. See *Analects* 19.14.

12. See *Analects* 8.13. However, Kongzi does not admire recklessness; see, for example, *Analects* 7.1. The Way has such importance for Kongzi that in *Analects* 4.8 we find him declaring, "If in the morning I heard that the Way was being followed, I could die that evening contented."

13. Kongzi distinguished different responses to and duties regarding the death of another depending on the closeness of one's relationship to the deceased. The most elaborate duties were, of course, for one's parents. These included the prescribed three-year period of mourning (*Analects* 1.11, 4.20, 17.19, etc.) However, he also discussed the duty one has to bury a friend whose relatives do not provide for him (*Analects* 10.14) and a general imperative to show respect for anyone in mourning (*Analects* 10.15). In other works, Kongzi is quoted as insisting that one has a related duty to animals that have served one's family. See, for example, his discussion of one's duty to bury a family dog or horse in the *Book of Rites*. For a translation, see James Legge, trans., *The Li Chi: Book of Rites* (reprint, New York: University Books, 1967), 1:196-197.

14. Lucretius argued that it is irrational to fear death because this would present an asymmetry between our reactions to our nonexistence before birth and after death, but Thomas Nagel points out that this argument is not quite right. The time after one's death is time of which death deprives one. See his essay "Death" in Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 7-8.

15. I have argued that "life" in this sense is significantly different from the bare notion of existence. See "Filial Piety as a Virtue," in *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Rebecca Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 301.

16. See James Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects*, in *The Chinese Classics* (reprint, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), 1:241, n. 11.

17. This is precisely how Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) interpreted the passage. He comments, "When you understand the Way of life, you will understand the Way of death. When you have completely fulfilled your service to human beings, you will have completely fulfilled your service to the spirits" (quoted by Zhu Xi 朱熹 [1130-1200] in his *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注心, SSBY 6.3a).

18. Bernard Williams argues that we need a conception of the bounded nature of our existence in order to find any significance in life. Immortality is a recipe for tedium and meaninglessness. See "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Language, Metaphysics, and Death*, ed. John Dellelly (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978), 228-242.

19. Aristotle makes a related claim in the course of his discussion of courage, arguing that it is more difficult for the person of practical wisdom, who understands and appreciates all that a good life offers, to risk or sacrifice his life. Only the *phronimos* feels the full measure of what such sacrifice entails. See NE 1117b10.

20. Compare this passage with *Analects* 8.4, where the disciple Zengzi is seriously ill and is led to comment, "When a bird is about to die, its song is mournful. When a man is about to die, his words are good."

21. Compare this and the passage in the following from the *Zhuangzi* with *Analects* 11.11, where Kongzi scolds his disciples for giving Yan Hui a lavish funeral and blames himself for having faded his favorite disciple. Here and throughout the

text of the *Analects*, we find a remarkably consistent view on various aspects of death and dying.

22. The passage is from chapter 32, "Lie Yukou," of the *Zhuangzi*. For an alternative translation, see Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 361.

23. This view is not consistently maintained across the various sections and strata of the *Zhuangzi*. The examples of the deaths of different friends and Mengsun Cai's mother, found in chapter 6, "The Great and Venerable Teacher"—one of the "Inner Chapters"—represent the view I regard as most consistent with Zhuangzi's general philosophy (see Watson, *Complete Works*, 83–89). This view, though, seems inconsistent with Zhuangzi's reaction to passing the grave of his friend Huizi (see Watson, *Complete Works*, 269). It also seems to be in considerable tension with Zhuangzi's complex reaction to the death of his wife (See Watson, *Complete Works*, 191–192).

24. The lack of this type of mourning is brought home in a number of places in the text of the *Zhuangzi*, but perhaps nowhere is it clearer than in the stories from chapter 6 and the story of the death of Zhuangzi's wife. See the reference in the previous note.

25. See Michael Slote, "Existentialism and the Fear of Dying," in *Language, Metaphysics, and Death*, 69–87.

26. Slote, "Existentialism and the Fear of Dying," 70.

27. As a symbol, the Dao possesses value above and beyond the various goods it directly promotes. It gives us a guiding and inspiring metaphor by means of which we can organize and carry out our lives. Robert Adams puts this well: "Symbolically I can be for the Good as such, and not just for the bits and pieces of it that I can concretely promote or embody" ("Symbolic Value," in Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, eds., *The Philosophy of Religion*, Midwest Studies in Philosophy 21 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 1–15, esp. 12.

28. For helpful comments on the meaning of this line and particularly the character *hong* 弘 (fill out or extend), see Bryan W. Van Norden, "Method in the Madness of the *Laozi*," in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, ed. Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 207, n. 25.

29. In *Analects* 14.38, Kongzi is described as one who "knows it is no use yet keeps on trying." This leads to interesting questions concerning the degree to which he is committed to pursuing a lost cause and how much of what is valuable is found in such pursuits. But "lost causes" need not absorb all of life's values; like the sense of symbols discussed previously, they can serve as ideals around which deeply meaningful yet in many respects quite normal human lives are organized. Josiah Royce argues that most religions represent such "lost causes," and his description offers profound insights into how such ideals can function in a human life:

One begins, when one serves the lost cause, to discover that, in some sense, one ought to devote one's highest loyalty to causes that are too good to be visibly realized at any one moment of this poor wretched fleeting time

world. . . . Loyalty seeks, therefore, something essentially superhuman. . . . In its highest reaches it always is, therefore, the service of a cause that was just now lost and lost because the mere now is too poor a vehicle for the presentation of that ideal unity of life of which every form of loyalty is in quest. (Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* [New York: Macmillan, 1908], 284–285.

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