


Disaster, Heaven, and Political Responsibility: Mencius and Dong Zhongshu on Humane Government

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Abstract: This paper investigates the Confucian conception of political responsibility as a political virtue essential for an ordinary non-Confucian ruler’s actualization of humane government by paying close attention to the early Confucian discourses of Heaven and disaster. After briefly discussing Confucius’s seminal idea of responsibility, this paper shows how Mencius developed the political conception of responsibility, as a noncausal responsibility shared by the ruler and the virtuous ministers for a humane government, especially under the condition of natural disasters. It then discusses how the Han Confucian philosopher Dong Zhongshu reformulated the Mencian theory of responsibility and humane government under radically altered political circumstances by advancing a new version of Confucianism, central to which is the causal conception of political responsibility. This paper concludes by discussing how the evolution of Confucian political theory from Mencius to Dong Zhongshu should be understood with a view to the question of political legitimacy.

In the Confucian tradition, there are two expressions for the ideal government. First, “the Kingly Way” (*wangdao* 王道) refers to the ideal mode of statecraft implemented by the ancient sage-kings who are believed to have attained moral perfection. When the ideal Confucian government is expressed in this way, the focus is on the ruler’s moral character and the moral principles that undergird his¹ government such as humaneness (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義).² The second expression that describes the

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¹I use the male pronoun for a ruler because the three early Confucians discussed in this paper—Confucius, Mencius, and Dong Zhongshu—took for granted that a ruler is a male.

²It is commonly opposed to the Way of the Hegemon (*badao* 霸道), which Mencius defined as “[a rule by] one who, supported by force, pretends to being humane”

ideal Confucian government is what Mencius famously called a “humane government” (*renzheng* 仁政). Like the Kingly Way, the locomotive of a humane government is the ruler’s moral character, his compassionate heart in particular. Still, when Mencius introduces humane government as a practical political goal achievable by the rulers of his time, who were far from virtuous, he seems to suggest that what makes a government humane is not so much the ruler’s personal humaneness per se but the mode of government that benefits the people. While the Kingly Way holds that inasmuch as the government is run by a man of superior moral character, it is a good government, the ideal of humane government pays more salient attention to the good consequences a ruler can bring about, namely, protection and promotion of the well-being of the people, even one who is less than virtuous. In this I share some core intuition about humane government with Loubna El Amine, who understands it in terms of the government that “provides for the people.”³ But El Amine’s interpretation of Confucian humane government does not help us make clear sense of the virtue of political responsibility that Mencius identifies as central to the ruler’s moral character. Her account is focused on the policy dimension of the humane government and pays little attention to the distinctive character trait that enables its reliable and stable operation.

Given the core premise of Confucian virtue politics in which political virtue is believed to be extended from moral virtue,⁴ it would be arbitrary and possibly misleading to decouple humane government from humaneness as moral virtue. Nevertheless, when discussing Confucian virtue politics, contemporary scholars have largely concentrated on the ruler’s moral character, with special attention to its power that enables the ruler as a moral agent to respond to various contingent situations in a stable, proper, and virtuous manner.⁵ Understanding humaneness as a robust character trait, Eric Hutton captures the gist of Confucian humane government in this way: “If there are people who do have robust character traits and are resistant to situational variation, they can design and reliably maintain the broad range of institutions and situations that facilitate good behavior for everyone

(*Mencius* 2A3). English translations of the *Mencius* are adapted from *Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

³See Loubna El Amine, *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 136–37.

⁴On the core premises of Confucian virtue politics, see my *Theorizing Confucian Virtue Politics: The Political Philosophy of Mencius and Xunzi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 5–10.

⁵Stephen C. Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 112–16; Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Character Consequentialism: An Early Confucian Contribution to Contemporary Ethical Theory,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 1 (1991): 55–70; Edward Slingerland, “The Situationist Critique and Early Confucian Virtue Ethics,” *Ethics* 121, no. 2 (2011): 390–419.

else.”⁶ The underlying assumption is that an arduous process of moral self-cultivation turns one into a moral virtuoso, who has a special taste for moral judgment and conduct which enables him to make decisions that are perfectly appropriate for given social, economic, and political circumstances, leading him to maintain a good government (i.e., humane government) stably, irrespective of specific situational changes and challenges.⁷ Confucian virtue ethics highlights the process in which one can attain the power (the pre-Confucian meaning of *de* 德, commonly translated as virtue) to put the otherwise contingent social, economic, and political situation under control of a developed moral agency.

However, in highlighting the remarkable power of a developed moral agency to cope with unexpected and uncertain situations, or simply the condition of contingency, the virtue ethical interpretation of Confucian humane government does not pay due attention to how the condition of contingency contributes to developing a specific virtue that is indispensable to exercising humane government. Though conventional Confucian moral virtues such as humaneness, righteousness, and ritual propriety (*li* 禮) are all conducive to the formation of robust moral character, there is a distinctively political virtue that is essential for the ruler to practice humane government—namely, political responsibility. Political responsibility is not required of anyone interested in moral self-development. Insofar as one’s goal is to become a good person by developing her moral character, she does not necessarily have to become a part of the public decision-making process and bear responsibility for a humane government. Thus, Joseph Chan asserts that Confucian virtues do not have to include political participation (and by implication political responsibility) because one can become good by cultivating nonpolitical social and ethical virtues such as benevolence and trustworthiness.⁸

There is a significant difference between political and moral responsibility. While it would be unjust for a person to be held responsible for bad outcomes caused by forces out of his or her moral control, political responsibility requires that a political leader bear the burden of the consequences of his conduct. It defines a political leader as one who is in charge of the well-being of the entire political community in the face of contingency and this quintessentially political virtue distinguishes him from ordinary people.

⁶Eric Hutton, “Character, Situationism, and Early Confucian Thought,” *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 50. Also see Bryan W. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷Eric L. Hutton, “Moral Connoisseurship in Mencius,” in *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, ed. Xiusheng Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), 163–86; Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*, 316–19.

⁸See Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Existing studies that approach Confucian humane government from the standpoint of virtue ethics have little to say about contingency, political responsibility, and their mutual implications. Unless such mutual implications are examined and analyzed, however, the alleged extension of ethics to politics in Confucian virtue politics remains incomplete, leaving it ambiguous how the ruler's moral self-cultivation leads to humane government under the conditions of contingency. Even if the virtue-ethical interpretation of Confucian virtue politics is right to accentuate the inextricable intertwinement between the ruler's robust moral character and good government, the question remains precisely what kind of moral and political quality emanating from the ruler's developed moral agency undergirds humane government.

This article investigates the Confucian idea of political responsibility as the core political virtue necessary for the ruler's actualization of humane government under the condition of contingency. I pay special attention to "natural disasters," which early Confucians attributed to Heaven (*tian* 天), signifying forces beyond human control. Early Confucians thought that the way in which a ruler responds to such disasters has to do with not only his moral character but also whether his government is humane. By taking full responsibility for the suffering of the people, even when caused by natural disasters, a ruler could entertain the Heaven-bestowed right to rule and maintain political legitimacy, even if he may not possess consummate virtue of the kind allegedly cultivated by the ancient sage-kings.

This article is structured in three parts. First, I show how Mencius reformulated Confucius's seminal idea of responsibility by rendering what Confucius called "this culture" in political terms, as a humane government. Second, I investigate why Mencius's political project that divides power between the ruler (ascending the throne by virtue of his hereditary right) and the virtuous ministers (the real carriers of the Mandate of Heaven) made his account of political responsibility incomplete by failing to explain why a ruler should take full responsibility for the suffering of the people caused by natural disasters. Finally, I turn to Dong Zhongshu, one of the most important Confucians during the early Han period, who resolved the Mencian difficulty by redefining humane government from a cosmological standpoint, at the core of which lies the anthropomorphic Heaven that creates natural disasters with the intention to warn the ruler about his misrule. I am one of the first scholars to introduce Dong to political theory in the English-speaking academic world. The few English-language studies are largely about Dong's cosmological thought and some philological matters (including the authorship) concerning the formation of the *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn* (*Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露), a text commonly attributed to him.⁹

⁹See Michael Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu, a 'Confucian' Heritage and the "Chunqiu Fanlu"* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Sarah A. Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn, according to Tung Chung-shu* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

My investigation of political responsibility as a quintessential Confucian political virtue that undergirds humane government provides a new perspective on the evolution of Confucian political theory from Mencius and Dong Zhongshu amid the radical political transition from the late Warring States period to the early Han dynasty. It also enriches our understanding of Confucian virtue politics by drawing attention to the key attribute of the humane ruler's moral character that is directly instrumental to the effective and reliable operation of humane government.

Mencius on Responsibility for Humane Government

When he found himself in a life-threatening danger in Kuang, surrounded by the henchmen of Huan Tui, a powerful minister of the state of Song, Confucius famously said, "If Heaven intended 'this culture' [*siwen* 斯文] to perish, it would not have given it to those of us who live after King Wen's death. Since Heaven did not intend that this culture should perish, what can the people of Kuang do to me?"¹⁰

Remarkably, Confucius took his personal disaster as an invitation to recommit himself to the mission given by Heaven (i.e., to preserve and revivify the humanistic culture of the Zhou dynasty or "this culture") rather than complain about it. In my view, this is the most profound meaning of his statement that he understood the decree of Heaven (*tianming* 天命) at age fifty.¹¹ It is not, as Robert Eno claims, that Confucius has finally come to the realization that his political endeavor to reform the world is impossible and his political failure is fated by Heaven.¹² On the contrary, "understanding the decree of Heaven" seems to involve a deep process of self-reflection, which can be explicated as involving two steps: first, the Heaven-given moral mission to change the world is not easy and, for reasons that only Heaven understands, is filled with challenges and obstacles, and second, it is nonetheless Heaven's intention for one to continue to strive to change the world. "Understanding the decree of Heaven" is not fatalism but rekindling commitment to the Heaven-given moral mission.

By treating a personal disaster that a virtuous person experiences as a natural disaster, as a contingent incident that is morally irrelevant,

Press, 1996); Li Zehou, *A History of Classical Chinese Thought*, trans. Andrew Lambert (New York: Routledge, 2020), 152–62; Robin Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 83–109.

¹⁰*Analects* 9.5 (modified). The English translation of the *Analects* is adapted from Confucius, *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003).

¹¹*Analects* 2.4.

¹²Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 89.

Confucius left ambiguous the nature of Heaven—whether it is a teleological moral force, or an inscrutable force more akin to fate. He provided no coherent philosophical account of Heaven. Moreover, and precisely because of this, Confucius was not able to clearly explain the implications of (personal) disasters for moral self-cultivation as well as for the political theory of responsibility. Though it is questionable that Confucius, in his later years, attempted to shield himself from responsibility by attributing his political failure to Heaven, his lack of interest in philosophically investigating the moral meaning of disaster led to an ethical stance close to what Philip Ivanhoe calls “character consequentialism,” according to which “the possession of certain virtues *usually* leads to the realization of certain good consequences above and beyond the possession of virtue itself.”¹³ But when the proviso of “usually” does not obtain, which puts one under the condition of contingency, what can Confucius (and Confucianism) say about it in moral terms, especially in relation to good government? One of Mencius’s greatest contributions to Confucian moral and political philosophy was to fill this important lacuna in Confucius’s thought, making Confucianism philosophically deeper and more coherent.

Mencius embraced and further developed the master’s virtue ethics and politics. His best-known innovations are the idea of human nature as good and the “developmental model” of moral self-cultivation.¹⁴ However, his philosophical account of personal disaster in reference to Heaven (or its decree) has been given little attention, although it holds profound implications for his vision of a humane government. Consider the following statement by Mencius:

When Heaven intends to confer a great responsibility upon a person, it first visits his mind and will with suffering, toils his sinews and bones, subjects his body to hunger, exposes him to poverty, and confounds his projects. Through this, his mind is stimulated, his nature strengthened, and his inadequacies repaired. . . . From this we know that we thrive from experiencing sorrow and calamity, and perish from comfort and joy.¹⁵

According to Mencius, personal disaster is qualitatively different from natural disaster inasmuch as it happens to someone Heaven has chosen to entrust with a “great responsibility” (*daren* 大任), namely, to revivify “this culture” in a world where the Way has disappeared (*wudao* 無道). While natural disaster holds no moral significance, personal disaster is understood as an integral part of the painstaking process of moral self-cultivation, through which one’s mind is stimulated and nature strengthened, leading to a robust moral character. Mencius calls one who has successfully cultivated formidable moral character “the great man” who “dwells in the wide house of the world [which is humaneness], occupies his proper place in the world

¹³Ivanhoe, “Character Consequentialism,” 56 (emphasis original).

¹⁴Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), 101.

¹⁵*Mencius* 6B15.

[which is righteousness], and carries out the great Way of the world . . . for the sake of the people of the world."¹⁶ One of Mencius's most revered ancient examples of the great man is Yi Yin, a former cook who after a series of personal hardships became the sagacious minister of King Tang, the founder of the Shang dynasty. Mencius describes Yi Yin as someone whose unswerving "commitment" (*zhi* 志) to the protection and promotion of the well-being of the people (or the Way) enabled him to fulfill his Heaven-given responsibility of stabilizing the new dynasty during its formative stage, even though he had to bend, but not break, the constant standard of morality to achieve a higher moral-political end.¹⁷

Mencius's moral account of personal disaster can be understood as an attempt to resolve the tension between the normative-teleological and inscrutable-fatalistic dimensions of Heaven latent in Confucius's account of Heaven from a philosophical standpoint. For Mencius, the inscrutable side of Heaven cannot remain unexplained, nor can it be juxtaposed with the teleological side; such a tension-ridden account of Heaven is critically at odds with the goodness of human nature as Heaven's decree within the mind.¹⁸ Since Heaven's decree is internal to human nature as the teleological-normative foundation (and motivation) of one's moral self-cultivation, personal disasters must be explained by the same Heaven who intends for him to become good. Mencius's resolution was to highlight the teleological side of Heaven (while leaving little space for the fatalistic dimension)¹⁹ and to associate it with the sense of responsibility that a morally cultivated person is supposed to carry out in the political domain for the sake of the well-being of the people whom Heaven gave birth to. The question of responsibility emerges as one of Mencius's central political concerns in actualizing his ideal humane government.

Though Confucius never clearly articulated his ideal form of government, despite his admiration for the Zhou dynasty, Mencius made it explicit that the ideal Confucian government is modeled after the humane government exercised by King Wen, the founder of the Zhou kingdom. Mencius says,

In antiquity, when King Wen governed Qi, tillers of the fields were taxed one part in nine and descendants of officers received emoluments. There was inspection but no taxation at border stations and in marketplaces; there was no restriction on the use of ponds and weirs. The wives and children of offenders were not implicated in their guilt. . . . These four [widowers, widows, desolates, orphans], the most destitute and the voiceless among the people, King Wen made his first concern, displaying humaneness in his conduct of government.²⁰

¹⁶*Mencius* 3B2.

¹⁷*Mencius* 7A31.

¹⁸*Mencius* 7A1.

¹⁹It is impossible to eliminate the condition of contingency from human life. Mencius was clearly aware of this ineluctable human condition. See *Mencius* 7A1–2.

²⁰*Mencius* 1B5.

King Wen's humane government serves as the political model of "this culture," and the great responsibility that a virtuous man is to carry out is to rekindle the humane government under the Warring States circumstances where the de facto sovereign states were perennially engaged in military conflict, driving the people into extreme destitution. Mencius's most eminent concern was how to realize a humane government under the circumstances of what can be called "total disaster." Mencius's description of total disaster is powerfully demonstrated in his depiction of the inhumane government by King Hui of Liang: "In your kitchen, there is fat meat, and in your stables fat horses. Yet the people have a hungry look, and out beyond, in the more wild regions, lie the bodies of those who have died of starvation. This is to lead animals to devour people."²¹

The problem is that a virtuous man's Heaven-given responsibility to realize a humane government is critically limited under nonideal conditions where the congruence between virtue and political authority no longer obtains. King Wen was a sage, but it was because the sage happened to be a king who possessed the institutional authority to implement good public policies that he was able to realize a humane government. All that a virtuous man can do, either as a minister or a guest-advisor, however, is to remonstrate with the ruler so that he can be put back on the right track of governance that serves the well-being of the people. Ironically, a virtuous man's Heaven-given responsibility to transform the world and deliver the people from disasters hangs on his ability to find a ruler who heeds his advice and to persuade him, often a non-Confucian mediocre man, to take on the responsibility of the Heavenly mission of protecting and promoting the well-being of the people. The question is what kind of responsibility is expected of a ruler or to what extent he should be held responsible for the well-being of the people in order to realize a humane government.

In this regard, Mencius's conversation with King Hui regarding the latter's response to a natural disaster is quite revealing. According to the king, when the harvest was bad owing to a natural disaster like flood or drought within the river, he transferred the people, along with food, to the east of the river, and when there occurred a natural disaster in the east of the river, he acted likewise. The king then asks why, despite his humaneness, the people of his state do not increase. Mencius responds:

The king's dogs and pigs eat food intended for human beings and he does not know enough to prohibit this. On the roads there are people dying of starvation, and he does not know enough to distribute food. People die, and he says, "It was not I; it was the year." How is this different from killing a person by stabbing him and then saying, "It was not I; it was the weapon"? When the king ceases to place the blame on the year, then, the people of the world will come to him.²²

²¹*Mencius* 1A4.

²²*Mencius* 1A3.

What is striking about Mencius's response is his complete rejection of causal responsibility. Evidently, the king took some reasonable actions to protect the well-being of his people when the year was bad owing to natural disasters. However, Mencius admonishes the king as if the people's suffering was caused solely by his inhumane government. On Mencius's reasoning, there is no qualitative difference between attributing the cause of the people's suffering to natural forces, which may be correct in the scientific sense, and blaming the weapon in the case of harming someone. As Mencius anticipates, the king may counter by claiming that Mencius's demand is unreasonable because one can take responsibility only for the outcomes caused by the decision made volitionally. After all, King Hui did not cause the people to suffer from the bad year. The assumption here is that one can take responsibility for something only within one's control and making one responsible for bad outcomes that are largely caused by nature is unreasonable.²³

The king, whose reasoning Mencius reconstructs, attempts to shield himself from responsibility by appealing to Heaven whose intentions are unfathomable and uncontrollable. Understanding Heaven as a teleological force, however, Mencius finds the king's rationalist reasoning implausible, because it undermines the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, according to which a ruler, typically the dynasty founder, attains the moral right to rule by means of his brilliant moral virtue and his single greatest mission is to protect and promote the well-being of the people by disseminating Heaven's beneficence (*de* 德) over them.²⁴ In Mencius's view, as "Heaven's delegated officer" (*tianli* 天吏), the ruler must take full responsibility for the people, even under circumstances of natural disasters.²⁵ As far as a ruler is concerned, humaneness is not merely being compassionate toward the people; rather, it must be manifested through the ruler's explicit willingness to take full responsibility for the people, regardless of the proximate cause of their suffering. Like Confucius, who turned his personal disaster into an opportunity to recommit himself to his moral mission to reform the world and deliver the people from suffering, Mencius encourages King Hui or any Warring States ruler to expand his sense and scope of political responsibility to the extent that the distinction between misfortune and injustice becomes moot.

²³For my detailed analysis of *Mencius* 1A3 and Mencius's noncausal conception of responsibility, see Sungmoon Kim, "Contingency and Responsibility in Confucian Political Theory," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 6 (2018): 615–36.

²⁴Mencius's subscription to the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven appears in *Mencius* 5A5–6. Also see A. T. Nuyen, "The 'Mandate of Heaven': Mencius and the Divine Command Theory of Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 2 (2013): 113–26.

²⁵On Mencius's discussion of "Heaven's delegated officer," see *Mencius* 2B8. Also see Justin Tiwald, "A Right of Rebellion in the *Mengzi*?" *Dao* 7, no. 3 (2008): 269–82.

Mencius's concern is not merely with chastising the ruler. He is also trying to shift the ruler's attention from what is within or without his control to what he should and can do to ameliorate the situation, thereby developing his humaneness and making his government humane.

If the agricultural seasons are not interfered with, there will be more grain than can be eaten. If close-meshed nets are not allowed in the pools and ponds, there will be more timber than can be used. When grain, fish, and turtles are more than can be eaten, and timber is more than can be used, this will mean that the people can nourish their lives, bury their dead, and be without rancor. Making it possible for them to nourish their lives, bury their dead, and be without rancor is the beginning of kingly government.²⁶

Contemporary scholars of Confucianism are far more interested in addressing general moral questions in reference to classical Confucian texts than understanding them in their own historical contexts. For this reason, they largely gloss over Mencius's practical side as a policy advisor to the rulers of his time. Leading scholars such as David Nivison, Philip Ivanhoe, and David Wong present the otherwise political conversations between Mencius and King Hui or Xuan, whose governments Mencius found inhumane, as occasions in which a moral education is conducted that aims to help one understand the importance of making moral motivation and moral judgment congruent with each other.²⁷ Though plausible as a contemporary philosophical analysis, it is dubious that this purely moral interpretation can render Mencius's core political message intelligible because it shifts our attention from the problem of total disaster. In actively seeking meetings with inhumane rulers, his most profound concern was to urge them to take an action to redress injustice resulting from their inhumane governance and actively bear responsibility for the well-being of the people who regard them as their parents.

As the first step toward this end, a ruler must overcome the temptation to draw a vivid line between misfortune and injustice. Where the people suffer bad luck, a ruler tends to see no responsibility, because the problem is believed to have been caused by forces beyond his control, by inscrutable Heaven. Mencius's point is that a ruler should not attribute the effects of a disaster, such as the people's suffering, to simple bad luck, thus exonerating himself from political responsibility. Rather, he must actively investigate how what he considers bad luck is in fact deeply entwined with his failure to practice humane government, resulting in him seeing the people's suffering

²⁶Mencius 1A3.

²⁷David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 96–106; Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Confucian Self Cultivation and Mengzi's Notion of Extension," in Liu and Ivanhoe, *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, 221–41; David B. Wong, "Reasons and Analogical Reasoning in Mengzi," in *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, 187–220.

as a matter of injustice which requires his active rectification. If the ruler's only concern is to punish the people who have succumbed to "dissoluteness, depravity, deviance, and excess" under the circumstances of total disaster, it is nothing other than "entrapping" them. Rather, what a ruler must be most concerned with is to "regulate the people's livelihood so as to ensure that, above, they have enough to serve their parents and, below, they have enough to support their wives and children. [And] in years of prosperity they always have enough to eat; in years of dearth they are able to escape starvation."²⁸

Thus understood, for Mencius political responsibility was the key attribute of the ruler's developed moral agency – his humaneness in particular – that is directly conducive to the effective and reliable operation of humane government. Therefore, the "political" nature of this virtue should not be understood in terms of its complete separation from moral self-cultivation or the individual moral virtues thus attained. Political responsibility is a virtue that is motivated by and extended from the ruler's humane heart, the essence of which Mencius famously captured in terms of the heart that "cannot bear to see the suffering of others" (*Mencius* 2A6). The ruler's noncausal sense of responsibility is political in the sense that, first, it pertains only to the ruler whose central task is to take care of the well-being of the people and, second and as shall be discussed shortly, it is closely related with the Confucian state's political legitimacy. Political responsibility is a virtue that undergirds what Joseph Chan calls the "service conception of authority,"²⁹ according to which the telos of the Confucian state (and Confucian political leadership) lies in serving the people's well-being rather than owning the state as his private possession. Political responsibility represents a ruler's moral commitment to the protection and promotion of the well-being of the people in the face of all sorts of contingency that are ordinarily thought to be beyond his control. It is a virtue exercised by a ruler who has sufficiently (if not fully) cultivated his innate moral sentiment of compassion, the "sprout" (*duan* 端) of humaneness.

How to Transmit the Mandate of Heaven?

At this point, two problems arise. First, his subscription to the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven notwithstanding, Mencius does not make clear why the rulers of his time are to take full responsibility for the well-being of the people, regardless of what actually caused their destitution and suffering, except to point out that everyone (hence any ruler) is potentially virtuous by being born with the sprouts of the cardinal moral virtues. In Mencius's own narrative, the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven applies only to the

²⁸*Mencius* 1A7.

²⁹Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, 30.

ancient “sage-kings” such as Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, and Wu, all of whom are dynasty founders.³⁰ It is said that they received the whole world (*tianxia* 天下) from Heaven because of their virtue, although the specific ways in which they acquired the position of the Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子) are different between the first three sages who ascended the throne through peaceful abdication and the rest who became universal kings by successfully banishing the last rulers of the preceding dynasties, all extremely inhumane rulers, by means of punitive expedition, a form of just war in the Confucian tradition.³¹

It remains ambiguous in Mencius’s political thought how the Mandate of Heaven is transmitted to the rulers who succeeded the throne by hereditary right, hence who are likely to lack moral character of the kind that warrants the right to rule. If a ruler, most likely a mediocre man under the hereditary system, did not receive the mandate to rule directly from Heaven, what is the motive for him to take full responsibility for the well-being of the people, especially when he did not cause their suffering? Xunzi, who rejects the abdication legend and advocates the hereditary system for purposes of order and stability,³² has a prudential argument for this problem: that the ruler must care for the well-being of the people because it benefits him.³³ It is questionable, however, that Mencius has a satisfactory philosophical argument for this problem, given that he explains moral decisions in terms of internal moral motivation and thus his program of moral education centers around cultivating innate moral sentiments.³⁴ What motivates a ruler to immerse himself in the arduous process of moral self-cultivation, which is regulated by his own ministers?

Second, and relatedly, Mencius never attributes the great responsibility, which is how he explains Yi Yin’s sagacity as noted earlier, to any random ruler of his time, most of whom were men of mediocre talent and ability

³⁰Wu is Wen’s son who brought to an end the punitive expedition against Zhou Xin, the last ruler of the Shang dynasty, which had been initiated by Wen. In the Confucian tradition, Wu is commonly understood as the cofounder of the Zhou dynasty.

³¹Sumner B. Twiss and Jonathan Chan, “Classical Confucianism, Punitive Expeditions, and Humanitarian Intervention,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 11, no. 2 (2012): 81–96.

³²Henry Rosemont Jr., “State and Society in the *Xunzi*: A Philosophical Commentary,” in *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the “Xunzi,”* ed. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), 1–38; Sungmoon Kim, “Confucian Constitutionalism: Mencius and Xunzi on Virtue, Ritual, and Royal Transmission,” *Review of Politics* 73, no. 3 (2011): 371–99.

³³Kurtis Hagen, “Xunzi and the Prudence of Dao: Desire as the Motive to Become Good,” *Dao* 10, no. 1 (2011): 53–70; David B. Wong, “Xunzi and Moral Motivation,” in Kline and Ivanhoe, *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency*, 135–54.

³⁴This does not mean that Mencius’s political theory has no prudential ground. For example, Mencius persuades King Xuan of Qi to share his pleasure of enjoying material goods with the people because it would benefit him and further help him become a universal ruler (*Mencius* 1A7).

with little commitment to the Way. In fact, Mencius was heavily critical of the rulers of his time as they were single-mindedly preoccupied with the Way of the Hegemon.³⁵ According to him, Heaven grants the great responsibility to a person who has undergone Heaven-inflicted personal ordeals and disasters, and who, in the end, has successfully cultivated moral character. Mencius presents it as the prerogative of sage-ministers like Yi Yin, whose central task is to make the ruler devoted to the well-being of the people.³⁶ His description of Yi Yin's thought process in accepting Tang's invitation to become his minister is highly revealing: "Heaven, in giving birth to this people, causes those who are first to know to awaken those who are later to know and causes those who are first awakened to awaken those who are later to be awakened. I am one of those Heaven's people who has awakened first; I will take this Way and use it to awaken this people. If I do not awaken them, who will do so?"³⁷ As far as Mencius's narrative goes, before Tang met Yi Yin, he was not a sage. Yi Yin, as one of Heaven's awakened people, helped Tang become one. This implies that kingship holds no moral significance in itself and does not automatically make its holder the delegated officer of Heaven. Ironically, for Mencius, despite his chastisement of the rulers of his time, the great responsibility to awaken the people and care for their well-being is not incumbent upon the ruler, but depends on virtuous Confucian scholar-ministers. Mencius makes this point abundantly clear when he concludes that Yi Yin "thought that if, among the people in the world, there was a common man or common woman who did not share in the benefits of Yao and Shun, *it was as if he himself had pushed them into a ditch*. So it was that he took upon himself the responsibility for the heavy weight of the world."³⁸

In short, the kind of political responsibility that Mencius claims a ruler must assume under the circumstances of total disaster is in effect entrusted to a virtuous Confucian scholar-minister (or a group of the virtuous ministers) who sees himself as if he were the one who caused the people's suffering. Under the hereditary system, it is not so much a ruler as virtuous Confucian ministers who understand and carry out the Mandate of Heaven, although, ultimately, the final decision-making power is still held by the ruler. This poses a problem of how to account for natural disaster from a moral standpoint. What is at stake is how we can explain natural disaster in a way that coherently explains the connection between Heaven's teleological and normative

³⁵Mencius 4A2; 7B1.

³⁶Arguably, Duke Wen of Teng seems to be the only ruler that Mencius found decent or sufficiently humane (Mencius 3A2), but as a ruler of a small state squeezed between two powerful states, Duke Wen's most eminent concern was how to protect his people from Teng's aggressive neighbors.

³⁷Mencius 5A7.

³⁸Ibid. (emphasis added).

dimension on the one hand, and the ruler's (not the minister's) noncausal remedial responsibility for the well-being of the people on the other.

Dong Zhongshu's Cosmological Transformation

Mencius's political theory of responsibility is incomplete in the sense that while a Confucian scholar must develop moral character to become the right agent (i.e., the minister) who can carry out "the great responsibility,"³⁹ a ruler is supposed to fulfill the same responsibility, often under exigent political circumstances, simply because he holds the office of kingship, although he ascends the throne not by moral qualification but through hereditary right. Moreover, as noted earlier, Mencius provides no explanation as to how Heaven's intention to create natural disasters can be understood in moral terms in relation to kingship.

Apparently, in understanding Heaven, disaster, and the ruler's political responsibility from a coherent philosophical perspective, the only moral discourse available to Mencius was the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven. However, this doctrine authorizes the right to rule not only of the dynasty founder, but more importantly, of the dynasty itself. Otherwise, the doctrine would lose its moral force under the hereditary system in which a ruler's right to rule is not directly given by Heaven through his personal moral virtue. If the doctrine purports to regulate every single individual ruler's moral conduct and governance, the dynasty would be discontinued upon the inhumane government by any succeeding ruler. In fact, according to Mencius, some of the early rulers of the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, including King Cheng, Wen's son, went astray from the Way and they could regain power only after a considerable time of self-reform.⁴⁰

After the founder of the Han dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) had finally reunified the old Zhou territory, replacing the short-lived Qin dynasty, the first Chinese empire, a new political theory was necessary that could complement the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, that could guide an individual ruler's conduct and governance without denying the Mandate of Heaven bestowed upon the dynasty. Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BC), one of the most venerated Confucians during the early Han period, provided such a theory, thereby solidifying the ruling legitimacy of the Han empire undergirded by the emperor's undivided power and centralized bureaucracy while encouraging him to practice a humane government.⁴¹ As an unswerving advocate of the

³⁹Mencius 6B15.

⁴⁰According to the *Mencius*, Tai Jia, Tang's grandson, was banished by Yi Yin and restored to kingship only after he reformed himself. King Cheng, too, was sidelined by the Duke of Zhou, his uncle, to return to power after self-reform.

⁴¹Yichun Liu and Xiaoye You, "Reading the Heavenly Mandate: Dong Zhongshu's Rhetoric of the Way (*Dao*)," in *Ancient Non-Greek Rhetorics*, ed. Carol S. Lipson and Roberta A. Binkley (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor, 2009), 153–75; Jiantao Ren, "Beyond

Confucian Way, who nonetheless incorporated many new philosophical elements such as the *yin-yang* theory among other things into his complex metaphysical and ethico-political system of Confucianism,⁴² Dong rearticulated the Confucian ideal of humane government from the perspective of Heaven's humaneness.⁴³

According to Dong, Heaven is humane not only in the sense that it "protects and shelters the myriad things" but also because of its "inexhaustible and boundless intentions" to make humans (and the myriad things under Heaven) prosper and flourish.⁴⁴ Moreover, in his cosmological Confucianism, there is (and should be) a correspondence between Heaven and the king. Modeling himself after Heaven who nourishes and benefits humans through the changes of the four seasons, which Dong explains in terms of the ceaseless interaction between *yin* and *yang* and the "Five Phases" (*wuxing* 五行) generated by them,⁴⁵ the king must "constantly love and confer benefits to all under Heaven [thereby bringing] peace and contentment to the age."⁴⁶

Dong presents the ruler as the pivot of the state that controls the vast territory of the Central Plains by means of "the commandery system" (*junxian* 郡縣),⁴⁷ acting as the sole agent of Heaven (i.e., the Son of Heaven) who is supposed to disseminate humaneness over all people under his authority. In return, the people are supposed to reciprocate the ruler's humane government with their voluntary compliance with gratitude. Following Shu-Shan Lee, we can call Dong's account of political obligation

Mencius and Xunzi: A Third Approach to Confucianism," *Journal of Chinese Humanities* 6 (2020): 77–91.

⁴²Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Sixth Century A.D.*, trans. F. W. Mote (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 484–503. Also see Robin R. Wang, "Dong Zhongshu's Transformation of 'Yin-Yang' Theory and Contesting of Gender Identity," *Philosophy East and West* 55, no. 2 (2005): 209–31.

⁴³For a useful introduction of Dong's idea of humane government, see Han Jinjun, "Dong zhongshu wangdao zhengzhi zhaxue de jiben jiagou" [The basic structure of Dong Zhongshu's political philosophy of the Kingly Way], *Hengshui xueyuan xuebao* 19, no. 5 (2017): 23–28.

⁴⁴CQFL 44.1. The English translations of the *Chunqiu Fanlu* (CQFL) were adapted from *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, trans. Sarah A. Queen and John S. Major (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁴⁵Dong says, "Heaven has Five Phases. [They are] Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. Wood gives birth to Fire; Fire gives birth to Earth; Earth gives birth to Metal; Metal gives birth to Water. Water makes winter; Metal makes autumn; Earth makes midsummer; Fire makes summer; Wood makes spring" (CQFL 38.1).

⁴⁶CQFL 44.1.

⁴⁷For an explanation of the commandery system, see Stephen C. Angle and Justin Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 201.

“paternalistic gratitude,” central to which is the people’s voluntary compliance with the humane ruler committed to serving their well-being.⁴⁸ While defining the king as “one who is lord over others [being] the point of origin of the state [and] the axial mechanism of the myriad things,”⁴⁹ he is also “one toward whom the people move; the ruler is one who does not lose his following.”⁵⁰ Unlike Mencius who extols virtuous Confucians as morally superior to (hereditary) rulers,⁵¹ thereby dividing the power between them, Dong presents the ruler as the possessor of undivided power and authority. Noting that “a state comes to be a state [because of the ruler’s] power,” Dong submits that “power must not be shared” because otherwise the ruler would “lose his grace.”⁵² In order not to lose his grace (i.e., his Heaven-given “right” to disseminate Heaven’s beneficence to the people), “one who would rule others must resolutely preserve his power to subjugate his people; must resolutely maintain his authority to rectify his ministers.”⁵³

Some contemporary scholars argue that Dong’s valorization of the kingship as the pivot of the state has a great deal to do with his more profound belief in the Grand Unity of the whole world. Yet they also note a tension between Dong’s unwavering commitment to the Grand Unity, which requires the ruler’s undivided power, and his subscription to the Mandate of Heaven that transcends the ruler’s secular authority.⁵⁴ What is certain, though, is that Dong was strongly convinced that “the unified empire should tolerate no intellectual pluralism”⁵⁵—hence his advocacy of Confucianism as the state ideology.

⁴⁸Shu-Shan Lee, “Paternalistic Gratitude: The Theory and Politics of Confucian Political Obligation,” *Dao* 20, no. 4 (2021): 635–59.

⁴⁹CQFL 19.1

⁵⁰CQFL 7.1. The authors of the *Chunqiu Fanlu* employ “king” and “ruler” interchangeably. As the English translators of the *Chunqiu Fanlu* rightly note (Queen and Major, *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, 153n1), the statement contains puns: between “king” (*wang* 王) and “move toward” (*wang* 往) and between “ruler” (*jun* 君) and “following” (*qun* 群, in the sense of the people gathering around the ruler).

⁵¹Mencius 5B7.

⁵²CQFL 29.2.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴See, for instance, Huang Yushun, “Dong zhongshu sixiang xitong de jiegou xing huan yuan: ‘Tian ren san ce’ de zhengzhi zhaxue jiedu” [The restoration of Dong Zhongshu’s system of thought: A political philosophical reading of the *Three Strategies of Heaven and Human Beings*], *Sichuan daxue xuebao* 5 (2020): 39–50; Gan Chunsong, “Cong tiandao pubian xing lai jiangou da yitong zhixu de zhengzhi yuanze: Dong zhongshu ‘tian’ guannian shujie” [Constructing the political doctrine of the Grand Unity from the universalism of the Way of Heaven: Interpreting Dong Zhongshu’s notion of “Heaven”], *Zhexue dongtai* 1 (2021): 74–83.

⁵⁵Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 87.

Dong's exaltation of the ruler as the sole agent of Heaven leads him to ascribe what Mencius called "the great responsibility" to the ruler alone. The corollary of this change is to turn the normative relationship between ruler and ministers upside down: while for Mencius the ministers possess the ritually sanctioned "right" to rectify the ruler,⁵⁶ in Dong's political thought the ministers are to be rectified by the ruler representing the will of Heaven. Since Dong believes that it is in accordance with the righteous principle of the *Spring and Autumn* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), the Confucian canon stipulating moral rightness, it is only necessary to "despise the minister who trades on the good reputation of his lord" and to make sure that "loyal ministers do not openly criticize their lords, hoping that the right conduct will emanate from the lord himself."⁵⁷

Given this renewed normative relationship between the ruler and the ministers, what would be the motivation for the ruler, ascending the throne by his hereditary right, to take the great responsibility? Dong's famous discussion of natural disasters and bizarre events provides an important clue to answering these questions. Three points combine to explain the defining characteristics of Dong Zhongshu's Confucian political theory. First, Heaven deliberately causes "bizarre events" and "natural disasters" to warn the ruler (and the ruling family) who has failed to disseminate Heaven's humaneness to the people through a humane government. According to Dong,

Natural disasters are Heaven's warnings [while] bizarre events are Heaven's threats. If Heaven warns [the ruler] and he does not acknowledge [these warnings], then Heaven will frighten him with threats. . . . Concerning the source of natural disasters and bizarre events, ultimately they are caused by the faults of the ruling family of the state. When the faults of the ruling family of the state have just begun to become apparent, Heaven sends disaster and destruction to warn and inform them.⁵⁸

This signals a Copernican change in Confucian political theory because Mencius, his firm belief in Heaven as the teleological and normative force notwithstanding, never explained natural disasters in terms of Heaven's warning for the ruler. Finally, Dong has erased the inscrutable dimension from Heaven and brought the moral theory of (normative-teleological) Heaven to its consummation. With Dong's new theory, according to which Heaven and humans (the ruler in particular) are correlated,⁵⁹ Heaven is no longer placed beyond human understanding and control. While Heaven appears to be an absolute cosmic and moral authority with an intention to interfere

⁵⁶Mencius 4A20.

⁵⁷CQFL 3.2

⁵⁸CQFL 30.2.

⁵⁹In CQFL 44.1, Dong states that "the beauty of humaneness rests with Heaven. Heaven is humane. . . . Human beings receive their destiny [*ming* 命] from Heaven. Human beings derive their humaneness from Heaven and thereby are humane. . . . It is the Way of humankind alone that is able to connect with Heaven."

in human affairs, it never intervenes with the human world arbitrarily. In fact, its moral-cosmological operation is always covariant with, even subject to, the ruler's conduct and governance. Dong thus says, "Other living things suffer troubles and defects and cannot practice humaneness and righteousness. Human beings alone practice humaneness and righteousness. Other living things suffer troubles and defects and cannot match Heaven and Earth. Human beings alone match Heaven and Earth."⁶⁰ As the most exalted man in the world, the ruler is believed to exercise a special moral-political agency that can put Heaven under moral control.

Second, Dong's cosmological theory of Heaven explains why the ruler must take full responsibility for natural disasters. As we have seen, for Mencius natural disasters happen for unknown reasons and he requires that a ruler perceive natural disasters as if he caused them and not attribute them to bad luck. Still, it is unclear what motivates a ruler to actively assume this non-causal responsibility. In Dong's account of natural disasters, the ruler's non-causal responsibility is reformulated as causal responsibility. Natural disasters occur precisely because of the ruler's (and the royal family's) misconduct or misrule, which Heaven does not condone. As the sole agent of Heaven governing all under Heaven, the ruler is not supposed to share the responsibility for natural disasters with his ministers, nor can he attribute them to mere misfortune. Inasmuch as natural disasters are inflicted by Heaven because of the ruler's fault, the distinction between injustice and misfortune becomes meaningless. The ruler's *full* responsibility is the natural corollary of his supreme and undivided political authority as the Son of Heaven.

Third, Dong's account of natural disasters informs us why a Confucian state can last for a long period of time without losing its ruling legitimacy, authorized by the Mandate of Heaven, despite the intermittent deviations from the Way by succeeding rulers. Dong continues his account of natural disasters and bizarre events:

If after being warned and informed, [the ruling family of the state] does not know to change, then Heaven manifests uncanny and bizarre events to startle and terrify them. If after being startled and terrified, [the ruling family of the state] does not know to fear and dread [Heaven], only then will death and extinction overtake them. From this we can see that Heaven's will is humane and that Heaven does not desire to harm others.⁶¹

What is central to Dong's claim here is that some episodic incidents of the ruler's misconduct and/or misrule, however grave, are not automatically tantamount to the crime grave enough to warrant his forfeiture of the Mandate of Heaven, which, in principle, is bestowed upon "the ruling family of the state" (*guojia* 國家) through the dynasty progenitor's moral virtue. Heaven informs

⁶⁰CQFL 56.1.

⁶¹CQFL 30.2.

the ruler of its discontent with his conduct or governance by showing a series of bizarre events and natural disasters with escalating severity. The discontinuation of the dynasty is Heaven's last and most severe punishment for the ruler (and the ruling house) and it happens when he refuses to reform himself in spite of the repeated warnings from Heaven. Dong's doctrine of natural disasters (and a new theory of Heaven therewith) offers a powerful explanation for why ancient Chinese dynasties such as Xia and Shang, which intermittently suffered misrule by bad rulers, lasted so long, only to be destroyed during the reigns of Jie and Zhou Xin, the two most notorious tyrants in Chinese history.⁶²

Equally important, with his new Confucian theory of Heaven as a cosmological force that ensures the teleological project of humane government, Dong forecloses the possible manipulations of the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven by ambitious ministers, which were prevalent during the Warring States period.⁶³ Dong's implicit message is that Heaven does not move the mandate to rule to a new candidate, who may hide his treacherous will to usurp the throne behind the feigned character, unless the incumbent ruler (or the ruling house) has clearly demonstrated his fatal inaptitude for the task of protecting and promoting the well-being of the people by repeatedly failing to heed the warnings from Heaven. Therefore, the presence of a man of Heavenly virtue as a potential candidate does not warrant the change of the Mandate of Heaven in itself. What is at stake is not so much the presence of a more attractive candidate as the complete and demonstrated failure of the ruler (and his family) to continue his role as the agent of Heaven. Thus, I disagree with Gary Arbuckle who, through the careful examination of Dong's later writings including his poetry, claims that after his political failure, Dong became completely disillusioned with the Han ruling house's ability to retain the Mandate of Heaven and anticipated the imminent collapse of the dynasty and emergence of Wang Mang.⁶⁴ Though interesting, I am not sure that Arbuckle's interpretation best captures the core of Dong's idea of political legitimacy. Even if Dong abandoned his hope for the Han ruling house in his later days, it does not change his normative belief,

⁶²Mencius attributes the longevity of the Shang dynasty to the existence of the virtuous ministers as well as "the inherited customs of the old families and the legacy of good government" (*Mencius* 2A1).

⁶³Indeed, the ruler's anxiety over the usurpation of the throne by powerful ministers was the most eminent concern of Han Fei, the iconic advocate of Legalism in ancient China. See Yuri Pines, "Submerged by Absolute Power: The Ruler's Predicament in the Han Feizi," in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Han Fei*, ed. Paul R. Goldin (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 67–86. For the manipulations of the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven during the Warring States period, see Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939), 153–54.

⁶⁴Gary Arbuckle, "Inevitable Treason: Dong Zhongshu's Theory of Historical Cycles and Early Attempts to Invalidate the Han Mandate," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 115, no. 4 (1995): 585–97.

predicated on his new account of Heaven, that the Mandate of Heaven falls on the royal house, under the assumption that the state (or the dynasty) must endure for a long period of time as the protector of both the well-being of the people and the Grand Unity of the whole world.

Dong's account of political responsibility is causal only in the nonrationalist and nonscientific sense, however. A non-Confucian and unvirtuous ruler may still ask why he should be held responsible for natural disasters over which he has no moral control. Dong could simply be confused between misfortune and injustice in upholding anthropomorphic Heaven and trying to account for the operation of Heaven in moral terms. The ruler may wonder, if there are no natural disasters or bizarre events during his reign, whether it follows that his government has been good and humane and he has nothing to worry about, regardless of what the people have to say about his government.

Like Mencius, however, Dong would say that these are the wrong questions because they miss the point of the new Confucian political theory of responsibility. Dong's core message is political and deeply Mencian: it is not necessarily because the disasters were caused by the ruler but because he occupies the institutional position of kingship that he is required to take full responsibility for the well-being of the people. This is how Dong understands the kernel of the *Spring and Autumn*, the Confucian canon allegedly redacted by Confucius himself, when he says, "The intention [of the *Spring and Autumn*] is to not inflict suffering on the people. If the *Spring and Autumn* despises causing the people to suffer [even in years of bad harvests], how much more is this the case of harming them. If the *Spring and Autumn* grieves at harming the people, how much more is this the case of killing them!"⁶⁵

Dong shows no interest in finding out exactly to what extent a ruler should be held responsible for the disasters that have occurred and precisely which of his conduct or policy invoked Heaven's wrath. The question is how the ruler is supposed to respond to natural disasters, not so much why or how much he should be held responsible for them. As Dong sees it, the right response is not limited to the ruler's self-reform or sacrificial rituals to the various spirits and deities and ultimately to Heaven, which Dong discusses extensively toward the end of the *Chunqiu Fanlu*.⁶⁶ The ruler's moral repentance, expressed by his sacrificial rituals to Heaven and other spiritual beings, may signal his redirection to humane government, but it is far from rectifying his inhumane government and satisfying the people. More important is the ruler's active quest for good public policies that can actually make his government humane. Consider the following statement by Dong describing Heaven's calamities that can happen in spring, the season of Wood:

⁶⁵CQFL 3.1.

⁶⁶CQFL 74–76.

Trees that once flourished will become withered, and the cart wheels hewn by artisans will become badly broken. Noxious waters will engulf the teeming masses [of living things], and the banks of ponds will dry up, [strewn with] stranded fish. [Heaven's] calamities also will visit scaly creatures, so that fish will not spawn, the numerous dragons will hide themselves in the depths, and the great whales will appear.⁶⁷

When these calamities have happened or in order to prevent them from happening, a ruler must take specific actions that can protect and promote the well-being of the people. He should not impinge on the common people's seasonal tasks nor impose a heavy tax on them. The ruler should, furthermore, "relax the numerous prohibitions, pardon light offenses, release the detained and incarcerated, and remove handcuffs and shackles."⁶⁸

Like Mencius, Dong encourages a ruler to take full responsibility for the suffering of the people even when it was caused by natural disasters. Despite upholding the causal conception of political responsibility, Dong has no desire to delineate the legal scope of the ruler's responsibility by rationally examining the causality between his (or the ruling family's) misconduct/misrule and the suffering of the people caused by natural calamities. Legal liability as a form of causal responsibility is out of the question as far as the ruler's political responsibility is concerned. Rather, the gist of Dong's notion of causal responsibility, which is predicated on the religious-teleological account of Heaven and its cosmological relation with human beings, consists in the ruler's moral ability to see natural calamities as if they were caused by his failure in order to carry on the Heavenly mission of humane government. Ritual sacrifices only represent the ruler's right mind, his determination to recommit himself to the Mandate of Heaven. The real remedy for the suffering of the people is sought through specific policy measures aimed at realizing a humane government.

Conclusion

Mencius reinterpreted what Confucius called "this culture" explicitly in political terms and presented "humane government" as the normative ideal of Confucian politics. Understanding humane government as "the great responsibility" bestowed by Heaven to a virtuous minister, Mencius reinforced the teleological-normative dimension of Heaven, which had been unstably juxtaposed with Heaven's inscrutable and fatalist side in Confucius's ethical thought, by explaining personal disaster as a necessary part of moral self-cultivation, the culmination of which lies in attaining formidable moral character, making one worthy of the great responsibility for humane government. However, Mencius did not explain clearly why a ruler, ascending the

⁶⁷CQFL 60.1.

⁶⁸Ibid.

throne not by his virtue but by his hereditary right, is supposed to take full responsibility for the suffering of the people caused by forces out of his control. Mencius left ambiguous how to make sense of natural disasters in relation to the ruler's responsibility under the condition of hereditary kingship.

Dong Zhongshu made the Mencian ideals of humane government and political responsibility complete and coherent. Finding himself in the radically altered political situation that followed the rise of the Han empire, Dong could not adhere to the Mencian project of attributing the great responsibility mainly to virtuous Confucian ministers, his commitment to humane government notwithstanding. The Mencian project would likely divide political authority between the ruler and the ministers, an unacceptable political suggestion under new political circumstances predicated on the Son of Heaven's centralized power. The alternative Confucian path Dong chose was to reconceive the Confucian theory of humane government in terms of the cosmological theory of humaneness, which stipulates that the ruler's responsibility for the well-being of the people derives from Heaven's desire to benefit the people. The ruler's failure to fulfill his responsibility would cause Heaven to bring about natural calamities. In Dong's cosmological Confucian ideal of humane government, the ruler's political responsibility was reconceived from the noncausal conception into the causal conception, while still stressing the ruler's moral ability to envision the people's suffering caused by natural disasters as if they were caused by injustice resulting from his inhumane government.

The evolution of Confucian political theory from Mencius to Dong Zhongshu shows that a Confucian humane government does not rest on the world-transformative power of the ruler's virtue but is undergirded by the ruler's political virtue of responsibility and specific actions that it materializes in the form of public policy. Though there is no denying that in Confucianism the political is extended from and deeply entwined with the ethical, as Sor-hoon Tan has forcefully argued,⁶⁹ political responsibility is importantly distinguished from general moral virtues in that it is the political virtue that is required of any political leader who occupies the highest office of the state, being responsible for the well-being of the people. This is not to argue that this political conception of responsibility is incompatible with Confucian virtue ethics (or character consequentialism) as far as it is understood as being extended from moral virtues such as humaneness and righteousness. Certainly, a sage-king is believed to possess political responsibility in his moral connoisseurship.

This article additionally shows that an ordinary ruler who is far from being fully virtuous can discharge the political virtue of responsibility if he takes his position seriously, and therefore, he can practice humane government,

⁶⁹Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

although it is only after the substantial process of moral self-cultivation that he can maintain humane government stably and reliably. Both Mencius and Dong Zhongshu developed the Confucian theory of political responsibility in the course of struggling to make an ordinary non-Confucian ruler devoted to the Way, at the core of which lies protecting and promoting the well-being of the people. Their shared idea of political responsibility helps us understand that the early Confucian project of humane government depended on the political virtue that was directly instrumental to materializing the ruler's humane heart in concrete public policies.