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Altering Tian: Spirituality in Early Confucianism

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Altering *Tian*: Spirituality in Early Confucianism

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Chapter One - Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two - The <i>Analects</i>	4
Chapter Three - The <i>Mencius</i>	14
Chapter Four - The <i>Xunz</i>	22
Chapter Five - Conclusion	31
References.....	33

Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the three earliest Confucian thinkers and the foundational texts associated with them. In studying these texts this paper attempts to discover how these early Confucian thinkers conceived of *Tian*. This paper claims the early Confucian thinkers did not make as radical of a departure from the Ancient Chinese religiosity as many modern scholars have suggested. It has often been asserted that the tradition presented by these Confucian thinkers was entirely humanistic, altogether separate from the Ancient Chinese religiosity. This paper contests such claims, instead insisting that the early Confucian spirituality still viewed *Tian* as God and that the three earliest thinkers actually introduced new concepts which expanded, rather than diminished, upon the role of *Tian*.

Chapter One - Introduction

The matter of spirituality within the works of the three Confucian thinkers has been a point of contention in Confucian scholarship. In this paper I want to examine this contention in the foundational texts attributed to the three earliest Confucian thinkers. The works this paper will primarily be addressing are: The Confucian *Analects*, attributed to Confucius (770 BCE – 476 BCE) and compiled by students of Confucius; The *Mencius*, written and compiled by Mencius (c. 372 BCE – 289 BCE); And the *Xunzi*, which was written and compiled by Xunzi (c. 300 BCE – 230 BCE). One of the most notable issues, which scholars discuss in regard to these foundational texts, stems from the inclusion of *Tian* 天 (Heaven) the God of the Zhou Dynasty. The disagreement surrounding *Tian* lies in the question of how the Confucian thinkers sought to reinvent Heaven. Indeed, the altering of *Tian*, which takes place in these Confucian texts, represents one of the most profound changes from the ancient religiosity of China. Furthermore, it forms one of the most fundamentally important aspects within the new Confucian religiosity.

Many have either denied that *Tian* holds any real importance within the Confucian texts, or worse, simply neglected to discuss the importance of *Tian* at all.¹ These modern day scholars often wish to instead depict the Confucian tradition as one rooted in purely humanistic beliefs, a

¹ Though I can hardly list all instances of this, I will note a few. While the inclusion of Heaven in the text is not always ignored, when it is encountered many scholars have suggested that it is not as it appears. This can be seen in Chad Hansen's "A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought," as he suggests that *Tian* is used as a general term for nature, or the "natural course" of things (Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 32, 63.). Roger T. Ames has also suggested that *Tian* is a vague term, which may have occasionally have been used to denote reverence towards cultural heroes (Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*. (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2012), 221-3.). A.S. Cua brings another interpretation that Confucius used *Tian* do to its prevalence in society, but personally Cua believes that Confucius was "insouciant" towards spiritual phenomena, and had an "as if" attitude towards the idea of *Tian*'s existence (A.S. Cua, "The Ethical and Religious Dimensions of Li" in *Confucian Spirituality*. Ed. By Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 264-273).

set of values that has no place for something like Heaven. While *Tian* appears as little more than a footnote in the *Analects*, I would suggest this footnote bears a great deal of importance. This is clear, as the influence of *Tian*'s position in the *Analects* carries through to both the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*. In all of these texts, rather than destroying *Tian*, the Confucian thinkers reinvent it. *Tian* becomes a secondary force in these texts, but still maintains its godly status, and becomes intrinsically intertwined with the Confucian ideal of human development.

Understanding the importance of *Tian*'s position within the Confucian tradition is imperative in grasping the new religiosity Confucius attempted to establish. This can be noted due to the place of *Tian*. While it would become secondary in the writings of the Confucian thinkers, *Tian* was at the center of Chinese religiosity during the height of the Zhou Dynasty. This was tied to the notion of *tianming* 天命 (Mandate of Heaven), a concept established by the Duke of Zhou. This mandate was believed to have given the emperor his right to rule. Following the fall of the Shang Dynasty, the Zhou were able to legitimize their own authority by suggesting that Heaven had given them a type of moral authority over the Shang Dynasty. Their moral nature allowed them to take over, and gave them their right to kingship.²

The emperor would become known as the "Son of Heaven," a term which represented the connection that existed between the emperor and *Tian*. It was an exclusive connection, and it was through the emperor that *Tian*'s will was exerted. As the Zhou Dynasty prospered, both the emperor and *Tian* became synonymous with all that was morally good. The dynasty's immense wealth and power allowed the populace to rely upon this religiosity centered upon the emperor and *Tian*. However, as the Zhou Dynasty began to falter, so too did the image of *Tian*.³

² Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 93.

³ Ibid.

Confucius's new religiosity appears to be a move away from this failed religiosity from the Zhou Dynasty. A society centered on reliance upon the emperor and his connection to *Tian* is replaced with a model of individuals working together to forge a sound society. However, despite this focus upon humans helping themselves, the Confucian scholars did not appear to be ready to give up on *Tian*. The inclusion of *Tian* in the Confucian texts gives the impression this was something too important to simply abandon. Instead *Tian* was to be salvaged, or perhaps even redeemed, rather than left behind.⁴

Despite maintaining *Tian*, an alteration does take place, and by analyzing the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*, a consistent strand of thought can be seen. The human achievement of goodness, or *ren*, is almost certainly at the heart of these different Confucian texts, but equally fundamental is that one's ability to succeed in this endeavor is tied to *Tian*. *Tian* rarely intervenes directly in human affairs, but instead remains in the backdrop. It is here that *Tian* operates as the great endower, providing humans with the ability to succeed. Without *Tian*, the progenitor of virtue, humans would be bereft of goodness. Each of the three Confucian thinkers depicts *Tian* in a fashion that reflects this importance to human achievement. In their construction of this new image of *Tian* they also seem to develop a new religiosity. The focus on humanistic achievement by allowance of a spiritual being forms something in-between the purely humanistic religiosity seen by many scholars today, and the ancient Chinese religiosity that preceded the Confucian texts.

⁴ Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 27-8.

Chapter Two - The *Analects*

By the Spring and Autumn period (circa 770 BC - 476 BC) the Zhou Dynasty had lost much of its fervor. Following a number of poor rulers, the Zhou Dynasty had lost much of its once vast empire. It was during this period, in the year 551 BC that Confucius was born. The *Analects*, the recorded teachings of Confucius, recognize that the Zhou Dynasty had become a shell of its former self.⁵ The dynasty as a whole was in decline, and so too was the image of *Tian*. This decline was the unavoidable result of intertwining the perception of Heaven so intimately with the mortal Son of Heaven, the product of *tianming*. It is because of this connection that *Tian* shared not only in the success of the Zhou Kings, but also in their cruelties and injustices.⁶ Although the power of *Tian* had become central to Chinese religiosity, it could not remain as it was, and in the humanistic religiosity presented in the *Analects* of Confucius, *Tian* would find a new role.⁷

While the *Analects*, which are made up of passages from many early followers of Confucius, were most certainly responsible for helping to alter the image of *Tian*, the extent to which *Tian* is altered is a matter of some debate. Many scholars today find the *Analects* to be a purely humanistic text.⁸ Thus, Confucianism is often seen as having cut ties to many of the spiritual beliefs found in ancient Chinese religiosity. Indeed, this opinion is hardly surprising, as *Tian* only appears in the corpus of the *Analects* seventeen times.⁹ Additionally, scholars may find

⁵ Ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2001), 1-2.

⁶ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 24.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See reference 1

⁹ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 96.

their beliefs corroborated by several passages which suggest avoiding the supernatural. One such passage appears in book eleven of the *Analects*:

When Yan Hui passed the Master lamented, “Oh! Heaven has bereft me! Heaven has bereft me (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 1-2)!”¹⁰

In this passage Confucius cries out to *Tian*. His most treasured student has died, and feeling betrayed, or forsaken, he places the blame on Heaven. This is critical moment, as it signifies a scenario in which Confucius wishes to discuss Heaven. The *Analects* only seem to turn to Heaven here because matters of life and death are perhaps too complicated for humans to answer. Confucius cannot blame humans for the early death of his student, so instead he defers to Heaven. This deferment implies that the *Analects* still view Heaven as having control over matters of life and death. These are clearly matters of great importance and for the *Analects* to attribute them to *Tian* suggests that fragments of the earlier Chinese religiosity are still embedded in Confucian spirituality. Still, another passage in book eleven of the *Analects* provides a slightly different picture:

Zilu asked about serving ghosts and spirits. The Master said, “You are not yet able to serve people--how could you be able to serve ghosts and spirits?”

“May I inquire about death?”

“You do not yet understand life—how could you possibly understand death (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 31)?”¹¹

Contrary to the ideas presented in the previous passage, here Confucius seems to suggest that certain matters are beyond human comprehension, and should not be delved into. Although ghosts and spirits are not the same as *Tian*, they are all supernatural forces found in the Chinese religiosity of the time. It is because of passages like this that some modern scholars have suggested that a radical shift was made away from the earlier Chinese religiosity by the *Analects*.

¹⁰ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “Analects 11.9,” 31.

¹¹ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “11.12,” 31.

However, while changes were certainly made, they may not be as humanistic as some scholars have suggested.¹² I believe what we see here is Confucius shifting his focus away from the spiritual, but this should not be mistaken as an outright rejection of the spiritual. Indeed, the phrase “how could you be able to serve ghosts and spirits,” while suggesting that they Zilu cannot serve them, also implies that they are beings which could at some point be served. However, like death, these supernatural forces are beyond Zilu’s abilities to understand. These are forces which seem to evade empirical data of any kind, they are enigmas. This is likely connected to why the *Analects* depict Confucius crying out to Heaven after his student’s death. It is a matter that he cannot understand, and in dealing with things that cannot be known by humans, Confucius turns to the supernatural.

Instead of erasing *Tian*, Confucius merely reasserts his shift of focus to the natural world and away from the spiritual. And although there is a shift to the natural world here, Confucius seems to suggest that Heaven may still have a significant role to play within this world, in matters that go beyond understanding things like death. Despite the secondary position of *Tian* in the *Analects*, it is hardly robbed of all importance. On the contrary, the few passages regarding Heaven seem to carry a great deal of significance.

Heaven is occasionally discussed in association with *tianming*, or the Mandate of Heaven, in the *Analects*. When *tianming* is discussed, one might notice that it has changed significantly from the Duke of Zhou’s original mandate. Originally *tianming* was conceived of as only being in relation to the emperor. Indeed, the emperor, or the Son of Heaven, was the only human who had a direct connection to *Tian*.¹³ It is curious then that no connection is made between the Son of Heaven and *Tian*, or *tianming*, within the *Analects*. This absence does not signal a humanistic

¹² See reference 1.

¹³ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 23-4.

shift, as much as it signals an expansion of *tianming*. Here it seems that Heaven is no longer exclusively accessed by the Son of Heaven. As this separation from direct association with the Son of Heaven is quite notable, it is certainly worthwhile to delve into it in the text. This analyzation can begin with one of the more well-known references to Heaven in the *Analects*:

The Master said, “At fifteen I set my mind upon learning; at thirty I took my place in society; at forty I became free of doubts; at fifty I understood Heaven’s Mandate; at sixty my ear was attuned; and at seventy I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 5).”¹⁴

This passage describes the stages of Confucius’s life, and how he grew over time.

Incredibly important is the notion that he did not understand *Tian* until he was fifty years old.

This is perhaps the most telling sign that Heaven’s Mandate is no longer connected solely to the king’s right to rule. Instead, this is somehow directly related to the life of Confucius. This is a sign of Confucius’s shift into the natural world. *Tian* is no longer solely tied to the emperor. Here there is an extension to everyday people, in this case Confucius. According to the passage, *Tian* is something that Confucius, for most of his life, could not clearly interpret. Robert Eno suggests that it was around the age of fifty that Confucius conceded, giving up on trying to succeed within the government. Given the monumental importance of this situation for Confucius, Eno asserts that this may have been when Confucius came to understand *tianming*. However, it was only at age sixty that Confucius learned to “attune his ears” and follow Heaven.¹⁵

Eno’s understanding of this passage is quite important in determining what role *Tian* plays within the *Analects*. Confucius is seen spending his whole life learning, developing himself. This desire for a powerful government position is likely tied to the Confucian ideal of internal sagehood and external kingship. The idea that the more powerful one is the more good

¹⁴ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “Analects 2:4”, 5.

¹⁵ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 89-91.

that person can do, allowing one to attain sagehood. In the back of Confucius's mind he has always desired a noteworthy governmental position. And yet, Confucius is never able to succeed in this position. It is not until he accepts his absolute failure, that he is able to understand Heaven's Mandate.¹⁶ So what significance might *tianming* actually have on Confucius's own life? The importance of the Mandate of Heaven in this case is perhaps that, originally, *Tian* only gave this mandate to emperors who were deemed morally righteous. If *Tian* now provides this mandate to all people, including Confucius, then not receiving the mandate indicates some moral error. The moral error in question could relate to his attempt to gain a role in government.

This could somewhat easily be connected to Confucius's belief in the importance of societal roles. The *Analects* often seem to maintain that people are meant to fulfill particular roles in order to better society.¹⁷ Despite comfortably assigning roles to others, Confucius struggled in settling into his own role. For years he attempted to succeed in a governmental role, but continually he failed. It is only through an understanding of Heaven's Mandate that Confucius is freed from his cycle of failure. *tianming* imbues Confucius with an understanding of why he constantly struggled, and it was simply because his role was not meant to be in government. Furthermore, there is an understanding that attempting to fit into a role, where one does not belong, is morally wrong. What is morally good is to fulfill a role in which one can succeed, and by entering into such a role, the whole of society benefits.

While Confucius pursues this morally good path on his own, it is a path that could not have been pursued without *Tian*'s Mandate, which allows for this understanding, this guidance, towards the morally good path. *Tian* may not be directly involved, but its position is very prominent and difficult to ignore. Indeed, the *Analects* take such care to insert *Tian*, one can

¹⁶ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 89-91.

¹⁷ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Analects 12.11," 36.

hardly deny Heaven's importance in the development of Confucius. The recording of Confucius's lifelong journey in this short passage shows Confucius falling short of success for a great part of his life. It is certainly grounded in the natural world that permeates the *Analects*. However, it is not without the insertion of *Tian* that Confucius can be set upon the proper moral path.

Two other passages from the *Analects*, which this paper will analyze, deal with Heaven's place in the natural world. The first of these passages is from book seven of the *Analects* states: "It is Heaven itself that has endowed me with virtue. What have I to fear from the likes of Huan Ti (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 22)?"¹⁸ In this passage, "Huan Ti" refers to a Minister of War during the time of Confucius, and one of Confucius's enemies who had professed a desire to kill him.¹⁹ Anyone looking to read *Tian* out of the text may suggest that Heaven lacks any importance at all here. Certainly by only reading the latter portion of this passage one could derive a purely humanistic understanding of what the *Analects* are saying here. However, this requires one to outright ignore the statement that "It is Heaven itself that has endowed me with virtue."²⁰ Confucius refers to Heaven as one would refer to another person. *Tian* itself seems to recall the God of the Zhou Dynasty and gives some authority to Confucius's claim. A humanistic claim that *Tian* merely refers to nature seems somewhat out of place in this context.

Alternatively, one might read this paragraph as if Confucius expects *Tian* to directly intervene to protect him. However, this appears much too direct for a Confucian text that consistently argues for human action.²¹ Indeed, here *Tian* appears as more of a driving force behind these actions. This is apparent as *Tian* is often depicted as that which enables humans to

¹⁸ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Analects 7:23," 22.

¹⁹ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 83.

²⁰ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Analects 7:23," 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*

act. This newfound role as an enabler helps to explain the uniquely small role of *Tian* in the *Analects*. *Tian* no longer directly intervenes, as much as it endows humans with the ability to fend for themselves. In this sense *Tian* is the biggest proponent of Confucianism's more humanistic religiosity. *Tian*, like Confucius, does not appear to want humans to be forced to relying upon the spiritual elements of the ancient Chinese religiosity. It is because of this that *Tian* is seen as the one that gives humans the resources to act independently of the spiritual.

An additional mentioning of Heaven appears within the seventeenth book of the *Analects*. In this particular passage Confucius reveres Heaven to the point that he wishes that he could emulate *Tian*:

The Master sighed, "Would that I did not have to speak!"
Zigong said, "If the Master did not speak, then how would we little ones receive guidance from you?" The Master Replied, "What does Heaven ever say? Yet the four seasons are put in motion by it, and the myriad creatures receive their life from it. What does Heaven ever say (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 50)?²²

The significance of this passage is two-fold: First it shows that Confucius has reason to believe in the existence of Heaven through nature. Secondly, this reasserts the image of Heaven as a teacher/enabler, rather than as a direct force. Addressing the former point, Confucius derives a belief of Heaven from observing nature. This could be related to the cosmological argument, noted by many medieval Christian thinkers, that God is evidenced by creation itself. Similarly, Confucius interprets the order and endowment as proof of *Tian*. The four seasons and the giving of life are what the later Confucian thinker Xunzi would call "offices of Heaven".²³ These are separate from human affairs, and it is through them that proof of *Tian* is satisfied for Confucius.

Concerning *Tian* as a teacher/enabler, Confucius sees Heaven as something which should be emulated. Although the perfect emulation of *Tian* is impossible, humans are still shown to be

²² Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Analects 17.19," 50.

²³ Ibid., "Xunzi," 298-302.

capable of performing highly auspicious roles. Indeed, this was the case with the great sage-king Shun. In the fifteenth book of the *Analects* it is said of Shun: “As a ruler... Shun had nothing to do, but to hold himself in a respectful position, facing south (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 45).”²⁴ Shun’s own abilities show the potential of humanity, as he, like *Tian*, is able to instruct without speaking. Julia Ching connects this idea of facing south to a passage in book two of the *Analects*, which similarly states: “If you govern with the power of your virtue, you will be like the North Star. It just stays in its place while all the other stars position themselves around it (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 5).”²⁵ This act of facing south was itself ritualistic, suggesting a high position of power over others. This simple act displayed Shun’s own ritual propriety, and it was this adherence to rituals which allowed him to rule successfully.²⁶ Confucius is displayed in the *Analects* as desiring to share in this type of ritual propriety, so that he too may lead by example only, and thus not have to speak.

Leading through ritual propriety is another point which stands in contention with the idea that the *Analects* are purely humanistic. Shun performs an act which is borderline supernatural, he rules purely through example, and it is only through the example of facing south. By doing this he, like the North Star, rules without issue. Although Shun is seen to have immense ritual propriety, Confucius is often not pictured to be on the same level as the sage-kings. The status of Confucius is typically shown to be quite average. In book seven the *Analects* show Confucius boasting “There is no one who is my equal when it comes to cultural refinement,” but he simultaneously acknowledges many of his shortcomings (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 23).²⁷

²⁴ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* “*Analects* 15:5,” 45.

²⁵ Ibid., “*Analects* 2:1,” 5.

²⁶ Julia Ching, “Son of Heaven: Sacral Kingship in Ancient China,” *T’oung Pao: Second Series*, Vol. 83. 1997, 38-9.

²⁷ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Analects* 7.32,” 23.

Overall Confucius is typically seen as being quite humble, and he often suggests that his own students are capable of just as much, if not more than he is.²⁸

A shift away from this humble image of Confucius does appear later in the *Analects*. This is most prominently noted in *Analects* 19.24:

Shusun Wushu was disparaging Confucius. Zigong said “It is pointless, Confucius cannot be disparaged. The worthiness of other people is like a hill or a mound, in that one can still climb on top of it. Confucius is like the sun and the moon – it is impossible to surmount him. Even if a person wished to cut himself off from their radiance, what harm could he do to the sun and the moon? All this would serve to show is that such a person did not know his limits (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 229-230).²⁹

Here Confucius, like Shun, is depicted as being much more than an average human. His student Zigong suggests that Confucius becomes a supernatural being, equivalent to the celestial bodies of the sun and the moon. Although *Tian* is not explicitly mentioned here, the supernatural aspect of Confucius perhaps implies the presence of *Tian*. Shun’s powers were derived from being the Son of Heaven, from holding the position of king.³⁰ Confucius is depicted differently here, going far beyond mere emulation, instead he is seen to be legitimately supernatural. And although this contradicts earlier sentiments found in the *Analects*, it provides very important insight into the minds of those constructing the later books of the *Analects*. This supposition that Confucius was more than just human insists that Confucianism had not completely abandoned the earlier Chinese religiosity. Indeed, these supernatural qualities suggest that spiritual notions and ideas concerning *Tian* were likely still very much embedded in the minds of Confucian thinkers.

²⁸ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Analects* 7.32,” 23.

²⁹ Ed. Edward Slingerland, *Analects: With Selections and Traditional Commentaries*, “19.24,” (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 229-230.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, “*Analects* 2:1,” 5.

Still, despite the vast amount of evidence for the presence of *Tian* in the *Analects*, modern scholarship continues to see it as a matter of little importance. This is glaringly apparent in the incredibly influential book by Herbert Fingarette: *Confucius—The Secular as Sacred*. Fingarette finds Confucianism to be incredibly relevant to modern society. However, he writes off concepts such as *Tian* and the spirits, dismissing them as “magical residue” from ancient Chinese religiosity. Fingarette suggests that many of these are problematic to the secular views of Confucius. He deems them to be later interpolations or simple “poetics”, and as such he chooses not to engage in discussing them.³¹

Fingarette still succeeds in writing a very gripping analysis of the humanistic nature of Confucianism, but something is most definitely missing. Although *Tian* is rarely in the forefront of the conversation, it is still very much present in the background of the *Analects*. Confucius’s Chinese religiosity survives through this purely humanistic approach depicted by Fingarette, but it does not go unchanged. Just as the *Analects* took a step away from the spiritual, Fingarette takes yet another step, further removing the ancient Chinese religiosity from the Confucian texts. He chooses to explain away *Tian*, just as many others have.³² However, as one can see, *Tian* is cited repeatedly within the *Analects*, and spiritual sentiments seem to be very much alive, despite what some scholars may choose to claim.

³¹ Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, (Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1998), 3-6.

³² See reference 1.

Chapter Three - The *Mencius*

Unlike the *Analects*, the book of Mencius, which shares his name, devotes much more time to discussing *Tian*. This is in part because *Tian* becomes inextricably intertwined with the overarching concepts present within the *Mencius*, which are *xing* 性 (human nature), *ming* 命 (fate), and the “four beginnings”. Each of these concepts is used to express a need for human development, and *Tian* is almost always seen as a means to encourage this development.

It is worthwhile to briefly discuss these new concepts before delving into how *Tian* accompanies them in the text because all three are tied to Mencius’s theories on human goodness. Looking first at the four beginnings, or the four sprouts, Mencius says that humans have these at birth the same way all infants are born “with four limbs.”³³ This is a powerful statement, suggesting these are truly a fundamental part of what it means to be human. These four sprouts are endowed with what Mencius calls the four virtues: *yi* 义/義 (righteousness), *li* 禮 (ritual propriety), *ren* 仁 (benevolence), and *zhi* 智 (wisdom). By accessing these different virtues and making use of them in one’s own life, it is possible to develop, or cultivate, the sprouts.

Mencius asserts that because of these sprouts everyone has the potential for sagehood. Robert Eno describes this sagehood as being made up of four elements: “focus of concentration; integration of phenomena; a sense of total control’ and feelings of freedom and joy (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 130).”³⁴ Though only a few may achieve sage status, it is a path available to all through proper cultivation of the four sprouts. However, some people will leave their sprouts

³³ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Mencius* 2A.6,” 130.

³⁴ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 175.

untended. The sprouts of those individuals will wither and die, and this will have a negative effect on their personal character.³⁵

Regardless of how one eventually turns out, the existence of these sprouts proves something about the nature, or *xing*, of humans: It is inherently good, though Mencius does not suggest that people always act in accordance with this goodness. Rather, Mencius indicates human nature can be considered good because all people are capable of becoming good. Here he is not speaking as to whether or not people are born good, but whether or not people have the potential to become good. His insistence on trying to push individuals to reach this potential can clearly be seen throughout the whole of the *Mencius* text. There is often an assertion that individuals must try to do good, as Mencius believes these acts will help in cultivating and preparing individuals to rule as kings.³⁶

Intimately connected to both of these concepts is *ming*, or fate. This term has a close relationship to *Tian*. This is because fate, much like *Tian*, often is depicted as a factor which compels. Indeed, it may not be a stretch to suggest that fate is the product of *Tian*, and thus is the same as *Tian*'s will. It is through fate/*Tian*'s will that the potential of the four sprouts and human nature might be realized. This is because fate and *Tian*'s will drive people to do what is morally right. By doing what is morally right one may cultivate their four sprouts, and in turn this leads to the development of one's good nature. Conversely, to ignore both *ming* and *Tian*'s will is to go against what is morally right, and ultimately leads to the withering of the four sprouts.³⁷

Now, with a basic understanding of *xing*, *ming*, and the four sprouts, it is possible to analyze passages discussing the connection between them and *Tian*. Perhaps the one of the most

³⁵ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 175.

³⁶ Ibid., "Mencius 6A.6," 147-8.

³⁷ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 114-20.

important points about the presentation of Heaven in these passages is that *Tian*'s role is often as the endower of human nature. This can be seen in book six of the *Mencius*:

But the office of the heart is to reflect. If it reflects, then it will get virtue. If it does not reflect, then it will not get it. This is what Heaven has given us. If one first takes one's stand on what is greater, then what is lesser will not be able to snatch it away. This is how to become a great human (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 151).³⁸

The meaning behind this passage has a great deal to do with the cultivation of the four sprouts, and whether or not to cultivate them. The specific decision in question is whether one should reflect and gain virtue, or simply ignore the office of the heart and not attain this virtue. The role of Heaven almost appears to be little more than a footnote. However, Mencius still takes time to note that *Tian* is the one who has endowed humans with this ability to reflect. This is to say that *Tian* does not act for humans, but allows humans to act. Thus, for Mencius Heaven is our enabler.

This depiction of *Tian* as an enabler is indicative of Mencius's entire approach throughout his work. *Tian* may appear to only serve minor roles in some of these passages, but on a grander scale *Tian*'s importance is immense. Mencius avoids discussing *Tian* in relation to this grand scale, and instead chooses to orient his discussion within the realm of human affairs. However, one can hardly dismiss that Mencius assigns *Tian* a role of supreme importance – secondary as it may appear. This is further illustrated in book seven of the *Mencius*:

Mengzi said. "To fully apply one's heart is to understand one's nature. If one understands one's nature, then one understands Heaven. To preserve one's mind and nourish one's nature is the means to serve Heaven. To not become conflicted over the length of one's life and to cultivate oneself to await it is the means to stand and await one's fate.(Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 152)³⁹

³⁸ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Mencius 6A.15," 151.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, "Mencius 7A.1," 152.

Throughout this small, but very packed passage, Mencius connects *Tian* to each of the three major concepts. Heaven is abundantly mentioned, and it seems to be very much the focus of Mencius's discussion. The start of this passage refers to "applying" one's heart, which based on the previous passage is to reflect. By doing this one would understand the importance of virtue, and his/her own nature. Furthermore, the connection between human nature and *Tian* is often repeated in the *Mencius*⁴⁰. *Tian* gives humans moral qualities, thus one understands that *Tian* is morally good. If one were to then nourish one's own nature it could be considered an act of service to the morally just *Tian*. Finally, Mencius warns against the dangers of worrying about one's own lifespan. This is ultimately a matter of fate. To say it is fate is to suggest it is determined by *Tian*'s will. If one is unconcerned with this, then all that is left is for him/her to cultivate their sprouts, and act within the human offices. In this way one will simply await what *Tian* has in store for oneself.

By grasping the nuances of this passage one can comprehend the vast importance of *Tian* to the whole of Mencius's work. *Tian* is what allows for Mencius's discussion to take place. Without *Tian* there are no sprouts, there is no fate, human nature lacks its current order. Mencius imagines all of these aspects to be perfectly planned out, each one feeds into the other. If each of these parts did not fit so perfectly together, if they were not constructed with such order, then the system would cease to work. And perhaps this order is why Mencius is so convinced that it is *Tian* which has endowed humans with these elements.

Although *Tian* is of immense importance to Mencius's discussion of human nature, *Tian* also is heavily discussed in regard to politics. One of the most curious statements concerning *Tian* in politics is seen in book two of the *Mencius*. It states: "He will have no enemy in the

⁴⁰ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, "2A.5; 4A.13; 6A.15," 121-2.

world. He who has no enemy in the world is the agent of *Tian*. Never has there been such a one who has not ruled as true king (Eno 1990, 103).⁴¹ This small excerpt divulges a great deal of information concerning Mencius's views of *Tian*. It is quite apparent that Mencius wishes to reinforce the idea that one should follow *Tian*, as he states that every agent of *Tian* has ruled as a true king.

Perhaps it is the first sentence of this passage that appears the most curious, as it seems impossible for a king to have no enemies. Indeed, even a great king would develop some foes during his reign, whether it is among his subjects, or other rulers vying for power. What sets apart the king in this passage is that he is an agent of *Tian*. This seems to suggest Mencius still believes the Mandate of Heaven is in effect and *Tian* is a powerful enough force to allow a king to rule without opposition.

The context of political passages like this make Mencius's comments all the more significant. Mencius's statements here are recordings of his encounters with various rulers, as he attempted to search for someone who could be capable of becoming the next great king. Mencius wanted to find someone who would thrive during the Warring States Period and be worthy of becoming a sage-king. The Warring States Period came about in the late days of the Zhou Dynasty, when it failed to maintain any order. This time of disarray continued for more than two hundred years (475 BCE – 221 BCE).⁴² In the 4th Century BCE Mencius traveled to find someone who he could teach, and help that person to become an “agent of *Tian*.”⁴³ It is because of this need that he uses *Tian* as a type of incentive, or a driving force, meant to mold these rulers. This use of *Tian* is not altogether foreign to Mencius's use of *ming*, which as previously

⁴¹ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, “Mencius 2A.5,” 103.

⁴² Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 115-6.

⁴³ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* “Mencius 2A.5,” 103.

discussed, is meant to compel individuals to follow a morally good path. Here *Tian* is explicitly used for that purpose.

Mencius's vision of what a proper ruler should look like is quite specific. This is apparent in book one of the *Mencius*:

Only a ruler who is *ren* is able to render service to states smaller than his own...
Only a ruler who is wise is able to render service to states greater than his own...
To serve a state smaller than one's own is to take joy in *Tian*; to serve a state larger than one's own is to hold *Tian* in awe. He who takes joy in *Tian* will protect the world [i.e., rule as king]; he who holds *Tian* in awe will protect his state.(Eno 1990, 103)⁴⁴

The *Mencius* presents two modes of acknowledging *Tian*. First is the individual who is *ren*. This suggestion that a person is *ren* simply means that he/she is a person of benevolence. One who is benevolent helps the smaller states out of a selfless desire to do good. This ruler takes joy in helping the smaller states, just as he/she takes joy in the morally good *Tian*. Counter to this is the wise ruler, who serves greater states, this ruler is practical and selfish. Instead of taking joy in *Tian*, he/she is in awe of *Tian*'s power.

By the end of this passage it becomes apparent that there is a large discrepancy between these two modes. Indeed, Mencius shows that one who takes joy in *Tian* may "protect the world," while one who is in awe is relegated to the position of only defending his own state. The one thing this passage does not do is directly explain why one is greater than the other. The difference here may be that one who takes joy will also take action. If someone takes joy in *Tian*, then this person must also take joy in doing what is morally good, and will perform all of the good that they can. On the other hand, one who is in awe may respect *Tian*, but this person does not take joy in what is morally good, and may not be inclined to act. The underlying point here being that it is not enough to merely respect the goodness of *Tian*, rather one must be willing to

⁴⁴ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, "Mencius 1B.3," 103.

act and improve themselves through these actions. This is the means to develop one's own sprouts, and the means to gain the Mandate of Heaven.

This is always the goal for Mencius's king. He strives to gain the approval of Heaven. It is both the beginning and the end for the king, at least in a sense. Heaven is what has given him the ability to do what is morally good. The king must then exercise these abilities in order to appease Heaven and gain the Mandate. Without the Mandate of Heaven the king is lacking. His dynasty cannot compete against one who gains Heaven's Mandate, and thus it is a necessity in ruling.

Indeed, Mencius demands that these potential kings strive to obtain *Tian*'s Mandate. Human action is always the first step to gaining this, and *Tian* is never depicted as helping those who will not first help themselves. *Tian*'s aid can only be secured by doing what is morally good. This is displayed in book one of the *Mencius*:

Duke Went of Teng asked, "Qi is about to fortify Xue, and I am deeply alarmed. How should I deal with this?" Mencius replied, "At one time King Tai ruled in Bin. When it was invaded by the Di tribes, he quit Bin and moved to live beneath Mt. Qi. This was not by choice but from necessity. If one does what is good, surely there will be some among one's descendants who will rule as true kings. The *junzi* initiates the task and lays down guidelines that it may be carried on. As for its success, that is with *Tian*. What should you do about Qi? Strive to do good, that is all.(Eno 1990, 104)⁴⁵

This excerpt states that the success of these endeavors are "with *Tian*," which seems to indicate that one should perhaps appeal to the higher being. Yet, Mencius does not actually suggest that any direct appeal should be made to *Tian*. Instead the only suggestion that Mencius makes is that one should "Strive to do good".⁴⁶ This is because it is pointless to simply appeal to *Tian*. Heaven's Mandate has always been given to those who have done good. The Mandate was not delivered to the Zhou Dynasty without reason. The Zhou Dynasty earned the Mandate

⁴⁵ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, "Mencius 1B.14," 104.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

through being morally righteous.⁴⁷ Duke Wen is thus expected to attain it through the same means.

For Mencius the clearest way to receive *tianming* is simple: do what is morally just. This means focusing on the offices of humans, dealing with what one is capable of doing. In actuality this may have been laid out perfectly by an earlier quote from book seven of the *Mencius*:

“...and to cultivate oneself to await it is the means to stand and await one’s fate (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 152).”⁴⁸ The king must be prepared to await his fate, as it is not something that he can determine. All the king can do is act in a morally good way.

In many ways the *Mencius* echoes sentiments that are present within the *Analects*. Both are very much grounded in language of self-cultivation, and attempt to champion human achievement above all else. Still, *Tian* is an ever-present force, endowing humankind, and propelling individuals towards a morally righteous path. Mencius stands apart from the Confucian *Analects* in that he utilizes *Tian* to a much greater effect. *Tian*’s mandate becomes the proverbial carrot at the end of the stick for Mencius’s prospective kings. *Tian* also is identified much more closely as the source of moral goodness in the world. Even more so than in the *Analects*, *Tian* is still very much an undeniable force.

⁴⁷ Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 93.

⁴⁸ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Mencius* 7A.1,” 152.

Chapter Four - The *Xunzi*

Immediately apparent in the book of Xunzi is that *Tian* is approached in a very direct way. This in itself seems curious, as it is quite different from what was seen in both the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. However, in the *Xunzi* one can find an entire section aptly titled “Discourse on Heaven,” dedicated to discussing *Tian*. Despite this change, where *Tian* is readily examined, it becomes clear Xunzi is not primarily concerned with Heaven. This is to say that Xunzi is more concerned with humans infringing on the office of Heaven than he is with Heaven itself. The focus given to Heaven is often a means to inform, which Xunzi does in order to reorient people away from harmful approaches to *Tian*.

One of the most prominent views Xunzi speaks out against is Mencius’s view of human nature, or *xing*. This stems from Mencius’s assertion that human nature is good. Xunzi completely disagrees, suggesting that nothing that is given is good.⁴⁹ Instead Xunzi asserts that human nature is inherently bad and must be changed through deliberate effort, only then can humans become good.

Xunzi, like Mencius, views *Tian* as that which has endowed humans with their nature. However, the two disagree on what exactly is given. Xunzi claims that the *Mencius* confuses deliberate efforts and human nature, believing that both of them are the same thing. For Xunzi human nature is not something that will naturally develop over time, deliberate efforts are required to war against this bad nature. Xunzi argues that the notion that humans are born with good nature is nonsensical, as no good person would abandon such a nature. This is dealt with in

⁴⁹ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “Xunzi: Human Nature is Bad,” 298.

Xunzi's discourse *On Correct Naming*, where he delves further into the concepts of "deliberation," or "deliberate efforts." These are the human attributes which allow for humans to go against their bad nature and produce good works.⁵⁰

Deliberation becomes a necessity when dealing with *qing* 情, or feelings. According to the *Xunzi's* discourse *On Correct Naming* these emotions include: "The feelings of liking and disliking, happiness and anger, and sadness and joy (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 292)."⁵¹ While all people necessarily have these dispositions, if one lacks self control, then they can be severely detrimental. The *Xunzi* introduces education as the solution to this problem. Education essentially becomes the tool that allows humans to go beyond their base desires, to control their emotions. Once people become educated enough to "deliberate" they are able to consider how they might go about achieving their goals in a morally good manner. Until that time most people are like children and are unable to keep their emotions in check.

Despite how vehemently the text advocates for education, stating in the discourse *An Exhortation on Learning* that "Learning proceeds until death and only then does it stop," it also is surprisingly understanding of the difficulties surrounding education (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 258).⁵² The *Xunzi* notes that instead of immediately trying to understand the deepest meanings of ancient Chinese texts, one should simply follow by example, or "draw near to the right person (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 258)."⁵³ For those who do not try and become close to the right people, but instead only cling to texts like the *Odes* and *History*, they limit their ability to learn. The education depicted in the *Xunzi* does not seem satisfied with an education built entirely upon reading and studying, but instead it seems very much intent on encouraging individuals to

⁵⁰ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Xunzi, On Correct Naming," 292.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Xunzi, An Exhortation to Learning," 258.

⁵³ Ibid., 259.

engage in a form of learning that will actively help to improve themselves. In this way Xunzi is very intent on seeing bonds develop within society.⁵⁴

It is learning which informs the aforementioned ability to “deliberate.” This is to say that in order for one to truly be able to “deliberate,” one must first be cognizant of what proper conduct looks like. Understanding this proper conduct is made possible through the forming of human bonds, which Xunzi suggests. By introducing “deliberation” Xunzi creates a means of overcoming the challenge of *xing*. Here one must recognize their own nature, and deliberately choose to act against it. This allows Xunzi to avoid infringing upon the work of Heaven, while still dealing with the problems addressed previously by Mencius.⁵⁵

These works, such as Mencius’s notion of *xing*, and his own idea of *qing*, are what Xunzi calls “the offices of *Tian*.”⁵⁶ And maintaining the divide between the offices of humans and *Tian* is of the utmost importance. A clearer picture of what the office of *Tian* entails can be seen in Xunzi’s depiction of the heavenly aspects. The *Xunzi* splits these Heavenly aspects into five categories: dispositions, faculties, ruler, nourishment, and government. These different aspects represent different things that all humans possess: the Heavenly ruler represents the heart, while the faculties are different parts of the body, and the other Heavenly aspects are similar in this way. The *Xunzi* depicts these aspects as being the product of Heaven, which means that humans should be incapable of improving upon them. As the *Xunzi* states in its *Discourse on Heaven*:

When Heaven has its proper seasons, earth has its proper resources, and humans have their proper order, this is called being able to form a triad (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 270).⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Xunzi*, An Exhortation on Learning,” 259-261.

⁵⁵ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Xunzi*, Human Nature is Bad,” 298-302.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁵⁷ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Xunzi*, Discourse on Heaven,” 270.

The significance of this triad lies in the way that all three forces work separately to benefit the whole. This excerpt shows that overstepping one's bounds, or attempting to perform the work of an office, to which one does not belong, could have devastating consequences. It is only by properly adhering to the human office that humans can succeed, and the same can be said of Heaven and earth.

The triad is dependent on each part working properly. However, failure by any of these three to fulfill their duties means that the triad simply cannot function. Heaven is needed to create and order, earth is needed to provide life, and humans are needed to perform rituals and allow for harmony to thrive. Without Heaven fulfilling its duties humans and earth could not exist, as it would be impossible to live without the order provided by Heaven. Without earth performing its own works humans could not exist. And if humans were to fail in their part, then harmony would fall to the wayside, allowing base dispositions to govern and cause chaos, harming the earth and neglecting the order of Heaven.

The *Xunzi* displays concern that by trying to improve one's heavenly aspects, as Mencius suggested one should, one would run the risk of throwing the triad out of order. It is because of this that the *Discourse on Heaven* in the *Xunzi* states: "The greatest cleverness lies in not doing certain things (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 271)."⁵⁸ This statement should not be seen as directed solely at Mencius, rather it is aimed at a great deal of people throughout China, especially those who were still holding onto Ancient Chinese religiosities. Worship of *Tian* and spirits has no place with the *Xunzi*, which seems adamant in its belief that Heaven acts according to an order, meaning that it does not bend to the fluctuating whims of humans. This is noted in a series of sentences from the *Xunzi's Discourse on Heaven*, as typified by the following: "If you strengthen

⁵⁸ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Xunzi, Discourse on Heaven," 271.

the fundamental works and moderate expenditures, then Heaven cannot make you poor (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 270).”⁵⁹ The importance of this excerpt is in great part because it addresses the idea that Heaven will not hurt those who do good. It is unlikely the *Xunzi* means to imply *Tian* lacks the power to do something so simple, rather this displays something very telling about how the *Xunzi’s Discourse on Heaven* perceives *Tian*. As he states earlier: “The actions of *Tian* are constant,” in other words Heaven binds itself to its office and does not intercede in the day-to-day minutiae of human life (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 269).⁶⁰ This is to say that humans are endowed by *Tian*, but this also makes them self sufficient, and it is through the self sufficiency of each part of the triad that harmony is maintained. Additionally, if there is no great concern that *Tian* will haphazardly act outside of its morally good office, then one should be content to work without appealing to *Tian*. Indeed, those who do good should fear nothing from *Tian*. This simply means that one should expect to reap what they sow, and *Tian* should hardly be factored into the equation. The *Xunzi’s Discourse on Heaven* delves further into this in a lengthy poem:

To exalt Heaven and long for it—
 How can this compare to nourishing things and overseeing them?
To obey Heaven and praise it—
 How can this compare to overseeing what Heaven has mandated and using it?
To observe the seasons and wait upon them—
 How can this compare to responding to the seasons and employing them?
To follow along with things and increase them—
 How can this compare to developing their power and transforming them?
To long for things and appraise them—
 How can this compare to ordering things and never losing them?
To desire that from which things arise—
 How can this compare to taking hold of that by which things are completed
(Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 272-3)?⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Xunzi*, Discourse on Heaven,” 270

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 269

⁶¹ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Xunzi*, Discourse on Heaven,” 272-3.

While the *Xunzi* does not seem to advocate against being in awe of *Tian* it does seem to express the concern that common people will misunderstand the power that they see. Xunzi recognizes that there is social merit in the performance of religious ritual, but he also acknowledges that many may not grasp why. For the *Xunzi* there is no special meaning behind a rain sacrifice. If it happens to rain after a rain sacrifice has been performed, then this is a fortunate coincidence. Similarly, one who performs divinations may be met with great success, but this success was not contingent on the divination. The importance of ritual is based on its ability to bring individuals together and create order. The metaphysical implications of such ceremonies are secondary, though this may be lost on the majority. For many who witness these events, they are mistakenly seeing miracles and the ability of humans to influence the office of Heaven.⁶²

Thus the importance of the *Xunzi*'s poem comes to light. Xunzi was living in a world where people saw the miracles of *Tian* in everyday life, which led them to seek out those miracles for themselves, instead of trying to accomplish things on their own. Nothing could be more antithetical to the purpose of the *Xunzi*. It is a text that stresses the importance of personal education, and societal improvement, and such a text would have little room for seeking easy answers in the spiritual, instead of self-reliant problem solving. Xunzi sought to warn against trying to approach *Tian* "theologically," he did not want people to try and grasp what God was. Xunzi simply wanted people to understand what *Tian* did, and the importance of it. The mere acts of exalting, praising, and honoring *Tian*, these are not necessarily wrong. Rather, the error lies in the perception of how things truly are, and the possibility of developing a distorted picture of reality. This is the case when relying on coincidence, which is tied to worshipping *Tian*, as it

⁶² Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Xunzi, Discourse on Heaven," 272

could hardly equal what one could accomplish on his/her own. This is, in a manner of speaking, the product of someone not properly educating oneself. Instead of trying to grow and improve, people are becoming stagnant, longing to have some influence over an office that is not theirs to occupy.

There is an additional error in this: the belief that one can understand *Tian*. However, as the *Xunzi's Discourse on Heaven* says:

That which one does not see the working of but sees only its accomplishments—such a thing is called spiritlike power. That which everyone knows how it came about but no one understands it in its formless state – such is called accomplishment of Heaven. Only the sage does not seek to understand Heaven (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 272).⁶³

This passage provides some curious insight into the *Xunzi* concerning to what extent humans can grasp the workings of *Tian*. The *Xunzi* notes spiritlike power, which is attributed to humans, and it is likely suggesting that it is sages who have this power. These sages, who have an immense understanding of the Way and hold spiritlike powers, can see what things are the “accomplishments of Heaven.” However, the second sentence in the above excerpt suggests that not even the sages can know everything about Heaven. Despite their knowledge, much is still left unclear. *Xunzi* insists that only Heaven can understand how Heaven works. For any person, sage or otherwise, to understand Heaven that person would have to be Heaven. And while humans are still capable of gaining some spiritlike abilities, even these must come from diligent learning.

The sages were said to be able to obtain these spiritual powers and a greater understanding of *Tian*, but these abilities did not come from focusing completely on *Tian*. The crime of those who endlessly praise *Tian* is that they are “fixated” upon Heaven.⁶⁴ This is the failure attributed to the Daoist sage Zhuangzi as well, as the *Xunzi's Undoing Fixation* states:

⁶³ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Xunzi*, Discourse on Heaven,” 272.

⁶⁴ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Xunzi*, Undoing of Fixation,” 286.

“Zhuangzi was fixated on the heavenly and did not understand the value of the human (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, 287.⁶⁵)” In the same way, many do not value their own abilities, thus they rely on Heaven, which will never truly aid them.

In order to remedy this, in order to break past this barrier of delusion, one must first understand the Way. To limit one’s focus to a single aspect, or to say that the Way is one thing, is to rob oneself of true knowledge. The Way encompasses all things, and to suggest anything else is to distort it. To put this into perspective: those who only understand Heaven neglect the triad. If one refuses to acknowledge anything beyond Heaven, it becomes impossible to see the place of Heaven in the whole of existence. It is only through an understanding of all things surrounding Heaven that one can begin to truly grasp how Heaven functions. Those who ignore the other aspects will be forced to go on in ignorance, praying for miracles that may never come. However, by pondering that the Way is connected to all things, and understanding the importance of things in relation to one another, it may be possible to break this fixation.

Throughout the whole of the *Xunzi* a familiar message appears concerning *Tian*, one that echoes both the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. Humans must help themselves, they must improve themselves, and no one should totally rely upon *Tian* to do this. What is unique to the *Xunzi* is the approach that is taken towards *Tian*, and it is one of the most apparent themes in this work. *Xunzi* is immensely concerned with humans overstepping their bounds and ignoring their own duties. An entire discourse is dedicated to such an analysis. Furthermore, issues like the nature of *Tian*, and *Tian* as the endower of *xing* are not so much discussed as they are assumed by *Xunzi*. This implies that there is nothing in the Confucian tradition to dissuade *Xunzi* from believing in *Tian*. He is adamant about the existence of *Tian*. So adamant is *Xunzi*, that he greatly criticizes

⁶⁵ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Xunzi*, Undoing of Fixation,” 287.

Mencius for not properly understanding the immutable nature of *Tian*'s works. Thus, in many ways Xunzi upholds the Confucian religiosity of *Tian* and human effort working alongside one another.

Chapter Five - Conclusion

Texts like those of the three Confucian thinkers open themselves to any number of interpretations. Indeed, drawing definite conclusions from a handful of passages can prove to be incredibly difficult. However, taken as a whole, some information may appear so pervasive that it becomes difficult to dismiss. I would suggest this is the case concerning the position of *Tian* within these three Confucian texts.

Throughout the significantly varied works of the three Confucian thinkers one encounters any number of differences. Terms that dominate the *Mencius*, such as the “four beginnings” are wholly absent from the *Analects*.⁶⁶ Similarly, focuses change between each Confucian thinker. Their writings were reflections of the times they lived in, so this variation is only natural. It is perhaps because of these variations that one could more easily pick out the most fundamental of ideas present in the Confucian texts. One that we have seen remain in each is the ever-prevalent position of *Tian*.

Although their approaches were different, *Tian* appears familiar in all three works. The *Analects* spoke very sparingly of *Tian*. Still, the endowing of virtues and the morally good nature of *Tian*, which both appear in the *Analects*, are concepts that reverberate through the sentiments of Confucius’s successors.⁶⁷ The *Mencius* adapts these ideas to politics, and his own theories. *tianming* reemerges in the *Mencius*, encouraging kings to do what is morally good, and *Tian*

⁶⁶ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Mencius* 2A.6,” 130.

⁶⁷ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, “*Analects* 2:4, 7:23,” 5, 22.

functions once again as the endower of human goodness.⁶⁸ The *Xunzi* spends a great deal of time illustrating the gap that exists between humans and *Tian*. *Tian* is everpresent in the *Xunzi* as the creator and endower, *Tian* is depicted as that which has given humans the ability to perform both good and bad.⁶⁹

We should likely conclude that no space is wasted in the writings of these Confucian texts. This is to say that every word has intention behind it. This means that the presence of Heaven should not be blindly dismissed as irrelevant, if it was written into the text, then it was done with purpose. So we can note that the image we see in each of these three works does not depict a completely humanized religiosity. *Tian* is repeatedly shown as the source of our human virtues and our propensity for goodness. Goodness is depicted as something we must seek out ourselves, but it is also something we could not do without *Tian*. This connection between goodness and *Tian* creates a profoundly spiritual image of the Confucian works.

Many academics may continue to interpret Confucianism as a purely humanistic text. However, something is lost in this interpretation. A piece of history is forgotten, and perhaps something that these Confucian thinkers found to be a fundamental truth is denied as well. Still, the words of these men remain in their own texts. It is here that both *Tian* and the original Confucian religiosity may continue to live today.

⁶⁸ Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, "Mencius 2A.5," 103; Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Mencius 6A.15," 151.

⁶⁹ Ed. Ivanhoe and Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, "Xunzi, Discourse on Heaven; Human Nature is Bad," 272, 298.

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