



Confucianism and the Political Order: Religion Poised in Risk

Confucianism has traditionally sought to advise political rulers in the course of action the state might pursue to establish a polity genuinely reflective of the ethical nature of humanity. This early role of the tradition, and a major activity of Confucius himself, was in large part made up of the effort to offer such advice. Standardly, the teachings offered by the Confucians have been seen as a form of humanism, often against a background of emerging humanistic tendencies within Chinese society.¹ All too infrequently have Confucian teachings and their roots been presented in the framework of a religious superstructure that views humankind as a potential mirror of the ways of *T'ien*, Heaven, the source of religious authority within the Confucian tradition. It is, however, from a religious context that Confucians have traditionally called upon political rulers to emulate the Way of Heaven for the betterment of humankind. This involves components of faith and risk-taking not often understood for the central role they play, even in the matter of political decisionmaking.

For purposes of this chapter, I am defining faith as a way of thinking and acting that is motivated primarily by a religious commitment. A religious commitment is a total commitment of the entire person toward that which is regarded as absolute, a definition influenced by Joachim Wach's discussion of the characteristics of religious experience.² It is also soteriological in that it offers ultimate transformation, following the definition of *religion* by Frederick Streng suggested in the Introduction.³ Faith is not primarily a matter of knowing, although unfortunately it is most often taken as a form of knowledge that lacks proper empirical verification. Streng has discussed faith as a way of living, not a way of knowing, in which all things are related to one's religious life,



not compartmentalized into specific epistemological categories.⁴ Thus, a life lived with religious commitment is a life of faith. It involves much more than simply the way in which things are known.

Risk-taking is not usually discussed as a category of religious dimension, and it is not the defining characteristic of the presence of religion. In many situations it may have nothing to do with religion. Situations exist, however, where it seems an important extension of faith. If we think primarily of faith as a way of thinking and acting within the context of religious commitment, then there will be those recommendations for action that appear to call for risk-taking. In such a situation faith may find itself in intimate association with risk-taking. One can think of numerous historical examples that would substantiate this. Is it, however, actual risk-taking? The answer is both yes and no. Religious commitment can call for certain forms of action, the outcome of which is very uncertain. That is a risk. Loss, suffering, and even death may be involved. That is a risk. Advice given may appear to ask for action that challenges the very basis of one's security. That is a risk. In any of these cases, the risk may still be taken precisely because of the religious commitment. And the consequences suggested can follow.

On the other hand, because in this case the primary motive to initiate the risk-taking is the religious commitment, the "risk" may only be a risk to one who does not share that religious commitment. After all, the risk for loss in each of the cases posed is loss of some thing in particular, even if that involves life, but it is not the loss of religious commitment. The religious goal may override any other form of commitment: at the very least, this appears to be the case for a religious person. Thus, the judgment that something is a risk is far more subjective than we normally chose to consider and is highly dependent upon the goals set by the individual.

The advice that the Confucians offered the various political rulers called for a risk, in a sense an ultimate risk, although they promised as well a security were the risk to be taken. While the political rulers wanted advice that would ensure them of the maintenance of political power and perhaps the enlargement of their own political base, the Confucians repeatedly cautioned that it was not political power in itself that brought security. If anything, such political power brought the threat of greater insecurity because of its precarious nature. Being a political leader was an insecure business, and the stakes were high for one's own demise. The answer lay not in an increase in political power, but from the Confucian point of view, in a radically different direction. This different direction was a return to the ways of moral virtue. For the Confucian, this was the moral virtue of the sage kings of the past. In a religious context, this was also the moral virtue of the Way of Heaven itself.

The various political rulers found, however, small comfort in the model of the sage kings of the past or the fact that this was the Way of Heaven itself.

◆ Their concerns were more immediate—the need to respond to a bellicose enemy, a rebellion within one’s borders, the struggle for power within one’s own court. And it was answers to such dilemmas that the political leaders sought from the Confucians and in a sense have always sought from the loyal Confucian ministers. The answer the Confucians gave, however, was in a sense unnerving and unsettling. It suggested that political solutions in themselves were inappropriate and inadequate. Instead, the solution lay in the return to the way of moral virtue. This was the risk. In the face of a seemingly insurmountable adversary, the Confucian suggests that one does not respond in kind, but instead radically alters the course of political action to a self-reflective mode of internal learning. The root of the problem is not with the external adversary, but with the internal level of one’s own moral nature.⁵

The political leader responds, “I must meet my enemy, build my military strength to a greater level than my adversary, and provide security for my people.” The Confucian response over the centuries has been that no amount of political and military strength will ensure security; the only thing that will ensure security is the proper attention paid to the cultivation of the moral nature of each individual. The risk suggests that the application of the moral nature of humanity to governance and rulership will disarm the armed. The risk of returning to the moral nature of humanity, from the Confucian point of view, is the only basis upon which an outward and external security may be built. This was the risk posed, a risk poised in religious commitment, and it has been at the very heart of Confucian teachings throughout much of its history.

Genesis of Religious Faith

It is a matter of methodological consideration to understand the basis upon which Chinese history and the Chinese political order might be interpreted in religious terms. If there has been any one dominant mode of interpretation, it has tended to argue for the largely secular character of Chinese society and worldview, and thus the general paucity of religious dynamics.⁶ While this is far too large a topic to respond to in an appropriate fashion in the present chapter, I want to comment upon a single aspect of this issue, one highly relevant to our understanding of the Confucian tradition. This is the religious character of the early Chinese political order.

It is commonly understood that Confucius advised rulers of his day to return to the ways of the ancient sage kings. Less common is the understanding of the religious import of this advice. That the sage kings lived in a world impregnated with religious meaning has played a surprisingly small role in the interpretation of the early political state, but even less in the interpretation of the arising of the Confucian tradition. Methodologically, the failure to understand the religious roots of the tradition has remained a critical problem for Confucian stud-



ies, and one might argue, the general understanding of much of Chinese thought. The problem, a frequently encountered one in the history of religions, is the reductive interpretation given to the role of religion. Religion occurs, but it is often seen either as secondary to other factors or even in a fundamentally manipulative role, upholding the authority of those in power and circumscribing the will of those without power. If instead of this role, religion were seen as the authentic and absolute worldview for the inhabitants of China at the time, what would the interpretation of the early emerging political order in China resemble? Were religion viewed in this way, it would, of course, become the central characteristic of the worldview, for religion when present is never a secondary feature.

One interpretation of the early political order that has allowed for its religious dynamic is that by David Keightley.⁷ Keightley argues that religion is at the very center of the Shang political order. This suggests that religion for Shang culture is not secondary, not derivative, not manipulative, but quintessential to the defining character of the Shang worldview. As such, the Shang political state is a religious state and we misinterpret that political state as long as we fail to understand the religious dynamics that underpin it, support it, and provide its very life. At the center of this religious dynamic lay ancestor worship and a perception of what Keightley calls the *generationalism* of its order and structure. By this term, Keightley means “the necessity to conceive of the world in hierarchies of power based upon the relative age of generations.”⁸ It is the Chinese commitment to hierarchy, authoritarianism and bureaucratic structure that, for Keightley, has its origins and continued allegiance in a religious dynamic. Thus, the political state is propelled by a religious commitment and its growth and development fed by a religious dynamic. Keightley says, in this respect: “The form that political authority, and the civil theology supporting it, eventually took as political culture became increasingly secularized in Chou times continued to manifest a commitment to the hierarchical, authoritarian, quasi-magical, bureaucratic features whose presence may be discovered in the characteristic generationalism and contractual logic of Shang ancestor worship.”⁹ The importance of this issue is not the character of the religious dynamic itself, but the possibility of seeing its role as the dominant element in the worldview.

For Keightley, this element remains as the driving force in political ideology and the functioning of the political state, even in those periods where religion appeared to play a less dominant role. “A religious faith in the validating efficacy of classification, hierarchy, number, and contract persisted, remaining behind in secular areas of life after the inundating flood of Shang religious belief had receded.”¹⁰ This suggests a need to understand the religious dynamics at work in a given period and the misunderstanding that can occur if we fail to take this element into account, even in later periods. “We misunderstand the new, more differentiated values, attitudes and institutions of Chou and Han if we view them in purely secular terms.”¹¹

◆ This has profound implications for the study of Confucianism. From this perspective Confucianism can be seen against a backdrop charged with religious import. Its own religious dimension develops out of this background, not in opposition to it. We know that the later Chou state cannot maintain the same religious dynamic as that of the Shang before it. There is a weakening in the power of the Chou state with the arising of the strength and independence of the individual states. It is in this setting that we see the arising of the so-called hundred schools of thought and the genesis of the Confucian school.

Confucius advised that there be a return to the ways of the ancient sage kings. This advice takes on a different meaning in light of the religious interpretation of the political order. Might one not argue that Confucius is primarily motivated by his own perception of a religious dynamic still existing, though but a faint shadow of its form from an earlier age? And is not his mission not only the continuation of this religious dynamic, but the attempt to reinstate it as a central component in the world in which he lived? One could argue that with the arising of the independent states, there is a loss of the central religious dynamic of the Chou political order. With this loss of the central religious dynamic, the states gain power, but the power remains largely disenfranchised from its religious roots. Confucius, however, remains driven primarily by this religious dynamic, what he saw as the quintessential feature of an earlier culture and the element most important to emulate and implement if the world was to be rectified. It is this religious dynamic he sought to transmit. As Keightley concludes, "The strength and endurance of the Confucian tradition, ostensibly secular though its manifestations frequently were, cannot be fully explained, or its true nature understood, unless we take into account the religious commitment which assisted at that tradition's birth and which continued to sustain it."¹² A religious interpretation of the Confucian tradition is thus not an isolated phenomenon, for the Confucian tradition itself has its own religious genesis in an already-established religious dynamic at the very heart of the early political order. Confucius' motivation was to return to this religious dimension, but the political reality he faced was one of men of apparently small faith and a dominance of political ideologies with the disintegration of the central religious component of the Chou worldview.

Confucius and Government by Moral Example

Much of Confucius' life was spent in what often seems a futile attempt to advise the rulers of his day in what would bring an end to the strife and turmoil of a war-torn Chou dynasty and a return to the ways of peace and harmony. Repeatedly, his advice was a return to the ways of the ancient sage kings. If, from his point of view, the rulers of his day could but follow the ways of the ancients, then there would be the creation of peace and harmony. And what was it that these rulers possessed that the rulers of Confucius' own age did not



possess? First and foremost, it is what was referred to as the ruler's *te*, translated as moral virtue. The quality of *te* as it referred to the ancient sage kings meant primarily a special relation established and maintained between the ruler and *T'ien*, Heaven.¹³ It was in a sense an attitude; the ruler's whole being standing in proper relationship to *T'ien*. This is often spoken of in terms of the ruler's special mission as an intermediary for Heaven and thus his possession of *T'ien-ming*, the Mandate of Heaven, which was Heaven's continued favor for the ruler as long as the ruler was himself virtuous.¹⁴ In turn, the ruler is frequently addressed as *T'ien-tzu*, Son of Heaven, to indicate the closeness between the ruler and Heaven, assuming that the ruler continued to hold Heaven's favor. The *te* of the ruler was identified specifically in the actions carried out by the ruler. If they were truly *te*, then they were themselves a reflection of the Way of Heaven.

From Confucius' point of view, the rulers of his own day were no longer exemplifying *te*. They were instead morally corrupt and thus no longer the intermediary between *T'ien* and humankind. Confucius' primary advice was to suggest that the rulers of his day return to this earlier model, that they reestablish their *te*, their proper relation to Heaven. The primary method whereby this could be accomplished for Confucius was for the individual to cultivate and develop his own inner moral nature. It was the responsibility of the ruler to be moral exemplar to his people, and Confucius saw his role as prodding the ruler on to awareness of this responsibility.

Time and time again, however, Confucius found a less than enthusiastic response on the part of the ruler. The rulers reminded Confucius that they found little usefulness and practicality in what they considered to be abstract moral discussions. Their problems were, instead, immediate and practical. Confucius responded by suggesting that his moral teaching was not irrelevant to these problems, and that, in fact, unlike the advice they sought, a moral solution was the only solution that was actually relevant and ultimately practical!

The moral teaching of Confucius is focused around often-found descriptions of the paradigmatic moral figure. This is the *chün-tzu*, the noble person, virtuous person, gentleman or exemplary person.¹⁵ Originally a term suggesting birth into the aristocratic ranks, Confucius changed its meaning from nobility by birth to nobility by virtue—moral virtue. As such, it came to mean a level of moral achievement. Confucius stresses repeatedly that anyone can become a *chün-tzu*, anyone can achieve the development of his moral nature. It is not easy; it requires diligence and perseverance, but each individual has the capacity for its achievement. And it is to this goal that the ruler must strive. This, for Confucius, is the only way that peace and harmony will return to the world.

Let us look at several examples of the description of the *chün-tzu* given by Confucius.

◆ The gentleman understands what is moral. The small man understands what is profitable.¹⁶

While the gentleman cherishes virtue [*te*]; the small man cherishes possessions.¹⁷

He puts his words into action before allowing his words to follow his action.¹⁸

The gentleman devotes his mind to attaining the Way and not to securing food.¹⁹

If the gentleman forsakes benevolence [*jen*], in what way can he make a name for himself? The gentleman never deserts benevolence, not even for as long as it takes to eat a meal.²⁰

A number of other passages could be cited, but these are sufficient to see some of the key concepts and terms introduced in terms of the characterization of the *chün-tzu*.

First, there is a sharp contrast drawn between what is right, *i*, and what is profitable, *li*. These continue to be held in sharp contrast to each other and are mentioned frequently in the characterization of the true ruler from the false. The way Confucius uses the term *i*, right or righteous, suggests a moral capacity inherent within human nature. Its chief character is to distinguish right from wrong and it is often used in a way that would suggest the term *conscience*, a kind of inner judge of right and wrong.²¹ The contrast of *i* and *li* stresses that the petty man is only concerned for material gain. With *li*, the end is defined exclusively in terms of such material gain, and there is no concern for the means employed to reach the end. There is certainly no consideration of either moral ends or means by the person so motivated, the *hsiao-jen* or inferior person. By contrast, the *chün-tzu* sees ends and means as intimately linked and each thoroughly rooted in moral consideration.

Second, we see the focus upon *te*, moral virtue, and its contrast with material possessions. The call is for the ruler to develop his capacity of *te*, to reflect his true relation to the Way of Heaven, rather than his own selfishness in personal aggrandizement of power and material possessions. Third, we see the contrast drawn between the Way, *Tao*, and making an end of one's livelihood. There is a higher call than mere subsistence where subsistence is not a mark of economic level, but of economic commitment. The Way is a religious commitment and other commitments pale by comparison.

Finally, there is the emphasis upon *jen*, goodness, probably the most frequently discussed virtue by Confucius. It has been translated as goodness, humanity, humaneness, or benevolence. Its meaning, rooted in its philological structure, suggests literally the relation of one person to another, that is, the proper relation, or moral relation, of one person to another. It is described in the *Analects* as the single thread that runs throughout Confucius' teachings.²² It is also further defined by two other virtues—*chung*, reciprocity, and *shu*, empathy.²³ It was this paradigm of virtue that Confucius sought to teach the rulers of his own day.



Several passages in the *Analects* find Confucius advising the rulers of his day on the benefits of a model of rulership by moral virtue: "The master said, 'Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble, but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.'"²⁴ Confucius is quite clear in distinguishing edicts and punishments from moral virtue and rites and suggests a rulership of inward moral capacity rather than outward political sanctions. Confucius is, in a sense, daring the ruler to appeal to his own inner moral virtue, suggesting that while political control and authority very well may be retained by edicts and punishments, it is a government of coercion and control rather than a naturally felt respect for moral virtue. The key is the use of the term *shame*. Edicts and punishments will keep the people in line, that is, the state will be ordered, but there is no sense of shame. With moral virtue and rites, there is a sense of shame. Confucius is using the term *shame* not to emphasize, as we might, shame as a response to a condition of socially constructed disgrace,²⁵ but as an indicator of the fiber of the inner moral nature of man. Shame is an outward form of an inwardly established capacity for rightness. Thus Confucius' comments suggest that a rulership of *te* and *li*, rites or propriety, allows the individual to develop his own capacity for moral conscience rather than coercing a conformance to a preestablished legal and punitive code. This point is made even more strongly in the following passage:

Chi K'ang Tzu asked Confucius about government, saying "What would you think if, in order to move closer to those who possess the Way, I were to kill those who do not follow the Way?" Confucius answered, "In administering your government, what need is there for you to kill? Just desire the good yourself and the common people will be good. The virtue of the gentleman is like wind; the virtue of the small man is like grass. Let the wind blow over the grass and it is sure to bend."²⁶

To Chi K'ang Tzu, the solution is simple—eliminate those who do not follow the Way, and then we will have the Way! The Way for Chi K'ang Tzu is an external standard to be applied as if it were a law or, in turn, a punishment. Chi K'ang Tzu's mistake, from Confucius' point of view, is that he fails to see that the implementation of the Way does not depend upon his success in demanding conformity, but upon his own inner and subjective realization of the Way. This is why he can distinguish between the goal of the Way and the means for its realization, why he can state that one simply eliminates those who do not conform. Confucius' response is to shift the problem from external standards to internal process. "Just desire the good yourself and the common people will be good." Instead of worrying about the elimination of those who do not share your perspective of the Way, just become good yourself. Become a

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chün-tzu, become a ruler of virtue, and the world itself will follow. The people may be forced to adhere to the laws of the state, but unless they see the goodness and the moral virtue of the ruler, the capacity of rulership remains superficial and only effective to the degree it demands conformance. But this is coercion, and it does not solicit the hearts and the minds of the people. However, if one is a ruler of goodness and virtue, then the people will give not only their allegiance, but their hearts and minds. With moral goodness, there is a trust from the people, an element of no small significance for Confucius.

Tzu-Kung asked about government. The Master said, "Give them enough food, give them enough arms, and the common people will have trust in you."

Tzu-Kung said, "If one had to give up one of these three, which should one give up first?"

"Give up arms."

Tzu-Kung said, "If one had to give up one of the remaining two, which should one give up first?"

"Give up food. Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the common people will have nothing to stand on."²⁷

The last element to be given up is the trust of the people. This is what the ruler must establish if he is to be a true ruler, and not simply a tyrant. This trust ultimately depends upon the ruler's capacity of moral virtue. This, from the Confucian perspective, is all that is needed.

If this inner character of moral virtue can be developed and brought to fruition, then governance itself is almost effortless. According to Confucius, "If a man is correct in his own person, then there will be obedience without orders being given; but if he is not correct in his own person, there will not be obedience even though orders are given."²⁸ The obedience springs forth from trust in the morally correct person and is itself a sign of each person's moral development. The dark side of the coin suggests that without this correctness one may force obedience, but such obedience is not a product of a natural inclination of moral response.

In describing the sages of antiquity, Confucius suggests that little effort was required in the art of rulership. "If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action, it was, perhaps, Shun. There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south."²⁹ This passage has received much comment, and I do not want to minimize the complexity of terms and phrases, but one point that seems quite clear is the quality of effortlessness exemplified by Shun. Because he possessed *te* and thus stood in the correct relation to Heaven, there was little, if anything, he had to act



upon. The phrase found in the passage, taking no action, *wu-wei*, suggests not so much “no action” as “non-action.” The difference is the differentiation of the cessation of all action, which the phrase does not mean for either Taoist or Confucian, from a very special kind of action, an effortless action. The ruler’s *te* is itself enough to effect action and most importantly to effect the manifestation of moral virtue in action. The ruler himself is essentially at the center in a kind of still point with his *te* fully manifest.³⁰ Action proceeds, gravitating around this paradigmatic manifestation of *te*. As the wind bends the weeds, so is there no one who is not influenced by this center of *te*.

Such *te* is the key to rulership, not the outward implementation of laws and punishments, and this can be seen in Confucius’ attempt to define the word for government or to govern. “To govern [*cheng*],” Confucius says, “is to correct [*cheng*]. If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?”³¹ His statement is a philological explanation of the term. The major part of the character for govern, *cheng*, is the word *cheng*, to correct or rectify. This suggests that the very process of governing is itself a process of rectification, moral rectification.³² From the Confucian point of view, the model of government as moral rectification continues to stand in contrast to a government of laws and punishments.

Confucius’ own frustration in attempting to convince rulers of his day of the ultimate correctness of his point of view is echoed perhaps in one passage of the *Analects*. “I suppose I should give up hope. I have yet to meet the man who is as fond of virtue as he is of beauty in women.”³³ Yet it is also a mark of Confucius’ teaching that he does not give up hope. There is a very strong undercurrent of thought that suggests Confucius believes Heaven itself has given him this mission.³⁴ Eventually someone will stop and listen and instead of asking for political and military strategy, will recognize that the only solution lies in taking that risk of returning to the ways of virtue; of risking what appears to be everything upon the belief that moral goodness will overcome the evil adversary, of taking the risk that the ends do not justify the means, but that the means are themselves determinations of the very nature of the end to be reached. The risk is high; the cost possibly great.

Confucius sees the risk and weighs the risk. He is aware that such risk may involve the loss of one’s own life, and yet he is prepared to take this step. “For gentlemen of purpose and men of benevolence while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished.”³⁵ This I would suggest is risk, and it is clear that what Confucius is posing to the various rulers of his day is an invitation to enter into this risk-taking, to defy the precedent of the age and strike out in a radically new way of acting and thinking, to act upon the belief, or more properly the faith, that the universe is morally good and that human nature has the capacity for such

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goodness, a moral goodness that can transform the world. It is risk-taking in his own age, but it is merely a confirmation of the faith of the sage kings from Confucius' point of view, a faith of great magnitude in relation to the political realities of his own day.

Mencius and the Moral Nature

Mencius, considered since the thirteenth century as the orthodox interpreter of the teachings of Confucius, maintains the same basic themes we have seen in Confucius. He roots them rather more firmly, however, in a theory of human nature that attempts to articulate the moral components of human nature and then employs this theory for its capacity to argue a political transformation based upon moral learning and self-cultivation. The *Mencius* begins, however, by arguing as Confucius earlier had for the benefits of the ruler adopting moral virtue rather than persisting in personal and selfish pursuits and interests.

Mencius went to see King Hui of Liang. "Sir," said the King, "You have come all this distance, thinking nothing of a thousand *li*. You must surely have some way of profiting my state?"

"Your Majesty," answered Mencius, "what is the point of mentioning the word profit? All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. If Your Majesty says, 'How can I profit my state?' and the counselors say, 'How can I profit my person?' then those above and those below will be trying to profit at the expense of one another and the state will be imperiled. When regicide is committed in a state of ten thousand chariots, it is certain to be by a vassal with a thousand chariots, and when it is committed in a state of a thousand chariots, it is certain to be by a vassal with a hundred chariots. A share of a thousand in ten thousand or a hundred in a thousand is by no means insignificant, yet if profit is put before rightness, there is no satisfaction short of total usurpation. No benevolent man ever abandons his parents, and no dutiful man ever puts his prince last. Perhaps you will now endorse what I have said, 'All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. What is the point of mentioning the word profit?'"³⁶

Mencius, as Confucius before him, distinguishes between, on the one hand, the virtues of *jen*, goodness, and *i*, rightness, and, on the other hand, profit, *li*, chastising the king for his emphasis upon profit. The argument from this passage becomes an important one throughout the history of Confucian thought. If the ruler is motivated by profit, then how can he expect any other motive for any other person in his kingdom? If the people from high rank to low witness the king questing after profit, then they, in turn, will follow the same course. Mencius counters this with an alternative. "All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. What is the point of mentioning the word profit?"



In other words, all that is necessary is benevolence and rightness. Following the themes we have seen Confucius develop, Mencius is suggesting that it is benevolence and rightness alone that are responsible for rulership. If, however, the ruler insists upon seeking his own profit, then he can expect nothing other than competition and struggle in all the ranks of society, and order will be maintained only by the implementation of laws and punishments. How much simpler to revert to the ways of virtue, to say nothing of its cost efficiency!

Mencius describes how his return to virtue might attract the attention of the people and how, in turn, it would begin a process that would transform society itself.

It was through losing the people that Chieh and Tchou lost the Empire, and through losing the people's hearts that they lost the people. There is a way to win the Empire; win the people and you will win the Empire. There is a way to win the people; win their hearts and you will win the people. There is a way to win their hearts; amass what they want for them; do not impose what they dislike on them. That is all. The people turn to the benevolent as water flows downwards or as animals head for the wilds. . . . Now if a ruler in the Empire is drawn to benevolence, all the feudal lords will drive the people to him. He cannot but be a true king.³⁷

The argument is a simple one, but central to Confucian thinking. To lose the hearts of the people is to lose the Empire itself. In what is essentially constructed as the opposite argument of the first passage, Mencius argues that instead of the divisions created by profit, the application of virtue will unite the people with their ruler. The critical element is to win the hearts of the people. This is the product of virtue and virtue alone.

To Mencius, the power of virtue is immeasurable. If virtue alone is employed, the ways of the world will be healed once again as they were in the time of the sage kings. To the ruler the challenge is to adopt such ways of virtue. But if they are adopted, the results are extraordinary. Several passages address this issue. In the first, King Hui of Liang, the same ruler who asked Mencius what he brought that might profit his state, questions the relation of the weak state to the strong, seeking Mencius' advice on how to remedy his own weaknesses.

King Hui of Liang said, "As you know, the state of Chiu was second to none in power in the Empire. But when it came to my own time we suffered defeat in the east by Ch'i when my eldest son died and we lost territory to the extent of seven hundred *li* to Ch'in in the west, while to the south we were humiliated by Ch'u. I am deeply ashamed of this and wish, in what little time I have left in this life, to wash away all this shame. How can this be done?"

"A territory of a hundred *li* square," answered Mencius, "is sufficient to enable its ruler to become a true king. If your Majesty practices benevolent government

◆ towards the people, reduces punishment and taxation, gets the people to plough deeply and weed promptly, and if able-bodied men learn, in their spare time, to be good sons and good younger brothers, loyal to their prince and true to their word, so that they will, in the family, serve their fathers and elder brothers, and outside the family, serve their elders and superiors, then they can be made to inflict defeat on the strong armor and sharp weapons of Ch'in and Ch'u, armed with nothing but staves. . . . Hence it is said, 'The benevolent man has no match.' I beg of you not to have any doubts."⁵⁸

A ruler of a small state complains bitterly of his fate to be sandwiched between militarily strong states. He tells Mencius of the defeats he has suffered and seeks Mencius' advice on what course of action he might pursue to remedy his situation. Echoing the first passage of the work, however, he is still asking Mencius how he might profit his state. Mencius' response is to suggest that considering military responses is unnecessary, that ultimately the only response is a moral response. He must cease looking at the strength of his enemies and turn his gaze inward upon himself and the condition of his own moral virtue. The answer lies in his becoming a true king, a benevolent ruler. If he does this, he will win the hearts of the people as well as their faith and trust. With their hearts committed, the people will fight valiantly for him against military forces far stronger than their own. However small or weak the state, if such policies are adopted, it will become the state of true strength. As Mencius says, there is no match for the strength that comes from moral virtue, and he begs that the ruler might accept this possibility.

Mencius offers the ruler the belief that if he were to adopt such ways, there will be little doubt as to his recognition by the people as the true king: "Now if you should practice benevolence in the government of your state, then all those in the Empire who seek office would wish to find a place at your court, all tillers of land to till the land in outlying parts of your realm, all merchants to enjoy the refuge of your market-place, all travelers to go by way of your roads, and all those who hate their rulers to lay their complaints before you. This being so, who can stop you from becoming a true king?"⁵⁹

The model of moral rectification is ultimately based upon the view of human nature, a view that has played a central role in the history of Confucian thought. It is Mencius who is primarily responsible for the classical form of discussion of human nature, arguing that human nature is inherently good. This is a position that often seems assumed in the writings of Confucius, but it was not a topic actually discussed by Confucius directly. With Mencius, however, we find a much greater attention paid to trying to describe and define human nature. Mencius argues that human nature has certain beginnings of goodness within it. This is not to say that human nature is at birth fully good and nothing else needs to be done. Rather, there is an intentionality toward



goodness, an incipient goodness that suggests human nature has the beginnings of goodness. In one of Mencius' classic debates with the philosopher Kao Tzu, Kao Tzu has argued that human nature is like water, it will flow in whatever direction a channel is opened.⁴⁰ That is, human nature is morally neutral, and it depends upon environmental circumstances to develop its capacity for goodness or for evil. Mencius replies that while water may flow east or west, it always flows downward. This is its natural proclivity, just as it is the natural proclivity of human nature to be good. This proclivity toward goodness is discussed by Mencius as the so-called Four Beginnings—qualities that if developed will lead toward the virtues of *jen*, *i*, *li* and *chih*, goodness, rightness, rites, and wisdom.⁴¹ The most famous example that Mencius uses to support his argument is that of a child about to fall into a well.⁴² His argument is that any person upon seeing a child about to fall into a well would seek and rescue the child. They do it for no other purpose than the response of their own human nature which cannot bear to see the suffering of another. This reduces itself to a basic Confucian moral axiom that states that it is a part of our human nature that we cannot bear to see the suffering of another. Interestingly enough, this ethic is tied directly to the sage kings. "Mencius said, 'No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others. Such a sensitive heart was possessed by the Former Kings and this manifested itself in compassionate government.'"⁴³

This is not to say that there are not evil acts, and, for that matter, evil persons and potentially evil states, but to suggest that such evilness is the product of external circumstances, rather than the inherent nature of the individual. The ramifications of this are important, for it suggests that the core of human nature remains good even when clouded by a capitulation to circumstance. Mencius would suggest that on the basis of this theory of human nature, the inherent goodness can be appealed to, not in every case, but in a number of cases. Perhaps there are some who simply are too encrusted with the evilness of their ways, but for most, if given the proper circumstance and opportunity, there remains the possibility of appealing directly to the inherent goodness and engaging the individual in the development and emergence of such goodness.

What Mencius is doing is posing a risk! He is asking the ruler to change his course of action from a rule of law and punishment to a recognition of the universality of moral virtue. He is asking the ruler to recognize that it is a part of the very nature of an individual that he cannot bear to see the suffering of another, and he is asking that this moral principle be incorporated into the process of governing itself. We again see the dynamics of the relation between risk and security. From the ruler's point of view, security is to be found in adequate laws and punishments to order the state and adequate military defenses to defend the state. From the ruler's point of view, the risk Mencius poses—to adopt a moral principle—only presents a picture of a total lack of security. To give up the legal and military underpinnings of society in order to

◆ follow some general moral principle seems only to offer the possibility of throwing away all security as well as common sense!

The response of Mencius is essentially to argue that the adoption of moral rectification is a risk, but it is a risk worth taking for several reasons. First, the present context of security is a false security. To think that through the political subjugation of one's subjects and military subjugation of one's neighbors, one has achieved a genuine security is simply wishful thinking. The fact of the matter is that while one might exercise control over subjects and neighbors, one has neither the trust nor faith of subject or neighbor. Thus, one cannot trust him, and at any opportune moment such subjugation will well forth in rebellion. The current path, while it might appear secure, has seeds of ultimate insecurity imbedded within it. Second, if this is the case, then the risk itself is of less magnitude when one realizes that the present policy is itself a risk, although it has been thought of as the only policy to pursue to gain a security. The risk worth taking is to turn away from a policy that involves a genuine insecurity and the risk of perpetuating such insecurity. What then is the risk, or in other words, wherein lies the actual risk? Does this risk lie with starting out on a new path of policy, one that admits to the moral nature of man, or does the risk lie with treading the same path of building a false security and having to rebuild such security to convince oneself that one is actually secure?

Finally, there is a sense that while there is risk in adopting something new and it appears idealistic at best to suggest this turning back upon the moral nature of the individual, such risk is only an apparent risk, for it arises from a profound faith in the truth of the moral nature of humanity. Here is where the risk in a sense appears as risk to the ruler, but not to Mencius, for it is the ruler who does not believe that human nature is good. Nor does the ruler remember his legacy in the religious nature of the earlier political order. The early political order, as we have seen, was in intimate association with religious authority. The political order reflected the religious order and the religious order reflected the political order: neither could be divorced from the other. For the Confucian, this is an article of faith. Lacking that faith the risk factor appears high if not insurmountable to the various political leaders with whom Confucius interacted. From the Confucian point of view, however, the moral nature of humanity is true, and if the ruler takes the risk and adopts himself to policies that recognize this moral nature, then he too will see that if given the opportunity humanity will respond in moral ways.

In summary, the weight of religious faith plays a critical role. The Confucian tradition assumes not only the moral goodness of human nature, but the larger context of religious authority, the Way of Heaven, which from the Confucian perspective is the ultimate moral order of the universe itself of which humankind is but a microcosm. As the Way of Heaven is morally good, so in turn is the way of human nature. This is an article of faith held by the Confucian



tradition and one that serves as the basis for acting in the world. This is the foundation from which Confucius, Mencius, and much of the later tradition can invite the ruler to risk the implementation of moral government. It is, after all, no risk at all, for what appears to be a risk of political insecurity in fact represents the ultimate security of the way of humankind matching the Way of Heaven itself. From the Confucian point of view, political considerations are ultimately a matter of individual religious and moral learning as they were for the sage kings. The degree to which the political order is divorced from these concerns is the degree to which the facade of security is created and maintained by political power alone, a security that matches neither the true nature of humanity nor the Way of Heaven. It is for this reason that the Confucian tradition over the centuries has sought to take the risk, acting out a deep religious faith in the goodness of human nature as a reflection of the Way of Heaven.