

# *Tian* 天 (Heaven) as a Cosmological Framework for Kongzi's Moral Teaching

LEE Yong-Yun

## Abstract

This paper explores the underlying framework of Kongzi's 孔子 moral philosophy, and attempts to elucidate the role and importance of cosmology in understanding Kongzi's moral teaching. Moral judgment concerns some criteria on which one can tell right from wrong, and this paper argues that *Tian* 天 as a cosmological entity provides a basis of ethical judgment for Kongzi's ethical system. It is worth noting that within any given tradition, even seemingly distinct aspects or social institutions may be better understood if approached from a broad and holistic perspective. Applying this understanding to the comparative study of ethical traditions, this paper argues that ethical traditions tend to reflect and support the prevailing cosmological framework held by the individuals in that tradition. In this regard, it is articulated that *Tian*-based cosmology functions as one of the deciding criteria in Kongzi's moral teaching and plays as an ultimate warrant for moral authority. One noteworthy feature of ethical teachings derived from *Tian*-based cosmology is that these rules are typically advanced and advocated as the manifestations of some type of "natural law." Kongzi, for instance, claimed that his ethical teachings conform to the rules of *Tian*, an entity described as essentially naturalistic rather than anthropomorphic.

**Keywords:** Kongzi (Confucius), *Lunyu* (Analects), cosmology, ethics, moral teaching, social hierarchy, natural law

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\* LEE Yong-Yun: Adjunct Professor, University College, Sungkyunkwan University, Korea (yongyunlee@skku.edu).

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## 1. Introduction

One of the recurring concerns in ethics is the struggle to understand the ethical basis upon which human conduct should be evaluated and judged. In exploring this key concern of normative ethics,<sup>1</sup> this paper attempts to provide a clearer picture of the ethical frameworks in Kongzi's 孔子 (Confucius, 550-479 BCE) moral teaching, by examining his teachings in the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects) in the light of their cosmological statements. In other words, cosmology will be analyzed as a possible yardstick for moral judgment in Kongzi's moral philosophy.

Though the connection between cosmology and ethics in Confucian ethics has been examined by a handful of scholars,<sup>2</sup> no single work is fully dedicated to the topic, nor does this previous scholarship provide a clear picture of the relationship between cosmology and ethics in the *Lunyu*. This paper is an attempt to provide a more thorough picture of Kongzi's ethical claims from a systematic and multi-dimensional perspective. I also seek to examine the conceptual framework upon which Kongzi built his moral teachings in order to show how Kongzi's understanding of *Tian* as the supreme source of authority reveals structural resemblances between his cosmological and ethical teachings.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The study of Ethics is generally classified into three branches: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Meta-ethics concerns the nature of ethical properties and evaluation, examining such questions as "What is the meaning of 'good' and 'right'?", "Is it possible for us to know what is right and good?", and "Are moral values objective?" Normative ethics attempts to apply the concerns of meta-ethics to the more practical realm of human lives; it seeks to suggest a set of norms for action. It thus addresses such questions as "What are morally right actions?" and "What rules should one follow?" Applied ethics mostly uses normative ethical theories to explore specific controversial issues such as abortion, war, and capital punishment; specifically ethicists adopt a theoretical framework from normative-ethics theories, and then give advice by applying the theory. In some sense, normative ethics bridges the gap between meta-ethics and applied ethics since it attempts to develop practical moral standards by exploring fundamental moral questions.

<sup>2</sup> For a general introduction to the relationship between cosmology and ethics in early Confucianism, see Lovin and Reynolds, *Cosmogony and Ethical Order*, 1-38. Ivanhoe's 2007 article "Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism" surveys the transformation of *Tian* 天 (Heaven) as an cosmological entity in the landscape of ethics in early China.

<sup>3</sup> I use the metaphor of "framework" to illustrate the ways in which intellectual arguments resemble complex physical structures. In most cases, these invisible frameworks fulfill the utilitarian purpose of holding and connecting the different parts of the structure in a unified form. Moreover, the physical and technical properties of the framework, i.e., the materials and layout of the frames, determine the possible shape of the structure which they support. The same is also frequently true for human intellectual products. That is to say, human

Applying the analogy of framework to the *Lunyu*, we may ask what concept or notion serves as the conceptual framework of the *Lunyu*? By conceptual framework, I refer to a concept or idea that is present in all different parts of a theory or teaching and is foundational of that theory or teaching. In this sense, the idea of ideological framework may be understood as a cosmological approach, since cosmology in the humanities is concerned with interrelationship between diverse entities.<sup>4</sup>

Some have argued that the main underlying framework of Kongzi's teachings consists of the virtues such as *ren* 仁 (benevolence) and *li* 禮 (rituals or ritual propriety).<sup>5</sup> If we limited our focus to concepts directly relating to moral behavior, these would be acceptable choices. However, if we broaden our horizon to include Kongzi's entire ideological structure, I would argue that the concept of *Tian* 天 (Heaven) represents a more suitable choice.<sup>6</sup>

Though there are not many passages that directly refer to *Tian* in the *Lunyu*,<sup>7</sup> a few passages demonstrate how the concept of *Tian* is employed as an underlying framework for most aspects of Kongzi's teachings. That is, *Tian*, being utilized as a conceptual framework, connects the diverse aspects of Kongzi's teachings and gives them each unique ideological

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intellectual products are frequently undergirded by an ideological framework that bridges its disparate parts and shapes its formula.

<sup>4</sup> In the natural sciences, cosmology is usually understood as the study of the origin of the universe and the relationship between physical entities. In the humanities, cosmology may be understood as any kind of human effort to formulate the relationships between different realms or groups within human society. In other words, cosmology might be viewed as a way to map the interrelational and hierarchical structures of individuals or social groups. This definition of cosmology suggests that human society cannot be understood as parts of an isolated system, but rather, in relational terms. In this sense, ethical issues can also or should fall under the enlarged scope of a cosmological framework. For a general introduction to the function of cosmology in the humanities, see Lovin and Reynolds, *Cosmogony and Ethical Order*, 1-38.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Fingarette, for example, supposes that *li* and *ren* are closely related and should be viewed as different aspects of the same entity. That is, *li* refers to the traditional customs themselves while *ren*, as a non-psychological term in the *Lunyu*, focuses on traditional customs as guidance for human behavior. See Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 37 and 42. For more detailed arguments about the senses of *ren*, see Waley, *The Analects of Confucius*, 29; Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 66-67.

<sup>6</sup> The Chinese character *tian* 天 is capitalized to show that it is addressed as the ultimate entity in the *Lunyu*.

<sup>7</sup> Zigong 子貢, one of Kongzi's disciples, observes that "As for the master's statements on human nature and the heavenly way, we could not hear of them." *Lunyu*, "Gongye Chang" 公冶長: "夫子之言性與天道, 不可得而聞也." This statement is not accurate in that the *Lunyu* contains several references to human nature and *Tian*. Even so, it is true that the *Lunyu* contains relatively few direct references to human nature and *Tian*.

identity. This attempt to utilize Kongzi's cosmological understanding with the aim to demonstrate the internal consistency of his teaching in the *Lunyu* is a challenging task, mainly because there are a number of unsolved puzzles relating to the authorship and composition date of the *Lunyu*. Many writers were probably involved in the rather lengthy compilation process of the text.<sup>8</sup> The issue of plural authorship and the time frame tends to lead us to doubt about the ideological and conceptual consistency of the text. This paper, however, argues against this suspicion and seeks to show that several of the seemingly conflicting statements in the *Lunyu* are actually compatible with one another, at least from its cosmological point of view.

## 2. The Nature of *Tian* in the *Lunyu*

Intellectual historians have devoted considerable energy to discussing the implications of *Tian* in the *Lunyu*,<sup>9</sup> not only because understanding of this term is essential for accurately portraying the early Chinese intellectual landscape, but also because its functions in early Chinese texts can hardly be understood or summarized using crystal-clear categories. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), for example, describes three categories of *Tian*: *Tian* as Ruler or God, *Tian* as Ethical Law, and *Tian* as Nature.<sup>10</sup> In the twentieth century, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895-1990) added two more facets to Zhu Xi's classification, and ended up with the following five: the Physical Sky, the Ruler or God, Fate, Nature, and Ethical Principle.<sup>11</sup> Many scholars agree that these various facets of *Tian* reflect stages in an evolutionary development over time in the process of adapting to changing worldviews. Robert Eno, for example, argues that the usage of *Tian* evolved from an anthropomorphic religious understanding to a more rationalized philosophical understanding.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This view has been reinforced in recently years mainly through archeological discoveries. In their book *The Original Analects*, Bruce Brooks and Taeko Brooks analyze the complex process of evaluating the compilation of the *Lunyu* and attempt to sort its content in chronological order.

<sup>9</sup> *Tian* is usually translated as "heaven" or "sky"; "heaven," in most cases, might be a better choice than "sky," since the former has broader referents than the latter. However, in some cases, these English equivalents hardly reflect the diverse implications of *Tian*. For example, *Tian* can refer to the creator of the universe and the principles which are believed to be set by the ultimate being, while heaven and sky do not have such implications. For this reason, I will keep the Chinese term "*Tian*" through the remainder of this article.

<sup>10</sup> Ikeda, "Tendō to tenmei (1)," 31.

<sup>11</sup> Feng, *Zhongguo zhixueshi*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Eno summarizes earlier studies on the various aspects of *Tian* as follows: "They have

He also claims that by the time of Kongzi, *Tian* had already lost its cardinal function as the source of religious and ethical authority that it had enjoyed in the Zhou 周 dynasty (c. 1122-770 BCE) though its rhetorical significance remained intact. In other words, Eno argues that though *Tian* in the *Lunyu* still maintains various senses, usages, or understandings defined by Zhu Xi and Feng Youlan,<sup>13</sup> *li* gradually came to replace the religious and socio-political values that *Tian* held during the Zhou dynasty.<sup>14</sup>

While Eno's observation about the evolution of *Tian* is correct in relation to its function and denotation, I disagree with his claim that *Tian* ceded its religious and political throne to *li* and held only an honorary position. This paper will attempt to show that, contrary to Eno's claim, several passages of the *Lunyu* indicate that *Tian* continued to function as the highest authority and basis for Kongzi's ethical and political claims.

Before testifying to *Tian*'s authoritative role in the *Lunyu*, the nature of *Tian* needs to be addressed since it defines the diverse roles of *Tian*. Understanding the diverse usage of *Tian* requires more than simply delineating the multiple roles of *Tian*, classified by Zhu Xi and Feng Youlan, because they are not exclusive to each other. Instead, these seemingly diverse facets of *Tian* may be understood in the light of *Tian*'s overarching roles in many different realms. In other words, for Kongzi, all these seemingly distinct meanings may be regarded as different manifestations of one entity. That is to say, the five facets of *Tian* suggested by Feng Youlan, i.e., Physical Sky, Ruler or God, Fate, Nature, and Ethical Principle, may be understood as an example of the "hermeneutic circle" which holds that all parts are interrelated with the whole.<sup>15</sup> That is, these five facets were not thought of

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tailored their interpretations to respond, either positively or negatively, to the hypothesis that the predominant image governing philosophical discussion of *T'ien* evolved from an anthropomorphic image in the mid-Chou period to an image of Nature by the end of the Chou." Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Eno gives examples of each of *Tian*'s usages listed by Feng Youlan in the *Lunyu* as follows. As the Sky: "The insurmountable height of Confucius' achievements is comparable to the sky, to which no staircase can ascend" in *Lunyu* 19.25; as Ruler: "At the age of fifty, I knew *T'ien*'s command" in *Lunyu* 2.4; as Fate: "Wealth and status are up to *T'ien*" in *Lunyu* 12.5; as Nature: "*T'ien* does not speak, yet the four seasons turn, the myriad things are born" in *Lunyu* 17.17; and as Ethical Principle: "Only *T'ien* is great, only the Emperor Yao emulated it" in *Lunyu* 8.19. See Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Eno puts it as follows: "Confucius's turn to ritual *li* was directly related to the discrediting of a belief that had served as the basic anchor of value during the early Chou: the belief in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent power guaranteeing social order - *T'ien*. The rise of *li* as a cardinal value can be seen as a function of the fall of *T'ien*." See Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> A major axiom of Hermeneutics holds that we cannot claim to know something; instead, we

as distinct but are merely as different names or manifestations of the same entity examined along different dimensions, so that the same entity of *Tian* may be referred to as “the highest entity.”

Based on this perception, the five facets of *Tian* may be understood as follows. The physical sky is the place where the highest entity is believed to dwell, and it may be also understood as a visible image of the highest entity.<sup>16</sup> The ruler or god is the appellation of the highest entity as understood by Kongzi’s contemporaries. Fate is something which was believed to be controlled by the highest entity.<sup>17</sup> Nature refers to the physical dimension of the highest entity that embodies rules set by the highest entity. Ethical principles are the rules that were believed to be given by or are consistent with the principles of the highest entity. As pointed out above, the seemingly distinct facets of *Tian* may be understood as based on one fundamental feature of *Tian*; that is, its character as the highest and ultimate authority.

The point here is that Kongzi and most of his followers regarded *Tian* as the ultimate source of authority. Contrary to Eno’s claim that “The rise of *li* as a cardinal value can be seen as a function of the fall of *T’ien*,”<sup>18</sup> some passages of the *Lunyu* clearly demonstrate that *Tian* was not limited to a merely symbolic role, but continued to function as the highest and ultimate source of moral and political authority. This is exemplified in *Lunyu* 8.19, where Kongzi said, “How great Yao was as a ruler! Lofty lofty *Tian* is; only *Tian* is greater; only Yao emulated it!”<sup>19</sup> The explicit message of

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may only understand or interpret it in the context. As one of the core concepts in hermeneutics, the idea of the hermeneutic circle mainly concerns the relationship between parts and the whole of the text. According to this theory, we cannot really understand any part of the text until we get to understand the whole. Also, we cannot understand the whole without understanding all of the parts. In this respect, we should move back and forth in a circle of the parts and the whole in order to understand the text. This circular character of interpretation is not proposed to show the impossibility of interpreting a text, but is proposed to stress that the parts of a text are interrelated with one another within a whole system.

<sup>16</sup> This may be understood as a metonymic appellation.

<sup>17</sup> The literal meaning of *ming* 命 is “command” or “order,” but its more accurate meaning depends on the context. Eno defines *ming* as “an impersonal force” outside human control in his book *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, and Slingerland as “a force external to the individual” in his article “The Conception of *Ming* in Early Confucian Thought.” In addition, Ted Slingerland points out that the role of *ming* went through several evolutionary stages from its literal sense to more conceptual implications. He puts it, “The role of *ming* (variously translated as ‘fate,’ ‘destiny,’ ‘mandate’) in early Confucian thought has been subject to a range of interpretations. From its literal meaning of ‘command’ or ‘order,’ and its predominant pre-Confucian use as the revocable ‘mandate’ bestowed by Heaven (*tian*) upon the rulers of a particular dynasty, it had evolved by the time of the Confucian *Analects* into a force that plays a role at the level of the individual.” See Slingerland, “The Conception of *Ming* in Early Confucian Thought,” 567.

<sup>18</sup> Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 19.

this passage is that Kongzi regarded *Tian* as the utmost source of political power and ideal rulership. Another passage hinting at the preeminent position of *Tian* is “He who offends *Tian* has none to whom he can pray.”<sup>20</sup> By suggesting that those who trespass against *Tian* may not entreat any other deity, this passage implies that there is no higher or more powerful authority than *Tian*. In this regard, it is clear that the *Lunyu* positions *Tian* as the unchallengeable highest and most sovereign authority.

If *Tian* is the highest authority relative to the human realm, then the next question we need to address is what *Tian* meant to Kongzi? How does *Tian*, in Kongzi's eyes, work as the highest or most sovereign entity? Several scholars draw a contrast between anthropomorphic and naturalistic elements to explore the issue of how *Tian* relates to the human world.<sup>21</sup> I argue that *Tian* in the *Lunyu* may be better understood as a naturalistic entity in the sense that *Tian* exhibits no definite sign that it intervenes in human affairs through direct interaction with humans. Rather, *Tian* in the *Lunyu* shows its will, if it has any, only through natural phenomena. Before getting into the main point, it might be necessary to examine several controversial passages first. In the *Lunyu*, we find the following conversation between Zigong and the Master:

The Master said, “Nobody understands me.” Zigong said, “Why do you say that nobody understands you? The Master replied, “[I] do not complain about *Tian* and [I] do not blame others; I understand [the heavenly things] above through study of [human affairs] below. The only one that understands me might be *Tian*!”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Lunyu*, “Taibo” 泰伯: “大哉，堯之為君也！巍巍乎，唯天為大，唯堯則之！” Yao 堯 was a legendary ruler who is also known as Tang Yao 唐堯. He is often referred to as a sage king of moral integrity. This passage implies that there is no higher ethical authority than *Tian*.

<sup>20</sup> *Lunyu*, “Bayi” 八佾: “獲罪於天，無所禱也。”

<sup>21</sup> The terms “anthropomorphic” and “anthropomorphism” derive from a combination of Greek words that mean “human” and “shape” respectively. In common usage, anthropomorphism means to attribute uniquely human features and characteristics, e.g. human face, hands, and speaking, to non-human creatures, e.g. animals, trees, and rocks. I use the term “anthropomorphic” to refer to entities that do not necessarily have to have the physical form of a human being, such as eyes, mouth, hands, etc. However, the term is used to refer to any entities which are believed to have any human abilities, such as thinking, volition, speaking, and so forth. By contrast, naturalistic meanings refer to an entity which does not have functions particular to humans. In my discussion of natural or supernatural deities of any kind, the term anthropomorphic will be applied to a deity believed to communicate with human beings directly, especially by way of speaking, and physical action as some supernatural beings described in the *Bible*. In contrast, a naturalistic entity refers to a transcendental entity that reveals no sign of human ability, emotional, sensory, or physical ability. However, a naturalistic entity still may be believed to influence the human world through natural phenomena.

<sup>22</sup> *Lunyu*, “Xian wen” 憲問: “‘莫我知也夫！’子貢曰，‘何為其莫知子也？’子曰，‘不怨天，不尤人，下學

If the last phrase “The only one that understands me might be *Tian*!” is taken out of context, it is very likely that one could interpret *Tian* as an anthropomorphic being that has cognitive abilities. However, in context, such an interpretation is not the only possible way to understand the passage. It is plausible that *Tian* is used by Kongzi as a rhetorical device in order to emphasize that no one understands him. In this sense, the expression “The only one that understands me might be *Tian*!” may not necessarily entail that *Tian* is being invoked as a supernatural being with cognitive ability.<sup>23</sup>

Another possible rhetorical usage of *Tian* appears in conjunction with the death of Yan Yuan 顏淵, one of Kongzi’s most cherished disciples. Kongzi screamed, “Alas! *Tian* has discarded me! *Tian* has discarded me!”<sup>24</sup> Mark Csikszentmihalyi has analyzed traditional and modern interpretations of the passage, and classifies them into three categories: 1) as an expression of Kongzi’s emotional distress from the loss of his beloved person, 2) as an expression of Kongzi’s grief not merely due to the loss of his disciple but also due to the loss of his successor of the Way, and 3) as an expression of Kongzi’s desperate political situation resulting from the loss of his sole disciple on whom he would have been able to rely as assistant if he were to become a sage king.<sup>25</sup> Though these three categories suggest slightly different reasons for Kongzi’s sorrow, all commentators agree that Kongzi expresses his desperate situation by referring to *Tian*. Even though this passage may be understood as a sign that Kongzi regards *Tian* as a volitional agent who could intentionally take one’s life, it is also possible that Kongzi refers to *Tian* rhetorically in order to express his extreme sorrow.

Unlike the previous passages, none of which allow for decisive interpretations about how *Tian* functioned for Kongzi in relation to the human realm, *Lunyu* 17.19 provides insight into how Kongzi understood the way *Tian* relates to the human realm. *Lunyu* 17.19 reads:

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而上達。知我者其天乎!” Regarding the succinct phrase, *xia xue er shang da* 下學而上達, many commentators including Huang Kan 皇侃 (488-545) and Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581-645) interpret *shang* 上 (above or up) as *Tian* 天 (Heaven) or *Tianming* 天命 (Mandate of Heaven) and *xia* 下 (below or down) as *renshi* 人事 (human affairs). See Cheng, *Lunyu jishi*, 1019-1021.

<sup>23</sup> This expression, in some sense, may be understood very much like the English expression, “God knows!” One who has no belief in any sort of supernatural being might use the expression “God knows!” in order to emphasize that indeed no one does know.

<sup>24</sup> *Lunyu*, “Xianjin” 先進: “噫! 天喪予! 天喪予!”

<sup>25</sup> See Csikszentmihalyi, “Allotment and Death in Early China.”

The Master said, "I want to say no word." Zigong said, "If you do not speak, then what can we pass on?" The Master said, "What did *Tian* say? Four seasons take turns and a hundred things grow. What did *Tian* say?"<sup>26</sup>

It is apparent that the phrase "What did *Tian* say?" does not imply that *Tian* provides audible messages. In fact, Kongzi's remarks indicate not that *Tian* is an entity which uses verbal languages to reveal its will, if it has any, but that *Tian* reveals its will only through natural phenomena. In this respect, Kongzi seems to hold that natural phenomena can be signs reflecting the will of *Tian* and that we should examine the will of a supernatural entity through the observation of the natural world. This means that in Kongzi's view any supernatural and spiritual aspects of *Tian* are negligible, and the natural world is the most reliable basis for human interpretations of *Tian*'s will. Kongzi's invocation of *Tian* is thus better understood as a naturalistic entity rather than as an anthropomorphic one.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, it should be noted that Kongzi's naturalistic understanding of *Tian* parallels his understanding of supernatural beings.

Ji Lu asked about serving spiritual beings. The Master replied to say, "[I] have not been able to respect [living] people, yet, how [I] can respect spiritual beings!" [Zigong] said, "May I venture to ask about death?" [The Master] replied to say, "[I] have not understood about living, how do [I] know about death?"<sup>28</sup>

Fan Chi asked about knowing. The Master replied: "[If you] endeavor to fulfill the wishes of your subjects and if you respect spiritual beings while keeping distance from them, then [you] can be said to know something."<sup>29</sup>

26 *Lunyu*, "Yang Huo" 陽貨: "子曰, '子欲無言。' 子貢曰, '子如不言, 則小子何述焉?' 子曰, '天何言哉? 四時行焉, 百物生焉, 天何言哉?'" Most commentators, including Zhu Xi and Liu Baonan 劉寶南 (1791-1855), read this passage as expressing Kongzi's emphasis on learning through the observation of external phenomena and behavior rather than on learning merely through listening to others. See Cheng, *Lunyu jishi*, 1227-1229; Zhu, *Lunyu jizhu*, 180.

27 Ivanhoe has a similar description about the role of *Tian* in Kongzi's time as follows: "Heaven' [i.e., *Tian*] lacked a distinct personality. Nevertheless, it was thought to have endowed human beings with a distinctive ethical nature, to harbor a lively and stable concern for human beings, and on occasion to act in order to promote a more just, peaceful, and flourishing world." See Ivanhoe, "Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism," 212.

28 *Lunyu*, "Xianjin": "季路問事鬼神。子曰, '未能事人, 焉能事鬼!' '敢問死?' 曰, '未知生, 焉知死?'"

29 *Lunyu*, "Yong ye" 雍也: "樊遲問知。子曰, '務民之義, 敬鬼神而遠之, 可謂知矣。'" Fan Chi 樊遲 was one of Kongzi's disciples. His given name was Xu 須 and style name was Zichi 子遲. According to the *Kongzi jiaayu* 孔子家語 and the *Zuozhuan*, he was forty-six years younger than Kongzi.

These two passages provide manifest pictures about Kongzi's attitude toward supernatural or transcendental realms of being. Based on the passages and other related examples in the *Lunyu*, Philip Ivanhoe summarizes the attitude of the *Lunyu* about the spiritual world as follows: "In the *Analects* there is a clear reluctance to appeal directly to spirits for aid or support and a real concern for not patronizing the spiritual world."<sup>30</sup> While we cannot claim that Kongzi's teaching is totally free from supernatural and transcendental factors, and no matter what labels we eventually choose to put upon his stance regarding the existence of supernatural beings, it is clear that he uses empirically-derived knowledge as the primary and ultimate yardstick for both his understanding and his teaching.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, it is still worth noting that even though Kongzi opposes assessing *Tian* as a supernatural being, he does attempt to utilize its authority in more than merely symbolic ways. A number of passages in the *Lunyu* testify that *Tian* was believed to exert a real and actual influence upon human society. In these passages, Kongzi does not refer to *Tian* in only symbolic or rhetorical ways, but as something which assumes power enough to control human society. In this respect, *Tian* in the *Lunyu* is referred to neither as a symbolic device, as Eno claims, nor as an anthropomorphic entity which has volition and intention, as Feng Youlan and Hou Wai-lu claim. I would argue that Kongzi did not conceive of *Tian* as a whimsical or unpredictable deity as was common in the Zhou dynasty, but as something which has observable rules which are revealed through natural phenomena. In addition, Kongzi no longer speaks of *Tian* as a source of authority which could be monopolized by certain social groups as had been done in the Zhou, but as something which functions as an open source of political and moral claims, accessible to anyone.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, the *Lunyu* hints that Kongzi does not expect supernatural work or magical signs from *Tian*, though he does base his teachings on the authority of *Tian*. More explicitly, Kongzi refuses to appeal to the supernatural

<sup>30</sup> Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, xvii. Ivanhoe, mentioning *Lunyu* 2.24, 3.12, 7.35, etc., adds, "I do not interpret these passages as expressing a disbelief in spiritual beings but rather a rejection of a more magical conception of human-spirit interaction."

<sup>31</sup> *Lunyu* 3.12 shows that Kongzi held an extremely sincere attitude when he was in the offerings ceremony to deities. The passages reads, "[Kongzi] gave offerings to deities as if the deities were at the place" (*ji shen ru shen zai* 祭神如神在). If we take the passage of *Lunyu* 11.12 quoted in footnote 28 into account, this passage may be interpreted in a way that Kongzi was sincere in his relations to anything, supernatural or worldly; however, he paid more attention to this-worldly things than things in the supernatural realm.

<sup>32</sup> On the shift of *Tian*'s role, see Ivanhoe, "Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism."

in facilitating his teaching, and he confines the role of *Tian* to an authoritative entity that does not intervene in human affairs beyond the signs of natural phenomena.

### 3. *Tian*-Based Cosmology: *Tian* as the Source for an Ethical Framework

Extant records show that Kongzi and his followers might have regarded *Tian* as the first cause and final end of all things, which suggest that most statements of *Tian* in the *Lunyu* might have cosmological implications and significances. This is hinted at in the following passage from the *Shijing*, a canonical text for Kongzi and his followers. It puts it: “*Tian* gave birth to people; once things exist, rules exist.”<sup>33</sup> This passage shows *Tian* as a cosmological entity that established all the realms of the material world and human society including ethical principles. This point is supported by the following statement:

The Master said, “*Tian* has endowed me with these virtues. What [harm] can Huan Tui do to me?”<sup>34</sup>

As shown above, *Tian* in the *Lunyu* is in many ways a naturalistic entity which does not interact directly with humans. More specifically, though *Tian* is supposed to reveal political and ethical guidelines as the ultimate entity, these guidelines are not expected to be made known through direct interaction between *Tian* and humans. In the absence of direct interaction, cosmological frames, which are supposed to have been given by *Tian*, are consequently destined to involve willful interpretation by human beings. In

<sup>33</sup> *Mao* 260.1: “天生蒸民，有物有則。” The reference range of *wu* 物 in this context should not be limited to physical things. Rather it is used as a broader sense to refer to anything material and immaterial, including historical events. Mengzi says, “The *Shijing* says ‘*Tian* gave birth to people; once things exist, rules exist. If common people grasp constant principles, what they like is magnificent virtue.’ Kongzi said, ‘Whoever composed the poem knows *dao*. Therefore, if there are things, there must be principles. Common people grasp constant principles; therefore, what they like is magnificent virtues.’” Mengzi, “Gaozi shang” 告子上: “詩曰：‘天生蒸民，有物有則。民之秉夷，好是懿德。’孔子曰：‘爲此詩者，其知道乎！故有物必有則，民之秉夷也，故好是懿德。’” This passage suggests that Kongzi’s comment on the *Shijing* passage had been transmitted in a certain form and Mengzi read or heard it. Furthermore, Mengzi’s record of Kongzi’s comment gives us noteworthy evidence that Kongzi regarded *Tian* as the sovereign entity which enabled the world to have a certain form and order.

<sup>34</sup> *Lunyu*, “Shuer” 述而: “子曰，‘天生德於予，桓魋其如予何?’” According to the *Shiji* 史記, Huan Tui 桓魋 was a minister of Song 宋, one of the feudal states in the Spring and Autumn period. He attempted to murder Kongzi when he was visiting Song with his disciples. See Sima, *Shiji*, 38.1630. In addition, the *Zuozhuan*, 14th year of Duke Ai, has a story about Huan Tui.

other words, since the lack of direct communication implies that *Tian* cannot be a sufficient source of ethical rules, human intervention in the formation of ethical rules becomes inevitable. Human involvement in making a cosmological order implies that ethical principles are derived in part from the intentions of people who are involved.

Assuming this to be the case, one question we might need to examine is what role Kongzi's intentions may have played in shaping his understanding of natural phenomena as signs given by *Tian*. In other words, if Kongzi considered *Tian* as the highest source of authority, why does Kongzi equate signs in the natural world with the revelation of *Tian*'s will? The answer can be found in two basic assumptions that Kongzi appeared to make. First, Kongzi seemed to assume that supreme and irresistible principles should be found in the natural world, and he intended to build or pattern his teachings on what he believed to be natural rules. In this respect, his basic standpoint would be to reconstruct the human world in a way that conforms to the natural world. Most of his teachings, including ethical rules, may be interpreted in this framework. Here, the point is not to determine whether Kongzi's teachings are logically true or false,<sup>35</sup> but merely to observe that Kongzi seemed to utilize the concept of *Tian* as evidence that his teachings conformed to undeniable natural laws.<sup>36</sup>

The second assumption Kongzi seemed to hold is that the ultimate entity that is supposed to give ultimate principles to humans exists outside the human realm in that *Tian* is a transcendent and non-human entity. This understanding may be compared to Plato's well-known Allegory of the Cave, which holds that the real and true world is transcendent and the material world is just a shadow of the real and true world. According to Plato, humans are like prisoners who live deep inside a cave from early childhood. They are unable to see real objects and can only perceive the shadows of real things cast upon on the walls of the cave.<sup>37</sup> According to this allegory,

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<sup>35</sup> In formal logic, the rhetorical method of "appeal to nature" is regarded as a logical fallacy, as are "appeal to authority," "appeal to tradition," etc.

<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that the term "natural" has been used very unnaturally throughout human history to give an impression that one's religious or philosophical position is undeniable eternal truth or fact. For a detailed discussion on how the terms "nature" and "natural law" have been utilized, see Worster, *Nature's Economy*; Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*.

<sup>37</sup> The Allegory of the Cave is found in *The Republic*. The full story of the allegory can be divided into three steps: 1) chained prisoners see only the shadows cast on the wall of the cave and think that the shadows are reality, 2) one prisoner is freed and sees the source of the shadows: a set of objects whose shadows can be seen flickering on the wall the prisoners are facing. This prisoner also manages to escape the cave, upon which he

what can be perceived through sensory organs are merely imperfect reflections of the real world, i.e., reality or truth, which exists beyond the sensory realm.<sup>38</sup> Kongzi's conception of *Tian* is similar to Plato's understanding of reality in the sense that both posit the existence of a higher realm and see the forms and laws of this higher realm as providing the sources for the rules which govern human society. Even so, Kongzi's *Tian* is distinguished from Plato's understanding of reality in that Kongzi holds that the human world is an extension of *Tian* and exists to embody the principles of *Tian*. Plato, on the other hand, draws a clear demarcation between "real" and human realms and understands the human world, i.e., the material or empirical world, as an imperfect reflection of the "reality."

If Kongzi regarded or utilized *Tian* as the source and authority of his teaching, how did he show this understanding of *Tian* in his moral teaching? In other words, how is the cosmological entity *Tian* used to define and structure ideas of proper human relationships?<sup>39</sup> There is no statement which directly addresses this issue in the *Lunyu*. Even so, if we approach this issue with the understanding that *Tian* functions as a cosmological map which charts the proper structural properties of all earthly manifestations, including human relationships,<sup>40</sup> then we can find several relevant passages that inform

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realizes that the shadows are merely a poor replica of the objects above ground, and 3) the enlightened prisoner returns to the cave and attempts to free his fellow prisoners and inform them about what he has seen and experienced. This allegory can be explored from diverse perspectives and has been studied mainly from ontological, epistemological, and ethical points of views.

<sup>38</sup> Plato believes that truth is gained from looking at universal principles in order to gain understanding of experience. Humans have to travel from the visible realm of image-making and objects of sense, to the intelligible or invisible realm of reasoning and understanding. In other words, Plato believes that truth exists independently of empirical knowledge, and we cannot obtain the truth without proper reasoning and understanding of the invisible and unchanging realm of Forms.

<sup>39</sup> Here, it should be noted that one of two main concerns of cosmology in the humanities is to define the relationships between individual or collective entities.

<sup>40</sup> The term "structural resemblance" should not be confused with Structuralism. The term "structural resemblance" is used to point out where each text has a structural resemblance between the cosmological and other aspects of the society including social structure and the structure of an ethical system. Though I use the expression "structural," I distinguish structural resemblance from Structuralism in two important ways. First, structure in Structuralism is viewed as a subconscious or autonomous thing. Structuralism holds that structures within a culture are not intentionally designed or planned; they arise gradually over a long period of time. Contrary to this view, I argue that early cosmologies, more specifically, "cosmological resemblances" which may be found in early Chinese texts, were purposely designed, supported, and advocated by people of the ruling class at that time. They consciously employed their own cosmologies in their political and ethical teaching. In other words, they set up a "cosmological map" that hints that there is a "structural resemblance" among different realms of the society. Secondly, structure in Structuralism

our understanding. Consider the following example, in which Kongzi replies to a question from Duke Jing of Qi (Qi Jing Gong 齊景公) about proper governance:

A ruler should behave properly as a ruler; an official should behave properly as an official; a father should behave properly as a father; a son should behave properly as a son.<sup>41</sup>

This seemingly simple statement hints at Kongzi's hierarchical understanding of human relationships. In this passage, Kongzi suggests that every person ought to follow particular ways of behavior which are expected of and required for the social group to which the person belongs. In other words, in Kongzi's eyes, the natural law given by *Tian* guides one's behavior to conform to one's social status. Though we cannot find a decisive clue in the *Lunyu* to answer the question whether Kongzi held that one's given social class is not to be changed,<sup>42</sup> it is apparent that Kongzi held that each social group has its own morality and social function which was not to be violated by different social groups. When this idea is combined with the principle expressed in the following line from the *Shijing* "*Tian* gave birth to people; once things exist, rules exist," the cosmological map which Kongzi presumably believed to be given by *Tian* functions as an infrastructure which applies to the political, social, and ethical realms of being, in this case helping to determine the proper organization of social hierarchies.

#### 4. Kongzi's Targeted Audience

Identifying Kongzi's presumed or intended audience is also an important step to understand the full implications of Kongzi's moral teaching, since

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refers to underlying phenomena; it is invisible and unrecognizable in our daily lives since they are deeply structured like the inner frames of a statue or building. Quite the opposite, cosmology, which conveys "cosmological resemblance" in early Chinese texts, is taught and advocated intentionally and underlies part of the framework of the society. That is, it is described as a given rule by the highest authority.

<sup>41</sup> *Lunyu*, "Yan Yuan" 顏淵: "君君, 臣臣, 父父, 子子."

<sup>42</sup> Kongzi lived in a period of social flux in which changes of social class were not rare. This social turmoil was mainly due to the absence of absolute political power resulting from the fact that the royal house of Zhou lost their political power and feudal states were in a series of battles for hegemony. Some of his students from humble families arose to become high officials. For a detailed discussion of Kongzi's disciples, see Lau, *Confucius: The Analects*, 196-219; Slingerland, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 244-247.

identifying the audience allows us to better understand Kongzi's teachings in their historical context and can lead to more accurate, specific, and focused analyses of his teachings. That is, Kongzi's understanding of cosmological order will be better understood if we take sociopolitical factors of the time which would have determined his audience into account.<sup>43</sup>

Several passages in the *Lunyu* illustrate the relationship between ruler and commoners, especially from an ethical perspective. Below are some examples:

The Master said, “[The ruler’s] governance with moral power can be compared to [the role of] the North Star. It always stays in the same place while other stars rotate around it.”<sup>44</sup>

This passage reveals that Kongzi wanted to make the political ruling group a model of proper morality. That is, in Kongzi's eyes, political leaders were also to serve as exemplars, ethical models for the people to emulate. This expectation of the ruling class reflects the universal application of *Tian's* cosmological map to every realm of human society. Kongzi wanted to realize his dream of an ethically ideal society by transforming an influential political group into a morally idealized group, something that could best be done by bringing their conduct into harmony with the order of *Tian*. In Kongzi's eyes, the common people are not ethically autonomous, but are passive in the sense that they are subject to following their ruler's behavior, a belief which is plainly revealed in Kongzi's comparison of the noble and the petty:

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<sup>43</sup> This point is well developed by Wang Aihe in her book, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China*. In this book, Wang tries to reveal the political contest over imperial sovereignty, emperorship, and imperial order that are veiled by a commonly shared cosmology. That is to say, Wang focuses mainly on sociopolitical applications of early Chinese cosmology, rather than on its origin, its progress, or its meaning as the structure of Chinese ethics. She treats cosmology as a “discourse” which describes cosmology as the interactive and interrelated sociopolitical practice, and rejects essentialist view of cosmology, supported by Granet who stresses that Chinese cosmology is a highly ordered system based on the logic of numbers and is a logical unfolding of structural principles of symmetry and centrality. Instead, Wang adopted the perspective of Foucault's structural anthropology, which is concerned with the causal relationship between cultural ideas and sociopolitical institutions, attributing causality and ontological priority to one or the other.

<sup>44</sup> *Lunyu*, “Weizheng” 為政: “子曰, ‘為政以德, 譬如北辰, 居其所而衆星共之.’” *De* 德 has been translated as “virtue.” Some scholars challenged this translation and pointed out that the translation does not convey its full significance, for the concept *de* denotes not only a moral characteristic but also the effects and power that an ethically cultivated individual displays. In this regard, it is translated as “moral force” by Fingarette and as “moral charisma” by Ivanhoe. See Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 28; Ivanhoe, “The Concept of *De* (‘Virtue’) in the *Laozi*,” 240.

Ji Kangzi asked Kongzi about governance, saying “If I slay those who do not have the Way and get along with those who have the Way, what would you think of it?” Kongzi replied, “In your governance, why do you kill others? If you want to do good, then people will come to do good. The virtue of noble man is like wind; the virtue of petty man is like grass. If the wind blows over the grass, the grass is bound to bend.”<sup>45</sup>

Here, Kongzi again emphasizes the unidirectional relationship between ruler and the people in terms of ethical influence. From Kongzi’s point of view, the ruling group should identify themselves as the model for the common people, because they are vulnerable beings who are easily influenced by their superiors. If the ruler is the moral exemplar for his people, it follows that it is not Kongzi’s primary concern to teach the people directly, but to instruct the ruling group in proper behavior. This point is expressed as follows, “If the upper class people like ritual property, then the people can be more easily controlled.”<sup>46</sup> As previously observed, if we understand that in Kongzi’s view the ruling group was the primary source of not only political but more importantly ethical influence, we can better understand his resulting belief that the ideal and most practical way to transform the people is to first cultivate the desired behavior in their political leaders.

This is particularly important since Kongzi’s view of the ruler as the cosmologically-ordained apex of the social hierarchy, especially in terms of moral teaching, mirrors the relationship that cosmology itself enjoys with other principles in human society. In this respect, the proper relationship between rulers and their people can be said to bear a structural resemblance with the relationship between cosmology and ethics, both of which are supported and upheld by the concept of *Tian*.

## 5. Conclusion

My intention to bridge the two seemingly distinct areas of cosmology and ethics may be understood as mapping the conceptual landscape of ideas, since the connection between the two areas cannot be obtained without a speculative reconstruction of the Chinese past. This reconstruction should not

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<sup>45</sup> *Lunyu*, “Yan Yuan”: “季康子問政於孔子曰，‘如殺無道，以就有道，何如？’孔子對曰，‘子為政，焉用殺？子欲善，而民善矣。君子之德風，小人之德草。草上之風，必偃。’” Ji Kangzi 季康子 (d. 468 BCE) was a member of the Jisun 季孫 clan, one of the influential families of the state of Lu 魯 in Kongzi’s time.

<sup>46</sup> *Lunyu*, “Xian wen”: “上好禮，則民易使也。”

be understood as an essentialist or reductionist approach; rather it should be conceived of as an attempt at discovering common features in the texts of early China.

My central claim is that because Kongzi positions *Tian* as the unchallengeable or highest authority in the *Lunyu*, the realms of cosmology and ethics cannot be understood apart from each other, particularly since Kongzi's assumptions concerning the proper organization of society seem to depend on *Tian* for both their cosmological and ethical warrant.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, my interpretation of *Tian* as the ultimate source of authority causes it to be seen as a cosmological framework that shapes Kongzi's hierarchical understanding of human relationships, particularly his instance that each person follow the behaviors required of the social group to which he or she belongs. Seen in this light, as I have argued, the use and function of *Tian* enables us to see important structural resemblances between Kongzi's cosmological and ethical teachings.

In short, the primary goal of this paper is not to evaluate the empirical accuracy of Kongzi's teachings about the structure of the universe or what he considers to be the natural order of things, but to examine the nexus between cosmological structures and ethical mandates; these two features are only properly understood with a reliance on each other. They are mutually-determined components of Kongzi's total system.

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<sup>47</sup> In his article "Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism," Ivanhoe analyzes early Confucian moral teachings in connection with *Tian* and suggests that *Tian* played the role of highest ethical authority in both the *Lunyu* and *Mengzi*. My paper shares a thematic approach with Ivanhoe in that I also connect Kongzi's moral teachings to the nature of *Tian*. However, my critical approach differs from Ivanhoe's in that my paper focuses more on revealing the structural resemblance between Kongzi's ethical teachings and his view on *Tian*, instead of just expounding on *Tian*'s more general nature as ethical warrant.

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## 孔子倫理體系中的天的作用

李容潤

### 中文摘要

這篇論文探索孔子倫理哲學的深層的結構而闡明在孔子的思想中起極為關鍵作用的宇宙論模式。是非判斷的標準是倫理學一直關注的問題，而這文認為在孔子的倫理體系中宇宙論提供倫理判斷的指南和權威。任何現象或概念從表面上看各自分離和獨立的，但宏觀的分析可以揭示各個現象或概念之間存在的互相聯繫和共同原則。孔子道德思想的各個原則跟其宇宙論的體系具有不容忽略的聯繫，因為孔子為了推廣自己的道德思想的一直利用天的權威。並且，孔子利用天的概念所具有的權威來提倡自己的道德體系的必然性的真實性，而堅持自己的倫理體系是服從自然的規則的普遍原理。

**關鍵詞：**孔子，論語，宇宙論，倫理學，道德原則，社會等級，自然法