

Confucius' Complaints and the *Analects*' Account of the Good Life

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Abstract The *Analects* appears to offer two bodies of testimony regarding the felt, experiential qualities of leading a life of virtue. In its ostensible record of Confucius' more abstract and reflective claims, the text appears to suggest that virtue has considerable power to afford joy and insulate from sorrow. In the text's inclusion of Confucius' less studied and apparently more spontaneous remarks, however, he appears sometimes to complain of the life he leads, to feel its sorrows, and to possess some despair. Where we attend to both of these elements of the text, a tension emerges. In this essay, I consider how Confucius' complaints appear to complicate any clean conclusion that Confucius wins a good life, particularly where we attend to important pre-theoretical sensibilities regarding what a "good life" ought to include and how it ought to feel for the one who leads it.

Keywords *Analects* · Good life · Moral maturity · Motivation · Desire

1 Introduction

In this essay, I aim to complicate a claim I think largely taken for granted regarding the moral sensibility found in the *Analects*, the claim that achieving the moral sensibility limned in the text leads to a good life. The *Analects*, to be sure, proffers assurances that following the way (*dao* 道) will yield a host of appealing and attractive goods. These goods represent a generous spectrum that stretches from the delightfully prosaic, such as the company of beloved friends (*Analects* 1.1),¹ to the existentially profound, such as the capacity to die content (*Analects* 4.18). It is in recognition of such elements that I intend to *complicate* the picture, rather than to oppose or dispute it. Where scholarship on the *Analects* tends to identify the life the text promises with the good life, I contend that the narrative depiction of Confucius'

¹All citations from the *Analects* are taken from Ames and Rosemont 1998. Where I have modified the translation, this is noted.

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life in the *Analects* effectively moderates any easy confidence that the life one stands to win through cultivating and practicing virtue is a good life. In rudimentary summary, the *Analects* makes clear that Confucius' life includes much hardship, disappointment, and indeed heartbreak. Moreover, it is often his virtue that rather predictably yields such outcomes. Most importantly, Confucius sometimes complains of his life and these complaints deserve our attention.

In Confucius' famous account of his own development, he concludes that, "at 70 I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries" (*Analects* 2.4). The *Analects*' inclusion of Confucius' complaints suggestively intimates that the "free rein" Confucius enjoys affords him the latitude for occasional protest and despair. Confucius' claim about his freedom must be situated alongside other remarks he makes in consideration of himself and his life. The *reason* Confucius is free to do as he wishes is because his wishes accord with following the way. What I take as significant is that sometimes he *wishes* to grieve his fate. While it may be possible to make the case that his occasional complaints are departures from his more usual sagacity, I think a better case can be made that they are not and that they importantly function as tells regarding what his life is like. However, if they are indeed tells, accounts of the good life drawn from the *Analects* must answer to what they indicate.

The principal philosophical effect of attending to Confucius' pains and disappointments resides in how we understand the outcomes of the virtuous life and the motivations that stimulate it. Identifying what connection, if any, obtains between virtue and a good life is of course a long-standing problem in philosophical ethics. Efforts to motivate morality by way of its promise to afford appealing outcomes are bedeviled by the difficulties in connecting moral practice to life outcomes people natively desire. Our hopes that virtue can yield a good life and that virtue can be motivated by the desire to have a good life are obliged to answer to unpleasant empirical realities, to the many virtuous lives that yield great suffering. While I do not here rehearse the many elements of efforts to address this problem, I want simply to suggest that the *Analects*' attention to Confucius' suffering and discontents is a useful complication we do well to incorporate into any effort to address both the outcomes of and the motivations for morality by way of the *Analects*. Before assessing the *Analects*' depiction of Confucius' life, some preliminary remarks on my approach to the text are necessary.

2 The Good Life and Pre-Theoretical Sensibilities

Throughout this essay, I confine my analysis to the *Analects* and eschew the many additional canonical sources that describe Confucius' life.² So too, while identifying the diverse authorial voices and historical strata of the *Analects* represents a considerable hermeneutical challenge, I likewise eschew addressing such issues.³ I seek instead to address the *Analects* as a received text historically available to moral

² Annping Chin offers a study that attempts to retrieve the "authentic" Confucius from the myriad sources on his life. See Chin 2007. For an ambitious and wide-ranging survey of how Confucius has been read and understood over generations, see Nylan and Wilson 2010.

³ For discussion of the various authorial voices and historical strata of the *Analects*, see, for example, Lau 1979: 220–233; Brooks and Brooks 1998, and Van Norden 2002: 13–18.

learners as a guide and inspiration for use in crafting a virtuous life. The *Analects* instructs and enjoins, commending a way of life for the use of its readers. My interest is in assaying what this way of life entails and, most particularly, what a learner who follows this way should expect. I seek, that is, to query what the *Analects* affords in answer to a rather fundamental question a moral learner who engages the text will have: what is it *like* to live the way the *Analects* would have me live? Embedded in this question are a host of pre-theoretical sensibilities about the good life a learner will have and against which she will weigh any answer. My argument seeks to keep these sensibilities in view and engages with two in particular.

First, pre-theoretical sensibilities regarding “the good life” often incorporate a dual sense of the term “good.” “Good” here can encompass, in Linda Zagzebski’s iteration of it, “desirable” and “admirable” (Zagzebski 2006: 55–56).⁴ Typically, the untutored desire for the good life combines conceptually distinct desires: to want a good life is *jointly* to want those elements that contribute to personal happiness and well being—such as having our material needs met, our health and security assured, and our talents and abilities exercised—and to want to achieve character and conduct that we can esteem as worthy of admiration. Informally, we might say that to have the good life is both to *enjoy* basic goods life can afford and to *be* good. Thus whatever more nuanced conclusions about the good life may emerge from careful philosophical reflection, for moral learners there will be a need to understand how any good life virtue can afford stands in relation to this general sensibility. A philosophical account may diverge from the untutored view, but if it is to be credible, it may not ignore the interest human beings have, for example, in their own safety or the meeting of rudimentary material needs.⁵ Many morally admirable lives of course demonstrate the human capacity to sacrifice such interests and moral exemplars often inspire admiration precisely because they forego concern for their own safety and needs in pursuit of some nobler end. *How* exemplars come to do so and what it is *like* to do so is part of what a satisfying account of the good life must explain. Where a life significantly deprived of what our pre-theoretical sensibilities would find desirable is proposed as an exemplary life, a learner will want to know what transformation of these sensibilities has occurred, what orientation toward her existing desires and revised estimations of a good life are proposed if she is to emulate the exemplar and seek a life like his as her own.

Second, pre-theoretical sensibilities regarding the good life will almost certainly include the assumption that whatever the good life may be, it should be pleasing to the one who leads it. Even where we hold in abeyance any decisive conclusions regarding what constitutes “pleasing,” if talk of the good life is to have purchase in human desires, it will need to address the inchoate sense that a good life should be experientially satisfying. This aspect of a learner’s orientation is particularly important for addressing what a good life is like but it also notably foregrounds elements

⁴ For the sake of clarity, I here adhere to Zagzebski’s terminology, but Christine Swanton’s is also instructive. She describes the basic division as that between being “morally meritorious” and a flourishing life of “personal satisfaction.” See Swanton 2003, especially Chapter 3.

⁵ I here do not of course suggest that a philosophical view will need to *endorse* such interests, but simply that the view must *address* them. Thus, for example, while the Stoics famously argue that one only needs virtue to live a good life, they also extensively and self-consciously argue for cultivating indifference to one’s success (or failure) in fulfilling such basic interests as enjoying security or meeting material needs.

that may be elided by admiration for exemplary lives and theoretical treatments of the good life. Where we look to the lives of exemplars as models and theorize conclusions about the good life based in part on what we see in them, we look at these lives from the outside and, moreover, we often behold them in their totality, as complete lives that have achieved a coherent narrative arc and sense. But lives are led from the inside and in increments. To query what an exemplary life is like is to seek understanding of what it is to *inhabit* the life over a calendar of days and years during which any arc the life will have remains incompletely determined and open. Thus if we are to get at whether and how that life is pleasing to the one who leads it, we cannot be content with whether it seems pleasing to *us* as witnesses who admire it from the outside and in its totality. We want instead to consider, insofar as it is possible, the felt, experiential sense of the life as it transpires for the one who leads it. Only thus can we query its relation to pre-theoretical sensibilities we have about the good life being pleasing.

Where a learner engages the *Analects* as commending to her a way of life, these pre-theoretical sensibilities regarding the good life will constitute an important element in her response to the text. Harvesting what the *Analects* can offer entails considering two conceptually distinct ways in which the text speaks to learners. As an ostensible record of Confucius' teaching, the *Analects* is rich with instruction and advice Confucius offers to his students, as well as with general abstract claims he makes regarding both what is good to seek in life and what seeking that good can afford. In short, Confucius himself is often presented as speaking to just the learner's question, describing what the life he recommends will afford to the one who leads it. In addition to presenting Confucius' claims about the life of virtue, the text also attends closely to Confucius *qua* model, offering him as an exemplar and offering his life as an exemplary life. In its narrative depiction of Confucius, the *Analects* presents a life of virtue *in situ*, offering a compelling story that includes the complexities of both Confucius' life and his reactions to it. The *Analects*' ostensibly biographical descriptions of Confucius make the learner privy to something of the felt, experiential qualities of the way of life the text recommends.⁶ My argument rides on observing a tension between these two aspects of the text, between its record of Confucius' claims and the narrative depiction of his life. These two aspects of the text cut in importantly different directions. Consequently, I begin by simply dividing these aspects and rehearsing what each, taken individually, appears to offer.

3 Confucius' Claims

Confucius' various general comments about the sorts of goods afforded one who follows the way mostly serve to recommend the view I seek to complicate. In these comments, Confucius suggests that following the way will promote contentment,

⁶ We cannot of course be certain that the biographical detail about Confucius in the *Analects* is accurate and, to be clear, this is not what I suggest. What Confucius undoubtedly is in the *Analects* is the text's chief protagonist, a signal model and hero embedded in a narrative that sketches a life with a recognizable logic and arc. It is in just this sense that I seek to address him. That is, even if the "Confucius" proposed in the text were wholly fictive, the *story* the text offers about him is a meaningful and indeed foundational element of the instruction it seeks to offer.

satisfaction, and even joy. He observes, for example, that one who achieves the highest moral character, one who is *ren* 仁, will endure hardship with equanimity and have a refined capacity to truly enjoy happy circumstances (*Analects* 4.2). He commends the pleasures of learning and practice, as well as the delight of pursuing these among friends (*Analects* 1.1). Perhaps more obliquely, Confucius suggests that while knowing the way and loving the way are valuable, finer still is taking delight in it (*Analects* 6.20). In these remarks, Confucius appears to present the way of life he recommends as one we have some natural incentives to find appealing and attractive. It is a life marked by enjoyment and even delight. While claims such as these seem the most definitive in associating a good life with the practice of virtue, they are likewise comparably scarce. What is more persistently emphasized in the *Analects* is that the life of virtue bests other modes of life.

The superior value of a virtuous life is most clearly established in the *Analects* in comparison with life patterns in which other activities and pursuits presumably enjoy higher priority. The most frequent comparison Confucius draws is between the life of virtue and the life of popularly recognized success and well-being, the life in which wealth is not wanting, status is secured, and easy pleasures are abundant.⁷ Confucius observes, for example, that all people desire wealth and honor and detest poverty and ignominy, but the exemplary person, the *junzi* 君子, will neither seek wealth and honor where it entails deviation from the proper moral course nor renounce poverty and ignominy where it is a consequence of following that course (*Analects* 4.5). The many worries that accompany a life organized to seek ordinary species of “success”—worries that include the hope of being acknowledged (*Analects* 1.16, 15.19), securing and preserving an official, status-conferring position (*Analects* 4.14, 17.15), impressing others (*Analects* 14.24), and avoiding poverty (*Analects* 15.32)—are framed throughout the *Analects* as cares that exercise little command over the consciousness of one properly oriented toward virtue. Thus, “in eating, *junzi* do not look for a full stomach, nor in their lodgings for comfort and contentment” (*Analects* 1.14). Confucius himself avows that he does not select work in accord with its promise to yield wealth (*Analects* 7.12). Similarly, the scholar-official (*shi* 士) worthy of his status and position will not prize comfort (*Analects* 14.2).

What emerges in these passages is a sense that the way Confucius recommends yields a life in which goods are prioritized in a manner that promotes deeper well-being. The virtuous person desires what all people desire, but adopts an orientation that precludes the anxieties and uneasiness to which common desires can give rise. Care for following the way, Confucius suggests, reduces or even supplants the many and considerable cares that arise from quotidian desires for material comforts, security, and recognition. Confucius' description of his own satisfaction is the paradigm: “To eat coarse food, drink plain water, and pillow oneself on a bent arm—there is pleasure to be found in these things. But wealth and position gained through inappropriate means—these are to me like floating clouds” (*Analects* 7.16). The good life here consists in a power to do without resources others perceive as

⁷ It is worth noting that many of the claims I reference here blend the descriptive and prescriptive. Confucius often appears to fuse the two such that, for example, a claim about how the *junzi* should be will also imply something of what a *junzi* is. Conversely, a claim about what a *junzi* is clearly indicates what anyone who seeks to be a *junzi* should seek to be. It is on this basis that I take claims about how a *junzi* should be to indicate something of how a *junzi*'s life is expected to be.

needed and to make more of resources others too readily discount. Above all, it relies on conditioning the value of commonplace goods, the stuffs of ordinary desires, on the means by which they are achieved. They may be celebrated as goods only where securing them transpires through activities that privilege and accord with the proper way. Indeed, only then, Confucius implies, can the pleasures of such prosaic goods be freely and genuinely enjoyed (see, e.g., *Analects* 4.2, 4.5, 8.13).

Confucius' lauding of exemplars who stand as models for the emulation of others likewise suggests a hierarchy of desires and frequently appeals to an implicit ranking of the rewards a life may afford. The satisfactions secured through virtue are indicated in what we see of those who pursue it; the comparable discontents of seeking more conventional measures of success are evident in those who struggle for wealth, status, or popular repute. For example, Confucius praises his student Zilu's 子路 ability to feel no shame in being humbly dressed and suffer no envy for those whose clothes are fine (*Analects* 9.27). It is a rare and more truly enviable state, Confucius suggests, to suffer no self-consciousness where one lacks the marks of status and wealth others enjoy. In contrast, Confucius bemoans his student Zigong's 子貢 seemingly intractable interest in seeking wealth (*Analects* 11.19). Zigong, he observes, cannot rest content with what he has and so is ever anxious for ways to gain more. He praises Prince Jing of Wei 衛公子荆, who had the power to increase his fortune but who nonetheless found satisfaction whatever the level of his household, enjoying it as much in its simplest state as in its later, finer improvements (*Analects* 13.8). SHI Yu 史魚 and QU Boyu 蘧伯玉, both ministers who served in the state of Wei 衛, are commended for adhering to the way regardless of changing fate and circumstance, adhering to right conduct whatever the perceived advantages or disadvantages to themselves (*Analects* 15.7). So too, the legacies of Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊, renowned for starving to death rather than sacrificing their moral rectitude, are long remembered and praised, where that of the tremendously wealthy aristocrat Duke Jing of Qi 齊景公 is to be recalled only as a man who could awaken admiration in no one (*Analects* 16.12).

The most finely drawn exemplar who exhibits a life organized to prioritize virtue is YAN Hui 顏回, a student Confucius considers as dear as a son (*Analects* 11.11) and to excel even beyond his teacher (*Analects* 5.9). YAN Hui was perpetually in poverty (*Analects* 11.19) and Confucius' commendation of YAN Hui takes measure of what he suffers in appreciating what he achieves: "He has a bamboo bowl 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" (*Analects* 6.11). More generally, YAN Hui is presented throughout the *Analects* as distinguished by his ability to disregard deficits in comfort and ease that would imperil the devotion of most, and by his capacity to enjoy what a life directed to moral learning affords him. YAN Hui is materially poor, but the *Analects* depicts him as incomparably rich in the finer currency provided by his virtue.

Whether making general claims about desire and satisfaction or indicating models whose lives summon moral admiration, Confucius often describes a life of virtue as having a salutary transformative effect on the individual's well-being and life satisfaction. The satisfactions such a life renders available are desirable; those satisfactions are superior in character and more steadfast than other, more popularly recognized objects of desire; and admired exemplars manifest a contentment that renders even straitened circumstances a part of their joy. In contrast, more conventional sources of perceived well-being and success are consistently presented as conditional goods, the

benefits they may confer absent an active pursuit of virtue counted dubious at best and a threat to more stable satisfactions at worst. There is, in short, much in the *Analects* that extols the good life outcomes that issue from following the way.

In the *Analects'* narrative depiction of Confucius' life, a different picture emerges. Both the conditions of Confucius' life and some of his responses to it simply do not lend themselves to the confident promise of joy and satisfaction found in Confucius' more general claims. From a pre-theoretical perspective that expects to find a good life pleasing, Confucius' life appears instead to offer much to lament. And, notably, Confucius does indeed sometimes lament. Let me survey this narrative picture, with a focus on Confucius' complaints and the circumstances in which they are made.

4 Confucius' Complaints

While Confucius' overwhelmingly influential posthumous legacy can obscure it, his life was filled with disappointments, disappointments the *Analects* details in its narrative depiction of him. In Confucius' lifetime, his efforts to achieve an official position and serious influence largely came to naught. Whether seeking to influence state affairs in his home state of Lu 魯 or traveling to seek influence and position elsewhere, Confucius could find no ruler willing to employ him. Equipped with much learning, talent, and skill, Confucius was denied any position commensurate with his abilities and consequently denied the conventional goods that would accompany it. Indeed, Confucius not only failed to win any success well matched to his abilities, his efforts sometimes resulted in active peril. On one occasion he and his students nearly starved, becoming "so feeble they could not stand up" (*Analects* 15.2). On another, they were obliged to flee for their lives (*Analects* 9.5, 11.23). Confucius, the *Analects* makes clear, led no easy life.

Confucius did of course teach and clearly prized the friendship of at least some of his students. However, despite the sense of robust community and affectionate companionship his students afforded him, his relationships with them included myriad disappointments as well: Some simply never seemed to redress persistent weaknesses despite Confucius' best efforts to instruct them; some secured positions only to compromise the values Confucius sought to instill; and some tragically died before their promise could be realized. For example, his brash student and friend, Zilu, never could follow Confucius' advice to temper his impetuosity. Discerning this, Confucius could only watch helplessly and with foreboding about where it would eventually lead (*Analects* 11.13). Another student, RAN You 冉有, won a position of prominence and influence only to breathtakingly betray Confucius' teaching and abet corrupt rulers in implementing policies that injured many. Confucius could not move RAN You from his course and was left only to disown him (*Analects* 11.17). Finally, Confucius suffered the untimely deaths of YAN Hui (*Analects* 11.9, 11.10), Boniu 伯牛, another student of considerable talent (*Analects* 6.10), and Boyu 伯魚, his own son (*Analects* 11.8).

Just as the *Analects* provides glimpses into the difficult conditions and serial losses Confucius endured, so too it offers telling glimpses of how his lack of conventional achievement registered with others. Confucius' failure to earn popularly recognized success earned him, at least on occasion, popular scorn. He is questioned and even occasionally mocked for his earnest pursuit of a course with so few obvious rewards. For example, Confucius is once asked why he does not participate in government, a pointed

query given his failed efforts to do just that (*Analects* 2.21). Confucius' response appeals to the importance for government of people being filial within their families: he serves government through his filial virtue. While Confucius of course makes a worthy point in his response, his answer also serves to remark the limitations of what he can offer. Despite his considerable learning, Confucius' contribution to governing is indistinguishable from what any unlearned yet filial citizen can offer. More pointedly, Confucius and his students are sometimes challenged regarding why Confucius struggles so hard to so little account (*Analects* 14.38), why he does not simply retreat from the cares of political involvement (*Analects* 18.6), and, more bluntly, why he does not simply give up (*Analects* 14.39) or undertake to learn skills more obviously useful (*Analects* 9.2). The *Analects'* observation of these challenges surely captures just how puzzling Confucius would have been to many. He is devoted to a course of life that, on a conventional measure, not only fails to win him obvious successes or comforts, but also entails seemingly perpetual frustration of his hopes and ambitions. Indeed, even his students sometimes cannot understand why Confucius is so unappreciated (*Analects* 14.35) and why his fate is seemingly so cruelly unmatched to his efforts and worthiness (*Analects* 15.2).

Where we assay Confucius' life as the *Analects* describes it, it can readily register as exhibiting painful gaps: the distance between what he deserves and what he gets, what he aspires to do and what he can in fact do is heartbreakingly great. The *Analects* of course takes care to show just how well Confucius bore up under the strains of his circumstances. Even when he and his students are starving, he remarks on the need to be "steadfast in adversity" and regularly cautions against trying to win acknowledgement from others. Significantly, however, the text does not afford only this. It also makes clear that, whatever Confucius' measured and reflective acceptance of his fate, he feels its disappointments. Indeed, it is striking to catalog just how many times Confucius confesses frustration or despair.

While Confucius can of course respond to adverse circumstances with aplomb, he does not always do so, nor do the *Analects'* authors appear to flinch from showing a much broader emotional range in Confucius' responses. In the text's most poignantly observed episode, Confucius reacts to the death of YAN Hui with uncontrolled weeping (*Analects* 11.10) and protests that he has been "destroyed" by the loss (*Analects* 11.9). More severely, when RAN You so singularly fails to uphold moral norms, Confucius gives way to rather blinding anger and says that he will not object if his other students "sound the drums and attack" RAN You (*Analects* 11.17). While these episodic responses, presumably made in the exigencies of the circumstances in which they originate, are striking, more striking still are the several apparently occasional and even perhaps idly casual protesting remarks Confucius makes.

Confucius sometimes confesses apprehending a futility in what he does. Despite his frequent insistence that recognition from others is unimportant, he is not beyond remarking in frustration, for example, "no one appreciates (*zhi* 知) me!" (*Analects* 14.35). He disavows bitterness, declines to "blame others," but nonetheless acknowledges that "only *tian* 天 (Heaven) appreciates (*zhi*)" him.⁸ In similar fashion,

⁸ I here follow Ames's and Rosemont's translation, reading *zhi* 知 as "appreciates" rather than the more value-neutral "knows" or "understands." In its parallel construction—contrasting what people *zhi* and what *tian zhi* — the passage suggests a clear evaluative component to *zhi*, such that to know or understand X is also to appreciate or value X.

Confucius confesses a wish to have done with speaking and frames his wish as modeled on the silent operations of *tian*, a remark that again serves to announce a certain alienation from others even as it asserts a consoling affinity with *tian* (*Analects* 17.19). Elsewhere, he notes how unreceptive people are to rectifying their faults and remarks, "I should give up!" (*Analects* 5.27; translation modified). In reflective consideration of the age in which he lives, Confucius ruefully acknowledges that the conditions are not right for someone such as himself to succeed, protesting, "All is lost with me!" (*Analects* 9.9). In these passages, Confucius appears to be at once expressing disappointment and engaging in a bit of self-consolation, remarking frustration yet rehearsing its necessity given the values he wishes to embody and the unfriendly age he inhabits. We also find a similar strategy at work in his occasional more comic confessions of disappointment.

As I have noted elsewhere, Confucius sometimes employs a therapeutic levity in remarking the frustrations of his life.⁹ In implicit acknowledgment that his efforts bear little fruit, he sometimes confesses the wish to abandon it all and, moreover, sometimes proposes outrageous strategies for doing so, forwarding what Christoph Harbsmeier characterizes as "mad ideas" (Harbsmeier 1990: 135–136). He may, for example, recruit the incautious Zilu to join him in taking to the seas on a raft (*Analects* 5.7). In the alternative, he may go live among the "barbarians" and, when challenged to explain how he would bear their lack of refinement, wryly asserts that his mere presence will overwhelm and thus rectify their crudeness (*Analects* 9.14).¹⁰ His sense of loss is likewise caught in poignant humor when he implicitly compares himself to a piece of jade, an object of great value that nonetheless requires a buyer who can pay its steep price (*Analects* 9.13). Confucius' counsel and character do not come cheap—they require a ruler of sufficient virtue to desire and secure them — and while Confucius is eager to sell them, no one will pay and so he can only persist in simply waiting. More gently, he listens patiently as his students rehearse the political goals and aspirations they would fulfill if they were given power, but "sighs deeply" in agreement when ZENG Xi 曾皙 says that he would wish instead to simply sing and swim with friends on a fine spring day (*Analects* 11.26). While these remarks are delivered in apparent humor or lightness of spirit, like much humor, they betray an underlying, *serious* struggle. They suggest that Confucius too, like his occasional skeptical interlocutors, can recognize a folly in trying so hard to so little effect.

⁹ For a more detailed treatment of these passages, see Olberding 2011: chapter 5. My reading of these passages is significantly influenced by Harbsmeier 1990. Harbsmeier details Confucius' tendency to "self-satirization" and humor. In seeing this humor as meaningful, I likewise draw from Ted Cohen, seeing Confucius' humor here as adopting a form common to jokes about serious matters such as death. As Cohen argues, jokes about death ride on our laughter affording temporary relief and thus assumed power over what we cannot control. So too, Confucius' humor remarks what he cannot control but also affords therapeutic comfort in the power to make light of ungenerous fate. For more on therapeutic humor and power, see Cohen 1999.

¹⁰ On my reading, Confucius' remark here is doubly despairing. In addition to confessing a desire to escape his life, he also remarks a doubt regarding the power of the virtuous to reform others. Confucius elsewhere avows confidence that the virtuous can influence their communities (see, e.g., *Analects* 2.3 and *Analects* 12.19), but in this passage his desire to escape is formulated in part based on his own inability to do just this. Put another way, the therapeutic humor here rides on how improbable and fantastic are *both* of Confucius' suggestions: it is unlikely that he will go live among the barbarians and unlikely still that he could effortlessly alter them. After all, despite much effort, he cannot even refine his own more "civilized" countrymen.

As Herlee Creel observes, as Confucius' life drew to its conclusion, "he must have felt that he had accomplished very little" (Creel 1949: 54). Moreover, given the deaths of his most talented students, Confucius "could neither hope that his ideas would be transmitted to posterity with clarity nor that their realization in practice would be pushed with energy." In the *Analects'* presentation of Confucius' expressions of frustration we find, I think, his awareness of all this. Confucius reliably affirms the way of life he has pursued, but so too he seems well aware of its costs and penalties. The cumulative complexity of his responses to his life are perhaps distilled in one final passage, one in which Confucius appears to summarize the mixed results of his life. Believing his death near, Confucius addresses Zilu's disappointment with Confucius' lack of success by noting the great consolation that he shall die among friends (*Analects* 9.12).¹¹ But this is not all he says. He elaborates, "Even though I do not get a grand state funeral, I am hardly dying by the roadside," an addendum that again suggests wit pitched at self-consolation. Confucius will "not get a grand state funeral" and, implicitly, did not get the life he wanted but, he dryly notes, things could be worse.

5 Moral Maturity and Seeking the Admirable

With this account of Confucius' various claims about the life of virtue and the *Analects'* presentation of his occasional complaints in hand, we can begin to assay how the text might answer to a learner's pre-theoretical sensibilities in evaluating the life of Confucius. Despite the tension between Confucius' remarks and his complaints, there are general observations that can accommodate both. Where the learner seeks to understand the model Confucius offers through a conception of the good life that incorporates both the admirable and the desirable, a basic picture emerges rather clearly. Confucius readily grants that all people desire wealth and honor, and that they seek to avoid poverty and ignominy (*Analects* 4.5). They want, that is, their basic needs met and they want esteem.¹² The *Analects* acknowledges that, all things being equal, we would prefer to have both. Moreover, it seems to suggest that the principal moral struggle in most lives is that things are, in fact, rarely equal. In lived experience, in actual lives, the admirable and desirable can readily come apart. A person may be faced with circumstances in which she is obliged to choose which sense of "good" will drive her, to choose between courses of action in which one will win her

¹¹ In context, Confucius' effort to console Zilu arises after Zilu has schemed to have Confucius' students pose as retainers in an effort to simulate for visitors to the ailing Confucius a social status he and his household lack. Implicit in Zilu's conduct here is a dissatisfaction with Confucius' actual status, a point I develop further in Olberding 2011: 155–158.

¹² It is important to point out that while the *Analects* does seem to acknowledge that all people desire to be admirable, so too it has an implicit, much more elaborate sensibility about just this. One pervasive concern in the text is just what should constitute satisfaction of the desire to be admirable and just whose admiration is relevant and salient. Popular renown, status, and positions of authority can, the text frequently suggests, be mistakenly thought to indicate worthiness of morally grounded esteem. Confucius' many cautions about this can be read as his enjoining his students against using such achievements as substitute gratifications for the desire to be rightly admired by those with the perspicacity to recognize moral worthiness independently of social status. The parallel suggested here is that just as native desires to have one's material needs met can transmute into desires for luxury and great wealth, so too the desire for esteem can transmute into a desire for popular fame and prominence.

a life she can esteem as governed by virtue and another will win her attractive outcomes such as material prosperity, security, and so forth. Confucius' extensive comments comparing modes of life address just how such choices ought to be navigated and his frequent assertions of the priority of virtue over more prosaic goods are aimed at just this. Moreover, these abstract claims effectively remark the refined motivational structure Confucius himself, *qua* exemplar, exhibits.

In most lives, I hazard, the motivations that inform choice and action are frequently a tangle of desires that incorporate both the admirable and the desirable. We want both esteem and comforts that derive from having our material needs well met, our positions within our communities secure, and the lives of ourselves and loved ones reasonably well vouchsafed in health and safety. The difference between Confucius and most, the *Analects* suggests, resides in how he has positioned himself relative to these desires. He has unknotted the tangle of desires in a self-conscious decision to seek his primary good in the admirable. In privileging the admirable, he foregoes the sorts of efforts that define much of human activity, efforts that aim principally to engineer his circumstances to the favor of comfort, security, and so forth. He has, we might say, chosen the admirable and largely consigned the desirable to the fates. Thus he says, for example, that the thought of reward and desirable outcomes should only occur after one has secured one's character (*Analects* 6.22, 12.21).

Just as we can see Confucius' motivational structure as privileging the admirable, so too the *Analects'* account of him recommends recognition of a virtue, a virtue I will call "moral maturity," that enables Confucius' motivational orientation and focus. Where privileging the admirable can explain *what* Confucius does in ordering and structuring his life, moral maturity can explain part of *how* he comes to do so. Moral maturity, in rudimentary form, is just the capacity to self-consciously and deliberately order one's desires where circumstances bar winning all that one might wish. It operates, put simply, as a precondition for Confucius' choosing to privilege the admirable.

In identifying moral maturity as a virtue, I understand it to indicate a human excellence and thereby indirectly to indicate a domain of human struggle, the virtue appearing as such because it represents an uncommon command in managing what people typically find difficult in some way. The struggle at issue here is just the effort to navigate the gap between all we want and what we can reasonably get. We do not merely come to the world with myriad wishes, we come with the more global wish that we can retain them all, that we need not make difficult resolutions about what will matter most. Confucius features as an exemplar in part because he declines to allow this global wish to tempt him into the fiction that he can retain, unsorted and unordered, all his wishes. Understanding his privileging of the admirable begins with understanding his capacity to recognize that the conditions in which he lives constrain his life's possibilities.

Moral maturity, as indicated in the model of Confucius, consists most basically in having the perspicacity and existential honesty to acknowledge a series of home truths, truths that are as unpleasant as they are basic: We do not get all we wish; circumstances constrain our possibilities; seeking to fulfill some of our desires entails leaving others behind. Such truths are as obvious and banal as they are difficult to admit and rarely acted upon. Confucius features as one self-consciously and deliberately governed by such home truths, the possibilities his life affords constrained by

the conditions of his age. Because he acknowledges this and establishes his priorities rather deliberately, he enjoys a kind of freedom. Rather than careering haphazardly among desires circumstances render incompatible, he strides down a chosen path, turning his attention to enjoying what rewards it can afford. To succeed in this is not theoretically complex, but it is experientially so. Part of Confucius' power as an exemplar resides in just this, in meeting well experiential challenges that are as difficult and profoundly affecting as they are commonplace.

Like understanding Confucius' privileging the admirable, understanding his moral maturity lends sense and structure to his life. However, while both Confucius' claims about following the way and the *Analects*' depiction of his life and responses to it do, I believe, implicitly commend this virtue to moral learners, they appear to come apart over its details in significant ways. There are, that is, two significantly different accounts regarding the finer details of what a morally mature agent does once she discerns that she cannot win all she wishes and must establish priorities. Moreover, these two accounts of moral maturity concomitantly generate strikingly different explanations regarding what the felt, experiential qualities of a life of virtue will be. What more complete answer we can find in the *Analects* to the learner's query—What is it *like* to live the way the text would have me live?—will depend on which more complete account of moral maturity we adopt. Let me first outline the account I think rather standard in interpreting the *Analects*, the account that emerges where we assign interpretive priority to Confucius' claims about the life of virtue.

6 Moral Maturity as Autonomy

As I detail in my presentation of Confucius' claims, Confucius habitually extols the finer rewards and satisfactions that issue from following the way. So too, he habitually observes the perils of being driven by desires for more conventional, prosaic goods. Cumulatively, these claims may appear to hook moral maturity to autonomy and freedom. They may suggest that the life of virtue both affords a critical reflective consciousness about what qualifies as *truly* good and identifies the truly good with what resides most firmly in the agent's own power, her capacity to be admirable. The mature moral agent is thus doubly independent and free. She asserts some measure of autonomy from commonplace views and assumptions in exercising deliberate judgment about what life she will count good. And she locates the highest good her life can afford in just those aspects of her life least prey to luck and circumstance and most wholly hers to govern. Confucius' own life can of course be read as a model of just this freedom.

Confucius' life includes many deprivations and heartbreaks. Nonetheless, where we scrutinize his life through the lens of his more abstract claims regarding the life of virtue, it can be read to manifest a rather radical freedom. Confucius is, as all are, vulnerable to circumstances and luck. However, in his many claims contrasting the life of virtue with the life of more conventional success and well-being, the life of virtue markedly insulates the one who lives it from changing fate and circumstance. Virtue, put simply, transforms Confucius' desires and, consequently, his relation to his circumstances. He is not free to direct many of the conditions of his life but his well-being and satisfaction are grounded elsewhere. He identifies his well-being with

being admirable, disidentifies it with fulfilling desires for more prosaic goods, and succeeds in being admirable. In this, he wins a good life.

On this account, a key element in the logic of Confucius' life is that he has, in some measure, *ceased to care* about winning the desirable elements of life, about conventional, prosaic goods. While Confucius is no Stoic—that is, he does not dismiss prosaic goods as but “matters of indifference”—he does nonetheless tightly circumscribe what influence prosaic goods will have on motivation and in evaluating his life. Desire to win prosaic goods should not drive one's life and activities, and deprivations of ordinary, prosaic goods do not count against the forms of satisfaction and well-being that truly matter. Thus, Confucius observes, if following the way yields a life in which he has only his “bent arm” for a pillow, such is still a pleasure; in contrast, the goods he might win by compromising value are no more than “floating clouds.” In this iteration, then, moral maturity is not simply the recognition that one must sometimes choose a course that forecloses other possibilities. It is also possessing the discernment to see that a corollary of choosing to be admirable is the determination to locate the quality of one's life independently of winning prosaic goods or, more generally, of what fortune may give or withhold. In exclusively privileging the admirable, Confucius effectively changes what “good” means *for him*. In him, whatever impulse people have to be held in moral esteem by themselves and relevant others is elevated to a singularly dominant, life-governing motivation. This transformation concomitantly transforms how happiness and satisfaction will be constituted, such that being virtuous is the *principal* good of life, the good he wins for himself independently of luck and from which comes profound joy.

Where this interpretive strategy has been applied to the life the *Analects* recommends, the result is an account of the good life that strongly identifies joy and satisfaction with “internal goods” virtue affords and disidentifies them with “external goods,” what I have been describing as common, prosaic goods that constitute the desirable.¹³ Notably, Confucius' life is here understood to be both admirable *and pleasing*, its felt, experiential pleasures accomplished through what Michael Ing characterizes as an “inward turn”: “The inward turn is a redirection away from the things that one cannot control and a focusing on the things that one can in fact control. The result of this inward turn is a joyful acceptance of the failures that are not one's fault” (Ing 2011: 226). While Ing himself incisively criticizes this reading, many scholars do endorse it, linking this achieved, inward looking independence to joy and, in turn, linking joy to the motivation for a virtuous life.

Edward Slingerland characterizes the Confucian posture toward fate rather explicitly in terms of mature discernment of what one can control. The Confucian recommendation, he offers, is not “resignation,” but “a realistic and mature redirection of human energy toward the sole area of life in which one does have control—the cultivation and moral improvement of one's own self—coupled with a faith in the ability of self-cultivation to produce in one an attitude of joyful acceptance of all that life may bring” (Slingerland 1996: 568). Addressing the *Analects* more particularly,

¹³ While some commentators I canvass here employ the familiar philosophical concepts of “internal goods” and “external goods,” my own avoidance of this terminology is deliberate. It is not clear to me that the Confucians would, without significant caveats and qualification, endorse the taxonomy that typically accompanies these terms. Fruitful use of this terminology may require developing a *distinctively Confucian* taxonomy. That work is far beyond the scope of this essay, so I simply eschew the terminology in favor of looser, less philosophically laden terms such as “ordinary, prosaic goods.”

Slingerland argues that the *junzi*, the exemplary person, is presented as one liberated “from the vicissitudes that attended external goods, and with this freedom (and the psychological strength it conferred) came joy” (Slingerland 2001: 110). YU Jiyuan strikes a similar note, observing that the *Analects* postulates a model of the virtuous person as independent from ordinary cares: “A virtuous or excellent person should not be disturbed by the lack of external goods” (Yu 2007: 187). Instead, the virtuous person, liberated by virtue, derives joy from a host of other goods, internal psychological goods virtue affords. Yu writes, “The achievement of *ren* (excellence) brings about inner serenity, harmony, integrity, strength, and satisfaction. This inner state of *ren* cannot be destroyed by misfortunes. An excellent person experiences no worries, fear and inner conflict” (Yu 2007: 187).

As Yu’s account implies, the *Analects*’ depiction of a life of virtue can be read as an inimitably attractive form of life and thus some commentators link this depiction with motivation for the life. HUANG Yong’s interpretation explicitly identifies the motivation for morality with joy, such that “the Confucian answer to the question ‘Why be moral?’ is that it is a joy to be moral” (Huang 2010: 73). As Huang explains, the Confucian practitioner will find that while life can afford multiple sources of joy, the joy derived from virtue is distinctively human and thus, properly understood, more deeply attractive than any alternative (Huang 2010: 76).¹⁴ Similarly, Steven Wilson argues that for Confucius, the life of virtue is sought “as a life qualitatively different from, and significantly better than, all other forms of life” (Wilson 1995: 282). The individual’s enjoyment of this life, he adds, is not incidental but a necessary condition for counting the individual genuinely virtuous, her desire for virtue sourced in deep reflective engagement rather than any instrumental reasoning regarding what virtue may stand to win her (Wilson 1995: 283). In Wilson’s analysis, virtue provisions a life with joy, and does so in a rather full autonomy from the means-end reasoning that constrains so much of human activity.

The interpretive approach represented in these scholars’ analyses importantly elaborates the basic account of moral maturity I give. Under this approach, moral maturity may begin with developing the existential honesty to recognize the constraints one’s circumstances impose on one’s life possibilities, but its full realization consists in freedom from ordinary, prosaic cares that a critical reflective consciousness and a commitment to the admirable enables. With this maturity comes the joy and satisfaction to which Confucius often alludes. One implication of this view may well be that moral maturity operates as a virtue through which one *can* win all one wants. Moral learning is here understood to dramatically transform both desire and how a pleasing life will be understood. The often muddled desires that accompany a pre-theoretical sense of the good life—a sense in which wanting both the admirable and the desirable stuffs of ordinary, prosaic goods structure motivation—are, on this account, transformed to favor what we can win for ourselves. More precisely, in making the admirable the exclusive target of desire for a truly good life, the target can be “hit” by anyone who wants it.¹⁵ Thus Confucius’ life, despite its deprivations and

¹⁴ Huang’s interpretation, it should be noted, treats both the *Analects* and *Mengzi*, and in part employs the latter to supplement the less explicit claims of the former.

¹⁵ Such seems notably suggested by *Analects* 7.30, where Confucius claims that merely wanting *ren* is sufficient to achieve it. Where we understand becoming *ren* to afford the various internal goods these commentators limn, this claim amounts to the claim that a truly good life is available to anyone who develops a proper and earnest desire for it.

hardship, is not deficient but truly good. Confucius suffers ungenerous fate, but in training himself to desire what he can secure for himself, his desires are his own to fulfill. Indeed, his is a joyful life, a life containing in abundance, we might say, all he *really wants*.

While this line of interpretation is a pronounced theme in scholarship on the *Analects'* view of the good life, my contention is that Confucius' complaints complicate it in ways we do well to recognize. Under this interpretive model, it is not clear just how we ought to understand Confucius' occasional excursions into despair. In characterizing what the life of virtue is like, Yu writes that the virtuous person's "goal is *ren*, which is up to him to grab. If he gets it, he should not have any complaints" (Yu 2007: 187). Yet Confucius *does* appear to have complaints. Unless we simply exclude these from analysis of how the *Analects* presents the good life, they constitute an interpretive challenge. One strategy to meet this challenge might be to concede that Confucius' complaints are failures of his more usual sagacity. Perhaps the discernment afforded by moral maturity is particularly difficult to maintain where luck is especially bad, and Confucius undoubtedly has especially bad luck. Another strategy is to connect Confucius' despair to wider values a virtuous person would endorse—that is, to see Confucius' suffering as owing far less to personal pain his circumstances provoke than to how his circumstances reflect losses of broader value. Thus, for example, his despair at finding no ruler ready to employ him owes to the morally regrettable state of politics in his age, the indifference of its rulers to being virtuous, more than to Confucius' own disappointment in being unable to use his talents and learning. Still another is to temper claims about the joy of the virtuous life in recognition that virtue will in some contexts undoubtedly entail experiencing negative emotional states. While this last seems the most promising—after all, Confucius clearly endorses sincere grief as the virtuous response to bereavement (see, e.g., 17.21)—it remains situational. That is, it is not clear whether it can well explain the much more *general* frustration and despair Confucius sometimes appears to confess or a rather global despair about how one's life is going.

There is also, in this approach, an unstated hermeneutical priority we do well to query. Where scholarship addresses what the life recommended in the *Analects* is like, it often inclines toward emphasizing Confucius' more abstract and general claims, largely eschewing the less studied remarks he makes about his own life. However, given that Confucius' more general claims are typically delivered to his students, men who are but learners yet face circumstantial challenges to rival Confucius' own, these claims likely include a hortatory element. The claims are not merely bold cant, to be sure, but their confident inflection may be more pedagogically strategic than simply descriptive of the life of virtue. The nature of the remarks largely omitted by this approach is also a worry. Confucius' less studied observations about his own life are ostensibly more spontaneous utterances—the casual remarks, wry asides and jokes, and even outbursts I survey as indicating complaints. Neglecting these is worrisome insofar as spontaneous utterances can operate as important tells about a speaker's state of mind, their unstudied character often revelatory precisely because they are unguarded and may thus reflect what the speaker thinks or feels rather than what she would *like* or *aspire* to think or feel. Especially where our aim is to assess what Confucius' life is *like* for him, we do well to consider their possible import.

Finally, this interpretive model endorses a view of the power of virtue to overcome pain that risks appearing insensate where the sorrows of ordinary lives and ordinary people are concerned. If the *Analects*' presentation of a good life indeed entails an exquisitely refined species of joy and, moreover, sees this joy as profoundly motivating in living a life of virtue, the good life here appears to stand at a worryingly far remove from ordinary lives and people. It promises something grand and ambitious, to be sure, but its very grandeur and ambition rather radically defies pre-theoretical sensibilities, declaring as more experientially good than most a life, Confucius' life, that transpires in conditions most people would find deplorable and cruelly tragic. Despite all of his life's sorrows, we must believe, Confucius' life is more abundantly joyful than most, he wins all he *deeply* wants and, by extension, all *anyone* should deeply want. While I judge this to be an unappealing conclusion, more to the point, it appears to sit ill with the *Analects*' philosophically exceptional and striking sensitivity to ordinary cares. This is a text that counsels us to worry about our parents' aging, that exalts as exemplary a man who weeps uncontrollably at the death of a beloved student, and that, put simply, often endorses many of the most *ordinary* of cares and sorrows.

7 Moral Maturity as Settling

I wish to offer an alternative reading of the life the *Analects* promises, one that takes Confucius' complaints as important, conclusion-altering tells about what that life is like. I seek, that is, to invert the more standard approach to the text, looking to the biographical, narrative features it contains as enjoying priority in explaining what the life of virtue is like. My reading thus begins from the premise that some significant truth about the felt, experiential quality of Confucius' life resides in his complaints and consequently the quality of this life lies much closer to the surface where our pre-theoretical sensibilities are concerned. Where we frame Confucius' life as I have done in rehearsing its conditions and his less guarded responses to those conditions, his life is unpleasant and his luck pitiless. However, in this reading, I contend, we find an alternative model of moral maturity that, while it leaves intact Confucius' suffering as *real* suffering, succeeds in both explaining this life and finding in it powerful sources of admiration. Let me begin by offering, in summary fashion, the alternative account of moral maturity that emerges from Confucius' complaints.

Confucius' complaints indicate both that he feels his life's deprivations *as* sacrifices and that, sometimes, his life is *not* experientially pleasing but summons despair and sorrow. Understanding that he lives the life he does *in spite of this* suggests that moral maturity may entail a developed resolve to settle for less than one would otherwise wish. Subsequent to the initial recognition that circumstances bar winning all one wishes, one can come to establish priorities in cognizance that doing so constitutes an effort to navigate loss self-consciously and deliberately. It is to see that circumstances deny the life one would *really* want and consequently to embark on the effort to win the best life circumstances can afford within the range of possibilities available. The morally mature person, in this iteration, is not engaged in a critically reflective assessment regarding what life is *truly* good, but instead existentially owning that the truly good life—a life in which circumstances afford the possibility

of winning *both* the admirable and desirable—is not on offer. There is here no achieved autonomy that enables joy in life come what may, but acceptance of an experientially much harder truth: because the good life is denied by circumstances one cannot control, one must seek to win the best life one can.

This distinction between winning a good life and winning the best life one can get may initially appear philosophically facile, for any responsibly sophisticated account of the good life will incorporate concessions to unhappy circumstances and frame the “good” with reference to the contingent particularities of any actual life. However, where understanding the felt, experiential qualities of the life the *Analects* recommends is the target, it seems salient. More significantly, it alters how we address the cluster of related issues that feature in accounts of the good life: the orientation toward pre-theoretical desires proposed in the *Analects*, how the possibilities for joy and satisfaction are conceived, and, finally, what deeper account of motivation may be in play. Let me treat these issues in series, contrasting the view I propose with the more standard account.

Where the standard reading would identify moral maturity with autonomy from ordinary desires and the cares that attend these desires, my alternative account registers Confucius' complaints as indicating that he *retains* both these desires and the cares that attend them. Unlike the autonomy account, which effectively emphasizes the significant difference between Confucius and most people, this perspective emphasizes the ways in which Confucius is *like everyone else*. It acknowledges that Confucius shares the untutored desire for a good life that includes *both* the admirable and desirable: Confucius' life is not the life, all things being equal, *he* would want. He wants not to be comparably poor, not to have his talents largely unused and unrecognized, not to endure physical peril, not to lose his students to moral corruption or early death. And the frustration of these desires costs him; he *suffers* for it. The life he has is thus, in an important felt sense, not the life he would choose. It is instead the one that the confluence of regrettable circumstances and his priorities oblige him to have. As he might put it, if the way prevailed in the world, he would have a different life, a *better* life. As is, he must make do.

The way in which Confucius “makes do” is not by transforming his desires, but instead something at once more modest and more difficult. Rather than ceasing to care about ordinary, prosaic goods, he engages in a continuous process of calibrating his desires, resolutely regulating them so that his caring about prosaic goods never trumps or overmasters his desire for the admirable. That is, he resolves never to betray the admirable in pursuit of the desirable, even while he wants both. The orientation toward desire is here thus *altered*, though it is not *transformed*. Insofar as Confucius wins some freedom in this alteration, it is the more modest freedom achieved by a clarity about one's priorities that precludes existentially destabilizing confusion about what to do where one must lose part of what one wants. This achieved existential constancy and resolve does not, however, preclude the pain of those losses. Confucius is an exemplar, in this iteration, not because he is liberated from ordinary cares, but because he remains bound by them and yet manages them in an extraordinary way.

As this treatment of desire already indicates, where we read the *Analects'* implied account of moral maturity as a capacity to settle for less than one would wish, such will significantly complicate what we may say about the promise of such a life to

yield joy. Close analysis of just what character joy and satisfaction can have on this account is a subject surely complex enough to warrant its own extended treatment. Consequently, let me but indicate some of what I think it necessarily would include, as well as what it would exclude.

Most immediately, this explanation of Confucius' life and desires appears to grant some pre-theoretical concerns a learner is likely to have regarding what following virtue may entail. Confucius' complaints appear to reinforce rather than alleviate the suspicion that while virtue may, as the cliché would have it, be its own reward, its rewards can nonetheless experientially register as rather spare or even mean. So too, while getting the best life one can is a good of sorts, it will not always or reliably feel good, no matter how deep one's "delight in the way." Whatever joy may be on this account, it is not a clean or unmixed joy secured by independence from caring about "external goods" or, more generally, from the vicissitudes of fate, for Confucius is here understood to have joy *and to suffer*. The character of Confucius' joy will consequently have about it an austerity that mirrors the conditions in which it is achieved.

A plausible account of Confucius' joy that does not underestimate or devalue his suffering can be found in the way in which his complaints are expressed. Confucius rues his lack of recognition and position, grieves his losses, and fancifully imagines escape routes from his life, but what he does not rue is what he has done in life. What consistently privileging the admirable has won for Confucius is not clean joy but a clean conscience. He can and does regret the circumstances in which he lives and the hard deprivations of more ordinary pleasures those circumstances impose upon him, but he does not regret his conduct within these constraints. Put most basically, he wishes the *world* were otherwise, but he does not wish he had *done* otherwise.¹⁶ Joy here is not in liberation from challenge but in challenge well met, a joy that comes from serially and consistently doing well what is radically difficult to do, loving the way even where it is most difficult to love.

While this account may initially appear to sit ill with Confucius' more abstract and reflective claims about the finer rewards of living virtuously, I suggest it can indeed incorporate them. As I note above, these claims may include a hortatory inflection. So too, I think they are consolatory. The claims are, in other words, working at multiple levels, enjoining learners to persist by encouraging consideration of rewards that may not be immediately evident and rehearsing compensations for the losses that following the way may entail. Understood this way, the fact that these claims are most often made contrastively achieves new sense.

The life of virtue here stands measured against a life pitched to seek more conventional, "worldly" success, for what is at issue is not what sort of life, simpliciter, one might want, but what sort of life it is best to seek and to have where conditions force the admirable and the desirable apart. The passages rehearse reassurances that the costs of following the way are *worth it*, reminding the practitioner, for example, of pleasures his life can afford even in adversity and invoking his admiration for exemplars in whose noble company persistence will place him. They encourage him to seek out subtler species of joy that might, in better conditions, escape notice, alerting him to the profundity of pleasures found in exercising one's

¹⁶ This seems buttressed by *Analec*s 12.4, where Confucius links freedom from anxiety and apprehension to being able to examine oneself and find no fault.

own resolve, doing so with beloved companions, meeting the end of life without regret over one's conduct, and so forth. These are not joys that trump sorrow but in them are consolations that no mere material success, with its attendant anxieties and compromises of conscience, can afford. Where Confucius contrasts the life of virtue with the life of conventional success, then, he does not offer counsel merely for learners, but also for himself, and for people like himself. The claims provide solace to those who suffer the loss of conventionally defined well-being in part because of adherence to high personal moral standards they decline to abandon.

While this view of joy tempers the ambition of what the *Analects* promises, it retains the conviction that there is a species of joy in virtue. Joy is not refined *away from* feeling the vicissitudes of fate but is instead found in one's capacity to endure them and locate redemptive satisfactions even while they injure. Experience is here enriched by recognition that while one *settles* for less than one would wish, one has not *compromised* one's deepest commitments. In this, we might say that winning the best life one can get comes coupled with a sense that one will *feel as well as one can* given what fate has offered.

The motivations of Confucius' virtue and, by extension, the life of virtue can, on this account, be framed with reference to the tempered sense of joy it offers. However, given the comparable modesty of the rewards here—a gentle joy derived from doing as well as one can rather than an inimitably attractive independence from worldly cares—it may make more intuitive sense to see these rewards as predominantly compensatory and thus as largely functioning to sustain motivation. Confucius claims on one occasion, “All is lost with me!” In some measure, surveying the goods he has *not* lost, such as his clean conscience and the subtler pleasures that too often escape notice, may work best not to motivate but to sustain motivation where it already exists, and indeed sustaining motivation does seem a more natural fit for the *Analects* than generating it where it does not already exist.¹⁷

While this account loses a “clean joy” as motivation, what it more forcefully offers is a way to plausibly and more securely hook Confucius' motivation to wider cares and interests. The puzzle of Confucius' motivations, on this account, rests not in understanding how he, or anyone, can radically transform pre-theoretical sensibilities regarding the sort of life we will find pleasing, but how one can come to live *with* these sensibilities while deliberately pursuing a virtuous life in which they are denied complete or even adequate fulfillment. A substantial part of the explanation, I expect, resides in a willingness to use one's own suffering as spur, reconciling oneself to ungenerous fate and persisting in the hope that where one cannot best fate for oneself, one may improve it for others. That is, winning a life one can esteem despite its significant costs may ride on coming to see the good life one seeks as other than one's own. It often belongs instead to a future that one longs to secure even while knowing one may not live to share it. Indeed, many of the lives we deeply admire are just those that seek the good life *for others*, lives in which the desirable is sacrificed precisely in the hope of rendering such regrettable sacrifices less necessary for others. While such

¹⁷ Given that the *Analects'* primary instructional focus is derived from Confucius' counsel to his students, men who presumably already enjoy significant motivation, it may be the case that the text speaks most, and most fully, to fostering the increase of motivation where it already exists rather than to stimulating it where it does not exist. I address this point in a bit more detail in Olberding 2011: 61–63.

lives may *include* satisfaction and joy, they *run on* something else, on an effort to reduce the losses required of others: where the world denies what I want, I try to change the world for others. This is of course a profound element in the logic of Confucius' own life but we risk obscuring it where we emphasize only his joy and satisfaction.

This account of Confucius' motivation is at once more basic and more mysterious. It is more basic insofar as it foregoes explaining Confucius' life with reference to a highly nuanced species of good in which the refined joy and satisfaction of living admirably predominate and largely define the life. It opts instead to emphasize the ways in which Confucius' political and moral efforts aim at securing a better world, a world in which virtuous people, people like himself, pay fewer penalties for their virtue. Put simply, Confucius desires what all desire, and because the denial of some of his desires *matters* to him, he can more deeply want a world where such denials are reduced. Confucius' motivation is also, however, more mysterious.

Where, as the autonomy account would hold, we understand Confucius to have won inimitably attractive joy, we need not wonder *why* he would want it or *why* it would motivate. His joy may be no ordinary joy, but in it he wins a state that is subjectively both abundantly fulfilling and pleasing, and subjectively feeling fulfilled and pleased with one's life is a good readily recognized, even by the untutored, as motivating. In contrast, the resolve to use one's own sorrows as spur to reduce those of others is more difficult to understand, in part because the agent is directed toward ends that, if secured, may not be hers to enjoy. While not strictly altruistic given the more tempered goods that accompany such efforts, it nonetheless has some of the same motivational mystery as altruism. Moreover, where we imaginatively inhabit Confucius' life, we understand that the motivation driving the direction of that life develops in radical uncertainty of success. His effort to seek a better world is one with no guarantee of success and indeed in the midst of his life he had many reasons to think his efforts failed.

In sum, where we treat Confucius' complaints and the conditions in which they are made as evidence for understanding what his life is like, moral maturity features primarily as a capacity to self-consciously settle for less than one would otherwise wish and a resolve to endure what penalties accompany privileging the admirable. Rather than ceasing to care about ordinary, prosaic goods, the priority is on subordinating them to the admirable. In this iteration, while Confucius' life is *morally* good—that is, admirable—its felt, experiential sense is psychologically far more complicated. Rather than robustly good, Confucius' life is the best one he can get, a difference that makes a difference in understanding what his life is like for him and, by extension, what the life of virtue may be like for any who pursue it.

8 Two Forms of Testimony

What in part underwrites efforts to locate an account of the good life in the *Analects* is recognition that the text offers testimony about the life of virtue. The text, that is, does not so much theorize about the good life, but compellingly offers in its presentation of Confucius purportedly more direct, experientially grounded statements regarding what following the way is like. My contention is that the testimony the text appears

to offer can cut in significantly different directions, depending on whether we assign interpretive priority to Confucius' reflective, general remarks or to his less studied reactions and remarks. In taking Confucius as exemplar and measuring the life the *Analects* promises, it is useful to see these two directions in testimony in broader context, to see them as belonging to wider families of testimony about living virtuously. Let me then describe these wider families through two testimonies that potentially illuminate the fundamental complication in understanding what the *Analects* offers.

Confucius' more explicit, general claims about the life of virtue and the autonomy account of moral maturity to which they give rise offer a form of testimony that is philosophically familiar. From this vantage, Confucius' testimony belongs to the same family as Socrates'. Plato's presentation of Socrates is notably pitched to differentiate Socrates' values and commitments from those of his wider community, that is, from pre-theoretical sensibilities. As Socrates awaits execution, for example, he consoles Crito by recalling that the cares they have jointly pursued have been marked out from the common run. He insists, for example, that concerns Crito expresses with regard to "money, reputation, [and] the upbringing of children" are not theirs, but instead belong to "the majority of men" (Plato 1997b: 48c). Likewise, while on trial, Socrates describes the logic of his life by employing a contrast between what is popularly perceived as happiness and the *real* happiness he has in his wisdom discerned and instead pursued (Plato 1997a: 36e–37a). More generally, Socrates asserts throughout his trial and unjust imprisonment a freedom of mind and spirit that effectively prohibits many of the feelings of injury or sorrow we might expect his circumstances to evoke. The arc of Socrates' life and the noble ease with which he meets its end results from his having trained himself to care only about what *really matters*. Socrates resolves to privilege the admirable, and a corollary of this is his resolving not to care about the desirable, to avow independence from the more prosaic goods about which "the majority" of people care.

While there are notable differences between Confucius and Socrates, *qua* exemplars both may be read as offering testimony that explains their superlatively virtuous lives by way of a moral maturity that transforms desire. Both resolve not to sacrifice personal integrity for lives that will afford greater safety, comfort, and popularly recognized well-being. Both courageously face disapprobation, enmity, and physical peril in service to noble moral ends. And, of course, both avow that the lives they lead afford finer rewards than any alternative available to them could do. They achieve an uncommon joy because they possess the moral maturity to discern what resides in their control and pursue it, thus developing a deeply refined appreciation of the life of virtue, a life compared to which other pleasures for them pale. They thus live *truly* good lives and secure *real* joy.

There is, however, another family of testimony regarding the virtuous life, one into which Confucius' less studied remarks about his life can fit. This family of testimony is less commonly found in philosophical literature but is nonetheless, I think, quite common. It is found in the myriad quietly heroic lives of people who rather profoundly want comfort and security but find a moral commitment strong enough to motivate them to forego non-trivial elements of their own personal well-being in pursuit of a future where such sacrifices need not be made. This posture is evocatively offered by Bill Bailey, a World War II veteran recorded in Studs Terkel's remarkable

oral history of the war as it was lived and endured by ordinary soldiers and civilians. After recounting his experience of the war, Bailey says simply:

I still think we're all part of somethin', call it the history of the human race, if you want to. I feel that if some guy ten years from now has got some halfway decent conditions, I wanna feel that I helped in some small way to make it possible for him to enjoy them conditions. I mean, that's the name of the game. I just want somebody to say, Them poor son-of-a-bitches, they musta taken a beating back in the old days. We don't know all the names, but glory to them, or somethin' like that. (Terkel 1984: 102–103)

What Bailey describes here as “the name of the game” is a game that features in the lives of many ordinary people who by dint of circumstance and quiet resolve do the best they can even as they suffer for their effort. Such comparably “modest” heroes of course populate, often unnamed and unrecognized, much of human history, lending their efforts, sacrifices, and even their lives to engineering moral, social, and political improvements in their communities. Yet despite the prevalence of such heroes, understanding them is interpretively complex, for such people often settle into heroism with deep regret about the circumstances that summon it forth and modest hopes that giving up some measure of their own good will matter, both in preserving their moral dignity and in making a better world. They do not opt for a joy that is easy to want but settle instead for satisfactions inextricably coupled with suffering. They do not win what they would estimate as truly good lives, but the best lives they can get.

As Terkel's collection of testimonies about the war amply attests, the moral nobility of the “good war” and the admiration we feel for its participants achieved at a safe distance from their experiences often fails to appreciatively capture the many complexities and ambiguities of the experience itself, as the war was lived by those who endured it. The war was morally good but, as Terkel's testimonies indicate, calling the lives of those in it good without attending closely to the felt, experiential *ungoodness* of it all is intellectually facile, emotionally indolent, and ultimately morally insensitive to the goods at stake in it. As Bailey attests, perception that life *lacked* deeply desirable goods and the hope that it someday might not be thus was what enabled the war's many sacrifices.

While we do not typically think of Confucius as belonging to the company of exemplars to which ordinary people such as Bailey belong, I suggest we should entertain the affinity his complaints appear to assert between his life and lives like Bailey's. Confucius' life, *for him*, transpired in the same uncertain hope that what he did might later matter. In many respects, the good Confucius pursued was not his own and cost him his own. What Confucius affords for consideration of the good life through the identification of his life with this family of testimony is a philosophically-minded model who exhibits a similar *reluctant willingness* to “take a beating.” He is, to be sure, a moral giant, but he is a wounded one, one who feels his troubles even as he struggles to overcome them. In this, the model he offers may better speak to the nature of moral experience as many people find it. Part of what commends this life to us as admirable is just this, the exchange of present personal good for an outward-looking hope: Confucius loses much of what he desires because “the way does not prevail in the world,” but his losses operate on the hope that *someday*, *for someone*, it may not be so and that, owing to his efforts, the best life someone else can get will be better than his own.

9 Conclusion

Whether the two directions in testimony the *Analects* appears to offer can be brought together into a singular, conceptually coherent theoretical account of the good life has not been my focus here. My concern instead has been simply, as I note, to detail an ambiguity the text contains and thus complicate the ease with which Confucius' testimony about his life is placed in the family of testimony represented here by Socrates and, concomitantly, his virtue identified with an autonomous moral maturity. While the *Analects* appears to move rather freely between the two directions in testimony I identify, philosophical scholarship has largely privileged the Socratic model, conceiving moral maturity as autonomy. It has, that is, largely inclined toward seeing Confucius' life as a highly nuanced species of good in which the refined joy and satisfaction of living admirably predominate and largely define the life. In privileging this perspective, however, we court a peril to which philosophical treatments of exemplars are prey.

There will, by definition, always be a pronounced gap between the lives that renowned exemplars lead and the lives of ordinary people: exemplars are identified as such because their lives operate upon an *uncommon* moral probity and consistency. In analyzing these exemplars and their lives, we effectively take measure of the gap, our assessments of the exemplar serving to establishing just *how* different and distant the exemplar is from others. Where philosophical treatments of Confucius neglect his suffering and despair, however, they effectively overstate and artificially extend the gap between Confucius and ordinary people. Emphasizing his joy and satisfaction, achieved in conditions our pre-theoretical sensibilities would find dreadfully tragic and deeply lamentable, risks rendering him *wholly other*. More to the point, it renders him more wholly other than indeed the *Analects* suggests he *is*, favoring how his life, in its totality, may appear to us and thus obscuring a substantial element in the model he offers for emulation. Insofar as Confucius' life *is* good, it is good not simply because of its joys, but also and perhaps more substantially because of his capacity to *navigate loss*, his acquired ability to deliberately relinquish what he must when he must.

My sense of the *Analects* is that it is commendably modest in what it expects to follow from the life of virtue, that it successfully avoids any chimerical claims regarding what such a life can promise. Its estimations of virtue's outcomes humanely acknowledge the force of prosaic concerns for basic material needs, security, and so forth, as well as the pains of having a life in which these are denied. There is here no conquering triumphalism, no definitive suggestion that virtue is a distinctively sufficient good that renders lesser goods superfluous, and nothing that disdains as plebeian commonplace human cares. Confucius' satisfaction with himself does not overmaster his sorrows. His virtue wins him the best life he can get, but the *Analects* suggests that he, and we, are warranted in wishing it were better. Indeed, that Confucius' life *is not as good as it could be* is, I suggest, rather core to the admiration of Confucius the *Analects* recommends.

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