

CORRIGENDUM

Franklin Perkins: *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane: The Problem of Evil in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. Pp. xiii, 295.)

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The above review (Peter R. Moody, 2015) was originally published by Cambridge University Press, 20 April 2015, in *The Review of Politics*, volume 77, issue 2, pages 346–349 without the necessary Chinese characters. The publisher apologizes for this error. The correct review is provided below:

For Franklin Perkins evil entails bad things happening to good people. He aspires to discuss the classical Chinese texts on their own terms while showing their relevance to universal issues of concern, putting them into dialogue with Western thinkers. He couches the issue in terms of theodicy, that most futile and frustrating of intellectual endeavors. The question of evil arises, he says, in a context that defines the good in anthropocentric terms, recognizes that the world is not good on those terms, and postulates a being responsible for the world and itself good on those terms (36). The title, though, is from the *Laozi*: Heaven and earth are unkind (*buren*—“not ren,” *ren* being the supreme Confucian virtue, variously translated as love, Goodness, benevolence, kindness, “humanness”). Grappling with the reality of evil led Western thinkers away from confidence in God. The Chinese thinkers became skeptical of the position of man.

Perkins does not devote a separate discussion to the ideas of Confucius (or Kongzi, as he calls him) in the *Analects*, but takes early Ru (in English: Confucian; Perkins’s usage here may be on the way to becoming conventional, but it still strikes me as a pedantic affection that adds nothing to the analysis) thinking as a kind of base point. He then takes up the usual suspects in roughly chronological order (roughly: there is some ground to think the *Zhuangzi* is prior to the *Laozi*; but Perkins’s order serves his expository purposes) as they react to issues raised by Confucius.

Confucius believed the Mandate of Heaven had collapsed, but found in the human person the image and embodiment (if we would only live up to it) of a moral order inherent in the universe. Mozi attributed less to the human person and more to Heaven, which wishes well to human beings and rewards and punishes us to the extent that we wish well and do good for our fellows (allowing, as Perkins notes, for considerable ambiguity about whether things always work out this way).

But Laozi says: Heaven and earth are not humane. *Ren* can also mean sensitive or having feeling, as in the phrase *ma mu buren* (麻木不仁), numb or unfeeling as hemp or wood: so here Heaven and earth may not be the sorts of

things that *humane* can be predicated of. Laozi, however, goes on to say: the sage (or “sagely people,” as Perkins for some reason prefers) is unkind: he treats the people as straw dogs (the straw dogs were little effigies burnt at funerals). That is, the Way (Dao, née Tao) is indifferent to human concerns; Confucian morality is an artificial construct, a symptom of our alienation from the Dao, and adherence to it reinforces our alienation. The sagely people, in Perkins’s interpretation, turn out, however, not to be entirely unren, since by adherence to the Dao they somehow, without preaching or coercion, guide the natural process toward a human good.

While Laozi asserts that morality is a symptom of our loss of the proper sense of the Dao, Mengzi (Mencius to us in Rio Linda) argues, rather, that morality is itself the expression of the Dao in human life. Inherent impulses lead us to proper conduct toward ourselves and others, although these “sprouts” require constant cultivation before they come to fruit. Zhuangzi takes the Laozi position to its extreme. While in Laozi there is some notion of the proper way to order human and social life, Zhuangzi undertakes a radical “deconstruction” of any hint that there is anything “anthropocentric” about reality. We are part of the Dao, but the Dao is what it is. And any peace of mind (or what?) entails our abstaining from any evaluation of anything, including our own pains, suffering, and death. Xunzi goes back to Confucian morality, except that his concept Heaven is that of the Daoists (as Laozi and Zhuangzi later came to be called). Heaven is nature, pure and simple, and neither has nor can have any concern for human convenience. While Mencius thinks human nature has spontaneous impulses toward morality, for Xunzi our spontaneous impulses are all to look out for Number One. On the other hand, Heaven does have its regularities, and by adapting to those regularities human life becomes bearable. And human persons and society are part of nature and they have their own regularities that we can discover through intelligence. These turn out to be the Confucian moral code. While human beings are inherently antisocial, proper human life requires society, and the rules of morality allow us to live in society.

The above is, of course, a grotesque (but I hope not inaccurate) oversimplification of a complex exposition. Perkins discusses each of the thinkers in considerable detail and with impressive erudition, showing a mastery of the texts themselves and of the contemporary English- and Chinese-language secondary literature. Some of the points seem quite suggestive. The Mohist attack on Confucianism denounced that school’s “fatalism,” but most students today would not find that a particularly salient aspect of Confucianism. Perkins suggests that the Mohists found a distinction in Confucianism between *tian*, “Heaven,” and *ming*, “mandate, decree, fate,” and I suspect that this gets at least partly at the issue. *Ming* in Confucianism refers (in one of its many references) to those things beyond human control; and the path of prudence and wisdom is to adapt yourself to what you can’t control and not tempt fate (as Mencius says, we don’t sit beneath a crumbling wall). But the general thrust is not, whatever Mozi thought, fatalistic: rather, it is to do the right thing

without being overly anxious about the consequences—you can control your own behavior, but not the results. The difference, I think, rests on a distinction between Mohist utilitarianism (something Perkins does not discuss much) and the Confucian rejection of action based solely on utility (or “expediency,” “profit”). Other claims seem somewhat off. One is the annoying impression left that in the post-Classical West no one pondered the “problem of evil” prior to the Lisbon earthquake (here, I guess, it’s a matter of “if you say so”: what do you count as data and evidence?). I didn’t fully follow the discussion of how Mencius “reproaches” as well as serves Heaven, and I wonder if the claim doesn’t have something to do with a confounding of 性, nature (in the sense of essence—as in “human nature”) and 自然: nature as trees, rocks, the laws of physics; in Chinese thinking the spontaneous operation of the universe. This confusion is natural (as it were) in English but not in Chinese. And the discussion of Zhuangzi, a protean, ambiguous, complex, ambivalent, playful thinker, seems in the end maybe a touch facile.

Perkins’s discussion sometimes wanders off onto side paths, raising issues worthy of thought and perhaps debate, but whose relevance to the main theme is not always obvious (to me, anyway). The book may take much time and multiple readings properly to digest and appreciate. At this point, though, I feel dissatisfied. The core problem may be in the definition of the question. It is distressing that bad things happen to good people, but this may be a shallow approach to the reality of evil. The terms of Perkins’s criteria for a theodicy seem irrelevant to Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi: a nonproblem, since there is no consideration of a benign God or a benign universe. For Confucius and Mencius there is an idea of a providence, an objective moral order inherent in the cosmos; but the concept of Heaven, *tian*, is both maddeningly polysemous and also unanalyzed in terms that would be useful to Perkins. Leaving aside, as Perkins does, the problem of natural disasters as a consequence of misrule, a feature of ideological Confucianism in the earlier imperial dynasties, the issue in Chinese thinking is not how come things are happening to me and whom should I blame, but, rather, given that troubles are going to come, how should I react when they do. And in this sense all of the thinkers Perkins analyzes, Zhuangzi included, remain “anthropocentric.” As Confucius allegedly said (in effect) to his proto-Daoist critics who mocked him for his concern with the state of the world and society: I’m a human being; what other standard can I have?

—Peter R. Moody
University of Notre Dame