

Article

“Life and Death Are Subject to Fate”: A Study Centered on Mou Zongsan’s Interpretation of *Ming* in Confucian Thought on Life and Death

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Abstract

According to Mou Zongsan, *ming* 命 (fate) in the Chinese context is not an empirical concept or a concept of knowledge, but a “notional concept” (*xu gainian* 虛概念) perceived through life practice, which manifests as the uncontrollable contingencies and limitations an individual encounters in time and space. This inexplicable and inescapable *ming* is often regarded as a kind of “malevolent force” (*e shili* 惡勢力), readily inducing a sense of powerlessness and even the abandonment of moral efforts. However, Confucianism does not lead to passive fatalism; instead, it emphasizes “rectifying *ming*” (*zhengming* 正命) and “establishing *ming*” (*liming* 立命) on the basis of “knowing *ming*” (*zhiming* 知命). By distinguishing between “seeking in oneself” (*qiuzai wozhe* 求在我者) (the original heart-mind of morality) and “seeking externally” (*qiuzai waizhe* 求在外者) (external circumstances), Confucianism advocates that one should exhaust one’s effort in the moral realm, while calmly “awaiting *ming*” (*siming* 俟命) when it comes to external limitations such as life and death, success and failure. Mencius proposed “cultivating oneself to await one’s *ming*, thereby establishing one’s *ming* (修身以俟之，所以立命也)”, emphasizing the transcendence of the limitations of *ming* through moral practice, showcasing the proactive spirit of “knowing that what one does is impossible and yet persists anyway (知其不可而為之)”. However, while Confucianism promotes “transcending” the constraints of fate, its potential lack of reflection on the “liberation” aspect might lead one to reconsider the theoretical efficacy of Confucianism in confronting the ultimate fate.

Keywords: confucianism; *ming*; malevolent force; establishing *ming*; liberation

1. Introduction

It is said that Solon, an Athenian statesman and one of the Seven Sages of Greece, was so devastated by the death of his son that he could not stop crying. At the time, one said to him, “Crying cannot bring the dead back to life, nor can it solve any problem. Why do you still cry?” Solon sighed, “The reason I cry is precisely because it cannot solve any problem.” Philosophy may indeed demonstrate its power in “dispelling confusion” (*jiehuo* 解惑). However, when confronted with the unsolvable *ming* 命 (fate; the Mandate; endowment) of life and death, we naturally become aware of the limitations of theory and the resulting sense of powerlessness. The so-called “sense of powerlessness” is a feeling of helplessness and futility. Its source lies in our inability to determine what or to whom the events that occur should be attributed—whether to a person, a thing, or some inscrutable, unfathomable divine force. We perceive only that there is *ming*, but we are unable to understand why it is this *ming*. The “Yong Ye” 雍也 chapter of the *Analects*



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論語 records: “Bo Niu was ill. The Master visited him, and held his hand through the window, said, ‘That we are going to lose him must be due to fate (*ming*)! How else could such a man be stricken with such an illness? How else could such a man be stricken with such an illness?’”¹ (伯牛有疾，子問之，自牖執其手，曰：「亡之，命矣夫！斯人也而有斯疾也！斯人也而有斯疾也！」) (S. Cheng 1990, p. 383) Bo Niu 伯牛, a disciple of Confucius, fell gravely ill. Confucius watched him dying, powerless and helpless, holding his hand through the window and lamenting in vain. Bo Niu was a virtuous man and seemingly underserving of such a grievous disease, but Heaven (*tian* 天)—blind though it is—nevertheless allowed it to happen. This is the inexplicable *ming*. The chapter “Xian Jin” 先進 also writes: “When Yan Hui died, the Master cried for him excessively. His disciples said, ‘Master, you are showing excessive grief!’ The Master replied, ‘Am I? Yet if it were not for this man, for whom should I show excessive grief?’ (顏淵死，子哭之慟。從者曰：「子慟矣。」曰：「有慟乎？非夫人之為慟而誰為！」)” (S. Cheng 1990, p. 758) Yan Hui 顏回 had devoted himself to moral cultivation; he was diligent and eager to learn, and able to grasp ten things from hearing only one. He was deeply admired and loved by Confucius, ranked at the top of Confucius’s disciples for moral achievement. Nonetheless, Yan Hui died young. Confucius could not restrain his grief and exclaimed, “Alas! Heaven has bereft me! Heaven has bereft me!” (噫！天喪予！天喪予！) (Ibid., p. 757) Confucius’s outcry and lament, like Solon’s, were a protest against this *ming* that cannot be explained by reason, hence their expression of pity, heartbroken, and futility. Yet despite their pity, heartbreak, and futility, there was no one to blame; one could only accept all of *ming* in order to confront *ming* and to come to terms with *ming*. Regarding this, chapter “Li Ming” 力命 of the *Liezi* 列子 says: “To live at the right time is a blessing of Heaven; to die at the right time is also a blessing of Heaven. Not to live when it is time to live is a punishment of Heaven; not to die when it is time to die is also a punishment of Heaven; ... Therefore, it is neither other things nor ourselves that give us life when we live and death when we die; both are destined (*ming*); wisdom can do nothing about them.”² (可以生而生，天福也。可以死而死，天福也。可以生而不生，天罰也。可以死而不死，天罰也。... 然則生生死死，非物非我，皆命也。智之所无奈何。) (Yang 1985, pp. 202–3) The so-called Heaven here signifies *ming*, and human reason is powerless and “can do nothing” in the face of the *ming* of life and death.

2. The Concept of Ming

Any philosophy or religion that earnestly addresses the meaning of human life cannot simplistically offer a cheap list of optimistic clichés while ignoring the existence of the *ming* of life and death that people inevitably encounter in real life. In fact, for Confucianism, a complete understanding of its theories of human life necessitates a serious engagement with its recognition of the factual existence of the *ming* of life and death, which is a crucial and unavoidable aspect. From its inception, Confucianism did not treat this *ming* as an abstract concept unrelated to personal experience. Instead, it reflects on and transcends *ming* within the concrete situations where one confronts it.³ Therefore, the *ming* of life and death is a very serious concept in Confucian moral practice (For example, see Back 2023).

According to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, *ming* means “to command,” and is composed of the radicals “mouth” (*kou* 口) and “order” (*ling* 令). (Jiang 1996, p. 255) The original meaning of *ming* is thus understood as “to issue a command orally,” which was later extended to signify “the Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming* 天命) and “fate” (*mingyun* 命運). In ancient Chinese thought, *ming* was an extremely broad concept. A cluster of ideas centered around *ming* involves elements like the Heaven’s Mandate, fate, lifespan (*shouming* 壽命), and mission (*shiming* 使命). Thus, *ming* is a polysemous term with diverse meanings, requiring specific context to determine its connotation.⁴ Broadly speaking, in ancient

China, all sorts of fortunes or misfortunes, such as auspiciousness or inauspiciousness, wealth or poverty, noble or humble status, and any individual's life or death, longevity or premature death, success or failure, rise or decline—insofar as they are determined by mysterious forces beyond human control—could all be called *ming*.⁵ This article focuses on *ming* in its *mingyun* dimension concerning life and death, yet Confucian discourse on fate is always intertwined with “establishing *ming*” (*liming* 立命). Analytically, the term *mingyun* arises from the interplay of *ming* 命 (fate) and *yun* 運 (fortune), where *ming* emphasizes predetermined constraints, while *yun* pertains to circumstantial opportunities and chances. Whether it is predetermined constraints or circumstantial opportunities and chances, *ming* ultimately signifies a certain unpredictable, uncontrollable force.

Perhaps much in life is uncertain, but death is certain, so death is an inseparable part of human existence. One may avoid many things in life, but not death. Therefore, for any individual, death is an unavoidable, irreplaceable experience that will inevitably arrive. “Inevitable” here means inescapable, whether sooner or later. Even though we know death will certainly arrive, how it will arrive, when it will arrive, and in what way it will arrive defy rational explanation. Life gives rise to death, and death to rebirth—Confucianism regards both as manifestations of *ming*. Hence, Confucius said, “Life and death are subject to *ming*” (死生有命) (*Analec*s, “Yanyuan” 顏淵) (S. Cheng 1990, p. 830), and the Daoist Zhuangzi likewise said, “Life and death are a matter of fate *ming* (死生, 命也)” (Zhuangzi, “Da Zongshi” 大宗師) (Guo 1961, p. 261). However, although we say life and death are *ming*, they are just phenomena. We cannot claim that any phenomenon can be called *ming*. For example, “the sun rises in the east and rain falls in the west (東邊日出西邊雨)” is simply a phenomenon. As an objective fact, we can not only state it in propositions but also reliably determine the causal relationships between such phenomena. But *ming* as a phenomenon is different. To speak of life and death as *ming* is to suggest that the journey of human existence unfolds as an “event” constituted through the interplay between the individual and his or her situational context, under the governance of an inscrutable force. Because it is inscrutable, human reason is helpless with respect to it; that is, it is something that human rational understanding cannot explain. Now, from the most general definition, what is *ming*, or what does *ming* mean?

From the perspective of the life-and-death *ming*, we might understand *ming* as the way an individual's existence unfolds in time and space; that is, treating *ming* as an existential fact. Yet the defining feature of *ming* is not merely to state that fact, but to indicate how this fact of individual existence unfolds—by what pattern or in what way—while its coincidences, contingencies, and traces remain unknowable and beyond reason. The twentieth century New Confucian Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 hereto offers a definition: “*ming* is a “notional concept” (*xu gainian* 虛概念) of an ‘internal limitation’ in an individual's life arising from the harmony or disharmony of the ‘transformation of *qi*’ (*qihua* 氣化). It is neither an empirical concept nor a concept of knowledge, but a **notional** concept in practice” (Mou 1985, p. 142). Under this definition, we must further unpack its meaning. First, *ming* is not an empirical concept, because empirical concepts arise from people's observation, perception, and practice of concrete things, and so are certain and explicable. *Ming* is different. In our daily life and survival, we constantly sense the existence of *ming*: some become wealthy without effort while others toil in poverty; some enjoy long lives like crane and tortoise, others live as fleetingly as morning dew. As an inexplicable *ming*, these existential phenomena lack universal empirical significance precisely because they are indeterminate—each person's circumstances are unique, accidental, and beyond explanation. Hence, *ming* is not an empirical concept. Second, *ming* is not a concept of knowledge, since a concept or proposition that qualifies as knowledge must satisfy three conditions: it must be verifiable, correct, and believed

to be true by people. A knowledge concept is thus a determinate and universal concept, derivable by logical reasoning and argumentation. But *ming* cannot be repeatedly verified—whether the “transformation of *qi*” is harmonious or not is random and infinitely complex; and it cannot be explained by logical reasoning, for it is indeterminate and has no discoverable causal chain. Rather, *ming* is an unwarranted feeling, as though a shadowy presence was drawing us toward an endless unknown, and so *ming* cannot become a determinate concept within a system of knowledge. According to Mou Zongsan, however, *ming* is a “notional concept in practice.” The phrase “in practice” 實踐中 refers to the way people in real life can genuinely feel the influence of *ming*. For example, “suppose I had not hurried to catch that car, or if I had stopped to tie my loose shoelace and thus delayed my departure by five minutes, then I would not have been injured in an unfortunate accident”. This is a reflection, made after the fact, on one’s own experience. But the reason why I did not stop to tie my shoelace, and thus got hurt, is attributed to (an unpredictable, accidental) fate. Thus, *ming* is a concept felt and recognized by the individual in the course of practical life. But this feeling and realization are not theoretical knowledge, because theoretical knowledge can be expressed through clear and determinate concepts. By contrast, *ming* is merely a kind of inexplicable subjective feeling. This is why Mou Zongsan calls *ming* a “notional concept.”

Why “notional” 虛? “Notional” stands in contrast to “concrete” 實. What is termed “concrete” refers to a specific entity or phenomenon that admits of a clear and definite rational explanation. “Notional,” by contrast, is vague and elusive, faint and fluctuating, ever-changing and unpredictable. One may genuinely feel the existence of *ming*, yet remains unable to explain why it exists in such a way. On this point, Mou Zongsan states the following:

“(Ming) belongs to the realm of *qi*-transformation, which is infinitely complex. No matter how much empirical knowledge we accumulate or how far it advances, it can never exhaust this complexity. And yet, the concept of *ming* does not serve to enumerate or describe this objective infinity of complexities. Consequently, the concept of *ming* becomes vague. What exactly does it refer to? Where does it lie? It lies at the boundary between individual life and the infinitely complex harmony or disharmony of *qi*-transformation. That boundary of harmony or disharmony is a “notional meaning” 虛意: not an objective fact within time and space that can be formulated in a proposition, and thus it is not knowledge. It is precisely upon this “notional meaning” that we give the name *ming*.”

(Ibid., pp. 142–43)

But what is this “notional meaning”? “Notional meaning” is not nihility, nor is it nothingness; it is not *wu* 無 (non-existence), but *you* 有 (existence). Although it is called “*you*,” it remains elusive and indistinct at the boundary between the harmony and disharmony of the infinite transformations of *qi*. It cannot be clearly grasped or precisely located—hence it is termed “notional.” And yet, despite its elusive and indeterminate nature, it still constitutes a real limitation upon individual life. In this sense, we may even call it “concrete”; only, this “concrete” is one that is vague, indeterminate, and beyond our grasp.

From the perspective of an ordinary, impartial mind, Yan Hui was a man of great virtue—“subsisting on a basket of grain and gourd full of water, and living in a humble alley without altering his joy”; “loved learning, never misdirected his anger and never repeated a fault”. A man of such moral integrity would seemingly not deserve to suffer such an unfortunate fate and die young. Yet the “whims of creation” 造化 toy with people, rendering his untimely death an inexplicable *ming*. To extend the point more broadly, a person is cast into the world and comes into being—this may be called a fact, not *ming*. However, the various circumstances one encounters in this world—such as fortune

or misfortune, smoothness or adversity—are precisely what is called *ming*. For instance, a person may live in poverty and destitution, yet, by chance, encounter a benefactor on the street and suddenly become extraordinarily wealthy. To say that this chance meeting is *ming* is to admit that it is beyond all explanation. Similarly, for any individual, death signifies the impossibility of planning. Yet death, as the finite endpoint of existence, is not *ming* itself but an analytic proposition. What qualifies as *ming* is the question of how one ceases to exist in the course of necessary existence—that is, how, when, and where one ceases to exist. Dying young or living long, a fatal car accident during an evening stroll, a boulder crushing a hiker, sudden demise in sleep, or death from overexcitement during celebration—all these absurd, irrational occurrences are what constitute *ming*. In other words, why one person suffers a specific fate while another does not cannot be rationally justified. This is the “virtual meaning of *ming*” 虛意之命 (Ibid., p. 143). What is the “notional meaning”? It is that which lies hidden and unknowable. *Ming*, a negative limitation within the transformation of *qi*, cannot be escaped even by the greatest sage. To “know *ming*” 知命 thus means to know that this *ming* constitutes a limitation for human beings—unexplainable and inescapable.

3. *Ming* as a “Malevolent Force”

If *ming* is understood as an elusive and unexplainable power, which imposes a concrete limitation on human life in reality, then we may say that such *ming* would implicitly constitute a kind of *e shili* 惡勢力 (malevolent force) in human existence. By “malevolent force”, it means a force that drags a person downward. The logic here appears straightforward: since *ming* is unpredictable and uncontrollable, one inevitably feels diminished, helpless, and powerless in the face of it. This sense of insignificance and futility may lead one to shift the duties and responsibilities originally rooted in one’s nature onto the arbitrary wheel of fate. This is one possible outcome when following this line of reasoning. Delving deeper, the awareness of such *ming* itself becomes a form of *e yishi* 惡意識 (malevolent consciousness), one that spreads, grows, and permeates human thought, ultimately giving rise to *e xingwei* 惡行為 (malevolent actions.) If this holds true, then human “wrongdoing”—ranging from minor offenses like complacency, drifting with the current, and opportunism to grave evils like colluding with corruption, abetting wickedness, and forming cliques for mutual exploitation—would appear to stem not from free will but from being driven and enslaved by the “malevolent force” of *ming*. In this view, humans become animals imprisoned and shackled by the inescapable, inscrutable *ming*, along with its embedded “malevolent consciousness” and “malevolent force.”

At this point, if we connect the unexplainable nature of *ming* and its embedded “malevolent force” to their “imprisonment” and “shackling” of humans, then when we ask, “Why do people commit evil?” we must seemingly account for other possible objective factors behind human wrongdoing beyond subjective intent. It suggests that beyond deliberate intention, people may also commit evil out of coercion or helplessness. Confucianism, on one hand, emphasizes that humans inherently possess the capacity for goodness, as seen in the maxims “*ren* 仁 (humaneness; benevolence) lies within yourself” (為仁由己) (*Analects*, “Yanyuan”) and “I have never seen anyone whose strength was insufficient (to pursue virtue)” (我未見力不足者) (*Analects*, “Liren” 里仁) (S. Cheng 1990, pp. 817, 238). On the other hand, Confucianism acknowledges human vulnerability and finitude. Hence, Confucius said, “I have never seen someone who loves virtue as much as they love beauty” (吾未見好德如好色者也) (*Analects* “Weilinggong” 衛靈公) (Ibid., p. 1094). According to Confucianism, both human goodness and evil hinge on free will. As recorded in the *Mencius* 孟子: “Gongduzi 公都子 asked, ‘We are the same in being humans. Yet some become great humans and some become petty humans. Why?’ Mengzi 孟子 replied, ‘Those

who follow their greater part become great humans. Those who follow their petty part become petty humans.”⁶ (Van Norden 2009, p. 75) (公都子問曰：「鈞是人也，或為大人，或為小人，何也？」孟子曰：「從其大體為大人，從其小體為小人。」) (Mencius, “Gaozi I” 告子上) (Jiao 1987, p. 792) Here, “follow” (*cong* 從) implies that human beings have the free will and the capacity to choose—the ability to choose actions according to what one’s nature requires, encapsulated in the phrase “seeking lies within oneself” (*qiuzai wozhe* 求在我者) (Mencius, “Jinxin I” 盡心上) (Ibid., p. 882). However, beyond free will, humans in the world are also subject to the constraints and influence of the inescapable, uncontrollable *ming*. As an external necessity, *ming* imposes limitations upon human freedom. While in principle such a limitation posed by external necessity does not diminish the power of “seeking lies within oneself,” the inexplicable *ming* often manifests in lived experience as outcomes that “no one extends to it yet it is reached (莫之致而至)”. (Ibid., p. 649) This creates a certain impression or illusion: when faced with the uncontrollable and inescapable *ming*, humans who drift with the tide, neglect their duties, or even go along with what is corrupt, may be exhibiting a form of “non-freedom within freedom.” It is a powerless resignation to the “imprisonment” by the “malevolent force” of *ming*. In this sense, wrongdoing appears as though one is merely yielding to the malevolent force of *ming*, rather than being the origin of evil. The “malevolent consciousness” and “malevolent force” of *ming* are thus perpetuated and realized through human beings within the world. (Apostle Paul quotation removed.) The danger of this illusion created by *ming* lies in the following: human wrongdoing comes to appear as the continuation of the “malevolent force” of *ming* through the human person, who is but a tool manipulated by *ming*. If this were true, then moral responsibility would be left without any ground to stand on, and the attribution of moral blame would lose all meaningful foundation. The moral foundation and significance upon which Confucianism rests would crumble.

Why does such an illusion—so illusory yet seemingly real, so real yet illusory—arise? The reason likely lies in how the inscrutable *ming* creates a perception in the phenomenal world: life appears preordained by an invisible force from the beginning. Birth, aging, illness, and death appear to lie beyond the power of human agency; diligence does not guarantee success; inaction does not necessarily result in failure, etc. Such irrational *ming* becomes a “malevolent consciousness” and “malevolent force” that drags humans into decline precisely because it leads people to perceive *ming* as a predetermined “fixed decree” (*dingshu* 定数). From this “fixed decree” arises the belief in “fixed fate” (*dingming* 定命) or “fatalism” (*suming* 宿命), whereby all matters of life are handed over to destiny to govern. In this way, *ming* transforms into a “malevolent force,” as the saying goes, “Everything is determined by *ming*, not a speck is up to humans (萬般皆是命，半點不由人)” (Feng 2009, p. 157). Amid such bewilderment, even though the human being is a free subject, before the unexplainable *ming*, one seems to be alienated into a passive, unfree object, falling into the numbness of “resigning to Heaven and accepting *ming*” (*tingtian youming* 听天由命). This is what Xunzi 荀子 criticizes in those who fail to “respect what rests with themselves” (*jingqi zaiji* 敬其在己) but “long for what rests with Heaven” (Adapted from Hutton 2014, p. 178) (*muqi zaitian* 慕其在天) (Xunzi, “Tianlun” 天論) (Wang 1988, p. 312), where “Heaven” here equates to “fixed fate.” When individuals become aware that all efforts may already be predetermined by some unknowable *ming*, they may fall into nihilism, giving up any active engagement with life, leading to a spiritual condition of negativity, or even “moral decay.” One laments that human life is but a temporary lodging, that joy and suffering are uncertain, that everything drifts and scatters, elusive and hard to grasp. As Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 wrote, “Human life has no roots, drifting like dust on the roadside. Scattered, we are carried off by the wind—this body is no longer truly ours (人生無根蒂，飄如陌上塵。分散逐風轉，此已非常身)” (Tao 2017, p. 127). Or as Wang

Guowei 王國維 put it, “Life is like willow catkins in the wind: its joys are scattered, its sorrows scattered, like duckweed drifting point by point across a river (人生只似風前絮, 歡也零星, 悲也零星, 都作連江點點萍)” (Chen 2000, p. 138). Since life is like duckweed in water, like catkins in the wind—ungraspable and drifting—they turn to “why not wander unrestrained beyond bodily confines, begging the rivers and lakes to become my land of drunkenness (何如放浪形骸外, 盡乞江湖作醉鄉)” (Kong and Qi 1962, p. 26); “How many days does a person truly have? Cherishing those fine moments and beautiful scenes, like a dream, already gone. Wealth and poverty preordained—why exhaust ourselves in vain? So I ask friends and guests to share in pleasure, raise the fragrant wine cup and sing softly. Get drunk for a while, and let the wheels of sun and moon shuttle back and forth as they will. (人生有幾, 念良辰美景, 一夢初過。窮通前定, 何用苦張羅。命友邀賓玩賞, 對芳尊淺酌低歌。且酹酹, 任他兩輪日月, 來往如梭)” (Yao 2015, p. 937). At first, this response may arise from helplessness and despair—one becomes numb, passive, and disengaged. Gradually, however, this gives rise to a growing awareness of the absurd, and eventually to the formation of despair. In the end, it may result in the collapse of all distinctions between right and wrong, whereby good and evil become indistinguishable, and even evil is taken as good. Humanly imposed injustice and unfairness come to be reinterpreted as the “fated” manifestation of “justice” and “fairness,” even “death in shackles” (*zhigu ersi* 桎梏而死) is justified as dying by “rectified *ming*” (*zhengming* 正命).⁷

It is often said that there are two types of evil: moral evil and natural evil. As a “malevolent force,” the evil of *ming* does not belong to moral evil, for humans can do nothing to alter *ming*. Nor is *ming* a natural evil. For instance, a physical disability may be considered a natural evil, yet it can be explained through scientific reason, with its causes traced, and in many cases, mitigated or even corrected. *Ming*, by contrast, defies explanation. Yet when we regard this inexplicable *ming* as a “malevolent force,” its “evil” is not ontological in nature, but relational and practical, manifesting as *shi* 勢 (situational power; tendency). When individuals resist submission, the inscrutability of *ming* reveals itself as a form of oppression, distortion, and deprivation imposed upon the person. Confronted with the helplessness and incomprehensibility of *ming*, immediate human reactions often involve resignation—relaxing efforts one ought to exert, lamenting human frailty, drifting with the current, or deluding oneself into evading *ming*, saying “this is how *ming* has decreed it” (*mingding ruci* 命定如此). However, since *ming* is an inevitable limitation inherent to human existence, escape is impossible. Similarly, since *ming* is both an aspect of *qi* transformations and fundamentally inexplicable, it cannot be articulated through reason (*li* 理), for reason pertains only to explicable matters governed by “the necessary principles of *li*” (*lizhi suodangran* 理之所當然). It is precisely here that we discern *ming*’s role in moral practice as a “malevolent consciousness” and “malevolent force”: human powerlessness before *ming* leads to failures in upholding what should be upheld and acting where one ought to act. The obscurity, ineffability, and inexplicability of *ming* further imply that events governed by *ming* are beyond reproach. Thus, *ming* operates like a serpent disguised as a beauty, seducing individuals to attribute their moral decline—whether intentional or inadvertent—to *ming*’s design: negligence, moral laxity, indulgence in carnal desires, or even criminal acts and the abandonment of conscience.

4. “Rectifying Ming” 正命 and “Establishing Ming” 立命

However, for Confucianism, acknowledging *ming* as a “malevolent force” and its constraints on human life does not mean that one ought to surrender everything to *ming* or submit passively to its dominion. Confucianism has long been referred to as the “teaching of *xing* and *ming*” (*xingming zhijiao* 性命之教). Though scholars may differ in their interpretations of *xing* and *ming*, the so-called “teaching of *xing* and *ming*” is precisely a

teaching that aims to elucidate the relationship between the two.⁸ Although the theory of “(human) *xing* is good” 性善 is often highlighted as the core of Confucian thought, focusing solely on *xing* without addressing *ming* fails to capture its full reality. Confucianism affirms the inherent goodness of *xing*, and thus advocates “exhausting one’s *xing*” (*jinxing* 盡性) to realize virtue. However, as previously discussed, Confucianism has always emphasized *ming*, treating this inscrutable, inescapable *ming* as a reality that must be earnestly confronted in the moral cultivation of life. How, then, does Confucianism confront the existence of *ming*?

Confucian discourse on *ming* is grounded in the practical process of transformation and realization of the world. Thus, the encounters with *ming* that humans inevitably face in real life cannot be ignored or eliminated. Precisely because *ming* pertains to moral practice, even though the concept of *ming* is intangible, elusive, and difficult to trace, Confucianism takes this negative reality seriously as a touchstone for refining one’s moral will. Confucius said, “Whether the Way is to be put into action is a matter of *ming*; whether the Way is to be discarded is also a matter of *ming* (道之將行也與，命也；道之將廢也與，命也)” (*Analects*, “Xianwen” 憲問) (S. Cheng 1990, p. 1024). He further declares, “Life and death are subject to *ming* (生死有命)” (*Analects*, “Yanyuan”) (S. Cheng 1990, p. 830). This underscores the imperative to acknowledge *ming*. Thus, Confucius further stated, “One who does not understand *ming* cannot become a noble person (不知命，無以為君子)” (*Analects*, “Yaoyue” 堯曰) (Ibid., p. 1375). Why is understanding *ming* essential for becoming a “noble person” (*junzi* 君子)? Zhu Xi 朱熹, quoting Chengzi 程子, explains, “To ‘know *ming*’ is to know the existence of *ming* and believe in it. If one does not know *ming*, then one will avoid what is harmful and pursue what is profitable—how could such a person be a noble person? (知命者，知有命而信之也。人不知命，則見害必避，見利必趨，何以為君子?)” (Zhu 2011, p. 181) “To know the existence of *ming* and believe in it” is to understand and face the reality of *ming*. Its meaning is twofold: first, that a noble person will not surrender to *ming* and remain inactive because *ming* exists; second, a noble person recognizes the limits that *ming* places upon the human condition.

From the perspective of moral practice, *ming* as a limitation (or as a negative existence, a “malevolent force”) must ultimately be resolved. Yet how is such resolution to be achieved? “Resolution” here encompasses meanings of “dissolution,” “overcoming,” and also “transcendence.” Theoretically, even if one were to cultivate oneself to perfection—even to the stature of a great sage—*ming* would still persist and remain ineliminable. To “resolve” what is fundamentally irresolvable, Zhuangzi 莊子 proposes the concept of “resolution of the bond” (*xuanjie* 懸解): “Your master happened to come because it was his time, and he happened to leave because things follow along. If you are content with the time and willing to follow along, then grief and joy have no way to enter. In the old days, this was called resolution of the bond of Di.⁹ (適來，夫子時也；適去，夫子順也。安時而處順，哀樂不能入也，古者謂是帝之懸解)” (Zhuangzi, “Yangsheng Zhu” 養生主) (Guo 1961, p. 128). He further elaborates, “I received life because the time had come; I will lose it because the order of things passes on. Be content with this time and dwell in this order, and then neither sorrow nor joy can touch you. In ancient times this was called the ‘resolution of the bond.’” (得者時也，失者順也，安時而處順，哀樂不能入也。此古之所謂懸解也) (Zhuangzi, “Da Zongshi” 大宗師) (Ibid., p. 260). Zhuangzi’s notion of “be content with this time” (*anshi* 安時) does not imply passive submission but rather conscious alignment with the rhythms of natural transformation—what he calls “Lopping off corners, chiseling away the rough places, he went tumbling and turning along with things (椎拍輒斷，與物宛轉)” (Zhuangzi, “Tianxia” 天下) (Ibid., p. 1088). “Dwell in this order” 處順 means to follow the “spontaneity” (*ziran* 自然) of things, to follow them as they are. Thus, Zhuangzi regards his wife’s death as “partaking in the four seasons of

spring, summer, autumn, and winter (相與為春秋冬夏四時行也)" (Zhuangzi, "Zhile" 至樂) (Ibid., p. 615). From the standpoint of "following (one's) spontaneity" (*yin ziran* 因自然), life is no cause for joy, nor death for sorrow. Hence, he drums on a basin and sings to avoid "hiding from Heaven and turning back on the true state of affairs" (遁天倍情) (Zhuangzi, "Yangsheng Zhu") (Ibid., p. 128). "Resolution of the bond" signifies harmonizing with natural transformations, being unswayed by life, death, sorrow, or joy. In this light, Zhuangzi's "resolution of the bond of Di" (帝之懸解) interprets the Di 帝 as the fundamental, the Way itself. At this stage, the meaning of *ming* is resolved. Its deeper significance lies in teaching one to let go of attachments, to participate in the unfolding of nature and fate, to return all uncontrollable encounters to the transformations of nature, and to follow them, to turn with them. This state may also be recognized as the realm of "thusness" (*ruru* 如如)—a perfected awakening where one harmonizes with *ming*, neither clinging nor rejecting, neither increasing nor diminishing, neither defiled nor pure—an awakened equanimity of complete acceptance. However, "in this realm, nothing remains to be said. Not only is *ming* transcended, but all positive things are forgotten. Yet from the perspective of the cultivation process, none of the transcended or resolved encounters are truly eliminated; they reappear in their original forms" (Mou 1985, p. 144).

The Confucian approach to resolving *ming* differs from that of Zhuangzi. It likewise seeks to "go beyond" *ming*, but not by eliminating it. Rather, it does so on the basis of "knowing *ming*" (*zhiming* 知命), and speaks of "rectifying *ming*" (*zhengming* 正命), "awaiting *ming*" (*siming* 俟命), and ultimately "establishing *ming*" (*liming* 立命). In this way, *ming* is preserved and taken seriously. Because Confucianism retains and affirms the existence of *ming*, its discourse on *xing* and *ming* is able to elevate the limiting power of *ming*—as a "malevolent force"—to the level of the tragic (but not the pessimistic). On the one hand, through the idea of "knowing *ming*," it brings to light *ming*'s moral burden, or consciousness of evil.¹⁰ On the other hand, through the affirmation of rectifying and establishing *ming*, it highlights the human struggle against, and transcendence of, this inescapable and unexplainable *ming*. This is precisely the spirit of Confucius's determination and courage when he said, "to know that what one does is impossible and yet persists anyway (知其不可而為之)" (*Analects*, "Xianwen") (S. Cheng 1990, p. 1029). Even in the face of the unresolvable, the helpless, and the unforeseeable nature of *ming*, the noble person must still press forward with unwavering will—constantly striving, never ceasing, until death.

Indeed, in human life—auspiciousness and calamity, parting and death—all are decreed by Heaven. Humans cannot alter them, even if they desire to. Thus, from the perspective of rational necessity, one must accept what is given and unchangeable. This is why Mencius says, "everything is *ming*, but one only accepts one's proper or rectified *ming* (莫非命也，順受其正)" (Mencius, "Jinxin I") (Jiao 1987, p. 879). Mencius's assertion encompasses two layers: "knowing *ming*" and "rectifying *ming*." As a passive limitation arising from *qi* transformations, "knowing *ming*" means recognizing *ming* as an inescapable reality—humans can only accept it. Yet this acceptance demands a particular attitude, "those who understand fate (*ming*) does not stand beneath a crumbling wall (知命者，不立乎巖牆之下)". (Mencius, "Jinxin I") (Ibid.).¹¹ This signifies that while submitting to *ming*, one must submit to its "proper/rectified" (*zheng* 正) dimension. "Proper/rectified" is a value-laden term, denoting "dying through fathoming the Way" (盡其道而死) rather than perishing through reckless crime or self-destruction. Hence, Mencius clarifies, "To die through fathoming the Way is one's proper/rectified fate (*ming*). To die as a criminal is not one's proper/rectified fate (*ming*) (盡其道而死者，正命也；桎梏死者，非正命也)" (Jiao 1987, p. 879). It requires acknowledging *ming*'s irremovable constraints in moral practice—"exhausting human effort and submitting to Heaven's endowment (*ming*)" 盡人事而聽

天命. Mencius thus adds, “A noble person simply acts in accordance with *fa* and awaits his *ming*” (君子行法，以俟命而已矣) (Mencius, “Jinxin II” 盡心下) (Jiao 1987, p. 1013). Here, *fa* 法 (rule; law) refers to moral norms, principles, or the “constant measure and standard observances” (*changdu fashou* 常度法守) that one ought to uphold. Zhu Xi commented, “*Fa* is the inherent principles of Heaven’s order. A noble person follows them, indifferent to fortune or misfortune. (法者，天理之當然者也。君子行之，而吉凶禍福有所不計)” (Zhu 2011, p. 349). By adhering to these constant moral measures, the noble person acts without obsessing over outcomes, recognizing that much lies beyond control. “Awaiting *ming*” means accepting and confronting *ming* while fulfilling one’s duties—a proactive stance epitomized in Confucius’s dictum: “do not resent Heaven nor blame others” (不怨天，不尤人) (*Analects*, “Xianwen”) (S. Cheng 1990, p. 1019).

Lao Sze-kwang 勞思光 interprets this through what he calls the “separation of righteousness and *ming*” (*yiming fenli* 義命分立), where *ming* represents objective constraints, and *yi* signifies conscious moral agency.¹² By recognizing that *yi* 義 (righteousness; morality) and *ming* belong to separate domains, we discern what can be pursued through human effort and what must be accepted as beyond control. As previously quoted, “Whether the Way is to be put into action is a matter of fate (*ming*); whether the Way is to be discarded is also a matter of fate (*ming*).” According to Lao, the success or failure of the Way’s realization lies with *ming*, which humans cannot control. However, “whether the Way is carried out or not is a question of success or failure; whether the Way ought to be carried out is a question of moral value and right or wrong. What human beings are responsible for pertains only to questions of right and wrong—not to questions of success or failure” (Lao 1984, p. 137). Thus, even when confronting unalterable *ming*, one must strive to realize the “rational distinction” (*lifēn* 理分) that belongs to human nature. This is the essence of “establishing *ming*,” as Mencius states, “To not become *er* 貳 (two; conflicted) over the length of one’s life but to cultivate oneself and await one’s *ming* is the way to establish one’s *ming* (夭壽不貳，修身以俟之，所以立命也)” (Mencius, “Jinxin I”) (Jiao 1987, p. 878). Here, the “length of one’s life” (*yaoshou* 夭壽) refers to the span of human life, while “establishing *ming*” denotes the attitude one ought to hold toward life and death. “Cultivate oneself and await it [fate] (修身以俟之)” encapsulates this attitude: rather than fretting over lifespan, one focuses on self-cultivation until life’s end. Zhu Xi comments, “Short or long life pertains to the measure of destiny. *Er* means to doubt. ‘To not become *er*’ means understanding Heaven’s ultimate principles, cultivating oneself while awaiting death, and serving Heaven throughout life. ‘Establishing *ming*’ means preserving what Heaven has bestowed, untainted by human interference. (夭壽，命之短長也。貳，疑也。不貳者，知天之至，修身以俟死，則事天以終身也。立命，謂全其天之所付，不以人為害之)” (Zhu 2011, p. 327). Zhu Xi interprets *er* as doubt, but Mou Zongsan argues that “‘*Er*’ in ‘not become *er*’ indeed carries the meaning of doubt, but here it specifically denotes ‘inner vacillation, an inability to maintain constancy, a departure from the norm’... It signifies confusion about the constant measure, leading to deviation.” (Mou 1985, p. 144). For Mencius, whether one lives briefly or long is determined by the inscrutable *ming*. Anxiety or attempts to evade this through abnormal means are futile. What humans can do is steadfastly embody the innate heart-mind of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom through ethical conduct. “As for accidental occurrences beyond our control (e.g., unforeseen events) or inevitable realities (e.g., life and death), there is no need for excessive concern. Simply cultivate oneself to meet them. This is the sole path to establishing the concept of ‘limits of *ming*.’” (Ibid).

5. The Debate on Xing and Ming

If we say that the Confucian doctrine of “establishing *ming*” aims to affirm the proper attitude one ought to hold toward life and death, then “knowing *ming*” constitutes the premise and foundation for “rectifying *ming*,” “awaiting *ming*,” and “establishing *ming*.”

Only by recognizing the existence of *ming*—and our helplessness before it—does the necessity and significance of “rectifying,” “awaiting,” and “establishing” *ming* become apparent. In fact, the explicit articulation of “establishing *ming*” demands that humans confront *ming* as a “malevolent force” and to transcend it. While *ming* can be transcended, it cannot be eradicated. Thus, we must face *ming* squarely, that is, we must clarify, in moral practice, the “malevolent force” implicit within *ming*, and adopt a rational attitude toward it. Mencius first distinguishes two types of “seeking” (*qiu* 求) related to *ming*, namely “seeking in oneself” (*qiuzai wo* 求在我) and “seeking externally” (*qiuzai wai* 求在外). He said, “‘Seek it and you will get it; Abandon it and you will lose it.’ In this case, seeking is beneficial to getting. This is ‘seeking in oneself.’ ‘There is a Way to seek it, but getting it depends on *ming*.’ In this case, seeking is not beneficial to getting. This is ‘seeking externally.’” (求則得之，舍則失之，是求有益於得也，求在我者也。求之有道，得之有命，是求無益於得也，求在外者也) (Mencius, “Jinxin I”) (Jiao 1987, p. 882). The former, “seeking in oneself,” is an unconditional, autonomous pursuit independent of external conditions. For Mencius, this means “seeking is beneficial to getting” (求有益於得), which refers to the pursuit of what lies within one’s inherent nature. While social status, examination success, or longevity may also be sought, these are external and beyond human control; their attainment depends on *ming*. “Seeking within oneself” pertains to the “original heart-mind” (*benxin* 本心) of *ren*, *yi*, *li* 禮 (ritual propriety; rites), and *zhi* 智 (knowing; wisdom), “what Heaven has given to us” (天之所與我). To seek this inner moral heart is something fully within my control; it is innately mine. There are no external conditions, no restrictions, no obstacles. As Confucius taught: “Is there a person who can, for the space of a single day, simply devote his efforts to Goodness? I have never met anyone whose strength was insufficient for this task (有能一日用其力於仁矣乎？我未見力不足者)” (*Analects*, “Liren”) (S. Cheng 1990, p. 238); “Is *ren* really so far away? If I simply desire *ren*, I will find that it is already here (仁遠乎哉？我欲仁，斯仁至矣)” (*Analects*, “Shuer” 述而) (Ibid, p. 495). In the realm of “seeking in oneself,” there is no substitution or excuse. Whether one becomes a sage or a worthy, or devolves into a thief or a bandit, rests entirely on personal choice. Humans cannot, and have no grounds to, shift responsibility for this onto the inexplicable force of *ming*.

On the other hand, “‘There is a Way to seek it, but getting it depends on *ming*.’ In this case, seeking is not beneficial to getting. This is ‘seeking externally.’” Zhu Xi commented, “‘In the (proper) Way, it is said that one must not seek recklessly. By *ming*, then one must not insist on obtaining it. That which is seeking externally refers to wealth, honor, profit, and success; all worldly gains are like this (有道，言不可妄求。有命，則不可必得。在外者，謂富貴利達，凡外物皆是)” (Zhu 2011, p. 328). For “seeking externally,” pursuits such as pursuing longevity, fine carriages, or luxurious furs, must not be pursued recklessly or blindly. Yet even if one seeks these in accordance with the Way, exhausting all ethical efforts, the outcome remains contingent on *ming*. “Even if one seeks in the right way, with full effort and moral integrity, one still cannot guarantee that one will attain it” (Mou 1985, p. 148). Whether one obtains it or not lies within *ming*, beyond what human power can determine. Confucius spent his life in restless striving—knowing that what he aimed for might not be achievable, and yet still committing himself to act. Still, whether the Way would flourish or fall was subject to an inexplicable *ming*; things did not always go as hoped or planned. Even the sage, at times, could not help but sigh with sorrow. Yet *ming*’s dominion does not justify abandoning righteous pursuits for external gains, neglecting moral duties, or drifting into corruption. This duality—the limits of *ming* and the responsibility for righteous seeking—must be held in balance and grasped firmly. Only then can the moral consciousness truly manifest. The more resolute this consciousness, the more starkly *ming*’s “malevolent consciousness” and “malevolent force”

are exposed. Any deviation from the “proper/rectified Way” (*zhengdao* 正道) or “proper/rectified pursuit” (*zhengqiu* 正求) constitutes a descent into “deviated Way” (*xiedao* 邪道) and “reckless seeking” (*wangqiu* 妄求)—a resurgence of “malevolent consciousness.” Thus, the distinction between “seeking within oneself” and “seeking externally” deepens the Confucian “debate on *xing* and *ming*” (*xingming zhibian* 性命之辯), prompting Mencius to write the following:

“As for the mouth in its relationship to taste, the eyes to appearance, the ears to sound, the nose to smells, and the limbs to comfort, these are of *xing*. Yet they are also (subject to) *ming*. Therefore, the gentleman does not call them *xing*. *Ren* in the relationship between parent and child, *yi* between ruler and subject, *li* between guest and host, *zhi* to the worthies, and the Way of Heaven to the sages, these are of the mandate. Yet they are also (rooted in) *xing*, so the gentleman does not call them *ming*.” (口之於味也，目之於色也，耳之於聲也，鼻之於臭也，四肢之於安佚也，性也，有命焉，君子不謂性也。仁之於父子也，義之於君臣也，禮之於賓主也，智之於賢者也，聖人之於天道也，命也，有性焉，君子不謂命也。) (Mencius, “Jinxin II”) (Jiao 1987, pp. 990–91).

Mencius here identifies two different senses of *xing* 性 (nature; disposition): one refers to the biological or animalistic *xing*, such as the functioning of the sense organs; the other refers to moral *xing*, including *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*. For Mencius, sensory cravings arise from humanity’s biological nature—undeniable and natural. Hence, he acknowledges that “the desires for food and sex are (part of) our *xing* (食色，性也)” (Mencius, “Gaozi I”) (Ibid, p. 743) and “physical form and senses are (part of) Heavenly *xing*” (形色，天性也) (Mencius, “Jinxin I”) (Ibid., p. 937). Zhu Xi, citing Chengzi, notes, “The desires of these five senses are (part of) *xing* (五者之欲，性也)” (Zhu 2011, p. 346). However, humans must not exploit this *xing* to justify excess. One must seek them in accordance with the proper Way. If one indulges in these desires on the grounds that they are “natural,” and acts without restraint—hunting and feasting without limits and giving free rein to sensual indulgence—the result is a violation of the Way and of principle, a regression into the level of beasts. This is what constitutes serious moral evil. Moreover, the fulfillment of sensory desires also depends on *ming*. For instance, seeking wealth or longevity hinges on external conditions beyond control. Thus, it is said, “One cannot claim these as belonging to one’s *xing* and therefore demand that it must be obtained (不可謂我性之所有，而求必得之也)”. (Ibid.) Hence, a noble person attributes such pursuits to *ming*, not *xing*. In contrast, *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, and the Way of Heaven—though they too are sometimes limited by *ming* in their worldly realization—are not *ming* in themselves. This does not mean the virtues themselves are *ming*, but their full expression in human affairs is subject to the constraints of *ming*. For example, consider *ren* as it appears in the relationship between parents and children; under normal conditions, parents love their children, and children are close to their parents. Yet, in reality, circumstances like “the tree wishing to stay still, but the wind does not cease; the child wishing to care for parents, but they are no longer there” (樹欲靜而風不止，子欲養而親不待) (Kongzi Jiayu 孔子家語, “Zhisi” 致思) exemplify *ming*’s inexorable interference (Gao 2021, p. 103). Even when *ming* impedes the fulfillment of virtue, one cannot use *ming* as an excuse to evade moral duty. To neglect duties grounded in *xing*, whether due to excuse, indolence, or other causes, remains an act of moral failure.

The Confucian “debate on *xing* and *ming*” establishes a transcendent concept by harmonizing *xing* and *ming*. It acknowledges the existence of *ming* while advocating a rational attitude to transcend its limitations. This transcendence entails an affirmative pursuit rooted in the self—leveraging free will to achieve moral perfection and break free from the confines of finite existence. Recognizing *ming*’s constraints yet summoning resilience, one exerts effort even in moments of utmost helplessness, embodying the ideal

of “making unremitting efforts to improve oneself” (*ziquang buxi* 自強不息)¹³. Regarding the *ming* of life and death, Confucianism, on the one hand, recognizes it as something unavoidable and beyond one’s control; yet on the other hand, it responds by cultivating an awareness that allows one “to be at peace with it as with one’s *ming*” (*anzhi ruoming* 安之若命). “To be at peace with it as with one’s *ming*” does not mean to passively accept whatever *ming* may bring.¹⁴ Rather, it means calmly enduring misfortunes by the decree of *ming* while steadfastly resisting its “malevolent force.” One must uphold the duties and responsibilities inherent to their moral *xing*, and never betray one’s principles or violate the proper human relationships. Thus, Confucianism situates the life-and-death *ming* squarely within the realm of moral practice—specifically, the cultivation of “exhausting one’s heart-mind” (*jinxin* 盡心) and “exhausting one’s *xing*”. By focusing on “seeking it and getting it” (*qiuzhe dezhi* 求則得之) and “seeking lies within oneself,” one transcends the limits of *ming*, cultivating virtue amidst endless adversity. For this reason, Confucianism emphasizes that in the face of the *ming* of life and death, one ought to be vigorous, proactive, and ever striving. As Hu Shi once remarked, Confucius’s greatest contribution was to transform the legacy of the Yin dynasty’s remnant culture—“submissiveness and appeasement” (*roushun qurong* 柔順取容)—into a new Confucian spirit of “fortitude and initiative” (*hongyi jinqu* 弘毅進取) (Hu 1934, vol. 4.3). This transformation is manifested in moral practice: “So passionate about learning that one forgets to eat, so joyful that one forgets worries, and grows old without noticing the passing years” (發憤忘食，樂以忘憂，不知老之將至) (*Analects*, “Shuer”) (S. Cheng 1990, p. 479); “Knowing that what one does is impossible and yet persists anyway” (*Analects*, “Xianwen”) (Ibid., p. 1029); “A scholar-official must be broad-minded and resolute, for his burden is heavy and his way is long” (士不可以不弘毅，任重而道遠) (*Analects*, “Taibo” 泰伯) (Ibid., p. 527); etc. These sayings of Confucius articulate the very attitude that Confucianism advocates in confronting the *ming* of life and death.

Perhaps another question worth raising is this—in the face of the unexplainable and inescapable *ming* of life and death, although Confucianism affirms that such *ming* can be transcended, it also acknowledges that it cannot be eliminated. This “transcendence” lies in proactive and resolute endeavors through “seeking within oneself.” However, from another perspective, such relentless striving merely bypasses *ming* without eliminating it. The helplessness and futility imposed by *ming* persist as a “malevolent consciousness” or “malevolent force” in lived experience. This tension compels us to consider whether the notion of “teaching” (*jiao* 教) in Confucianism may contain something other than mere “transcendence”—a concept of “liberation.” In other words, the Confucian “theory of transcendence” focuses on the positive ethics of “fortitude and initiative,” but when confronting the obscure and frustrating *ming*, does it perhaps appear somewhat lacking in terms of a “theory of liberation”? This brings to mind Wang Fuzhi 王夫之’s critique of Wang Anshi 王安石. In his *Song Lun* 宋論 (*Discourses on the Song*), Wang Fuzhi declares that “Wang Anshi is without excuse in being rightly called a “petty person” (*xiaoren* 小人) and lists numerous actions and words as evidence: “That he sought advancement through what a noble person must never do: Using acceptance or rejection (of office) to coerce the ruler; initiating a major legal case to repay a petty grudge; humiliating the mature and accomplished in order to reward roving (unrooted) knights; taking pleasure in flattery and entrusting it to those close to his heart; stationing patrol guards to investigate slander” (夫君子有其必不可為者，以去就要君也，起大獄以報睚眦之怨也，辱老成而獎遊士也，喜諂諛而委腹心也，置邏卒以察誹謗也) (Wang and Yang 2011, p. 156). From the standpoint of Confucianism, what Wang Fuzhi found most intolerable may well have been Wang Anshi’s turn to Buddhism late in life, despite being a Confucian: “To destroy the writings handed down from the former sages and instead revere the Buddha and Laozi;

To let resentment extend to one's own full-blooded brothers and accept others' rejection of them; When one's son dies and the soul is lost, to give up the ancestral hall and make it into a Buddhist temple to beg blessings from a stupa—Such things as these are what a *junzi*, though in firm poverty or on the verge of death, would by all means not do. But as for Wang Anshi, he did all of them. Did he truly not know that these were evil deeds, and yet blindly went on to tread the filthy path?" (毀先聖之遺書而崇佛、老也，怨及同產兄弟而受人之排之也，子死魄喪而舍齋為寺以丐福浮屠也。若此者，皆君子所固窮瀕死而必不為者也。乃安石則皆為之矣。抑豈不知其為惡而冥行以蹈汙途哉？) (Ibid.) From the passage above, it is not difficult to see how severe Wang Fuzhi's criticism of Wang Anshi is. From the Confucian perspective, Wang Anshi's conduct at the end of his life—"his son dies and the soul is lost" (子死魄喪), "begging blessings from a stupa" (丐福浮屠)—indeed appears as a loss of traditional propriety. We are justified in criticizing Wang Anshi for abandoning his Confucian commitment, judging him from the standpoint of the constancy and integrity expected of a "Confucian scholar" (*ru* 儒). Yet his case raises a deeper question: As a Confucian scholar enduring relentless blows from *ming* in his later years, why did the Confucian "theory of transcendence" fail to provide him with sufficient strength of belief? Why did he seek "liberation" in Buddhism instead? Issues like this inevitably invite pluralistic interpretations, and as with all interpretation, they involve not only the particularities of an individual's cultivation and moral practice, but also the theoretical and practical efficacy of the doctrine itself.¹⁵ History confirms that Wang Anshi's turn to Buddhism late in life is not an isolated case. Reflecting on such examples may prompt us to ask: When faced with the obscure and helplessness of *ming*, does the Confucian "theory of transcendence"—a liberation without a "theory of liberation"—itself require a further transcendence?

We raise these questions without offering definitive answers, for this matter not only entails assessing the theoretical validity of a major tradition but also, to a great extent, involves the personal realms of *xin* 信 (sincerity; trust; belief) and *jue* 覺 (sensing; awakening; realization).

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Notes

- ¹ All translations of the *Analects* in this paper are original, prepared in consultation with the renderings of James Legge, D. C. Lau, and Edward Slingerland. See (Legge 1930, p. 18; Lau 2014; Slingerland 2003).
- ² This translation is revised on the basis of A. C. Graham's translation (Graham 1990, p. 127).
- ³ It is also important to note that in early Confucianism, especially in the context of life and death, premature death, and longevity, *ming* appears to mark the domain of what must be accepted rather than transcended.
- ⁴ Lao Sze-kwang 勞思光 writes: "The character *ming* 命 is composed of the radicals for 'mouth' 口 and 'command' 令. In terms of its original meaning, it most fundamentally signified 'command' or 'order.' Secondly, it carried the meaning of 'designation' or 'appointment,' which also appears frequently in the pre-Qin texts. In addition to these two meanings, there is also the meaning of 'lifespan,' which pertains specifically to life and death. Although the 'lifespan' meaning may very likely be derived from the meaning of 'designation,' in the end these are two distinct senses of the term, with different referents." (See Lao 1984, p. 199).

- 5 In early Confucianism, especially in the thought of Confucius and Mencius, *ming* was closely associated with Heaven, which carried a distinctly religious dimension. See (Eno 1990).
- 6 The translations of the *Mencius* in this paper are based primarily on Van Norden's translation, with occasional minor adjustments. See (Van Norden 2009).
- 7 According to Mou Zongsan, "Dying in shackles" does not necessarily mean dying as a criminal. Any form of reckless behavior that leads to the destruction of one's own life counts as 'dying in shackles.' This includes indulgence in sensual desires that corrupt moral measure, unrestrained self-abandonment, taking reckless and opportunistic risks, placing one's life in danger, or failing to harmonize with the conditions of one's own existence—all are cases of dying in shackles." (See Mou 1985, p. 146).
- 8 In pre-Qin Confucianism, scholars often focused on themes such as the "debate over antiquity and present, ritual and law" (*gujin lifa zhizheng* 古今禮法之爭), the "discourse on the relation between Heaven and humanity, names and actualities" (*tianren mingshi zhibian* 天人名實之辯), and the "discussion of kingship versus hegemony and righteousness versus profit" (*wangba liyi zhilun* 王霸義利之論). In terms of human nature theory, the well-known "debate over the goodness or evilness of human nature" (*xingshan xinge zhizheng* 性善性惡之爭) also stands out as a major concern. All these were indeed foundational to early Confucian discourse. However, the "debate on *xing* and *ming*", as another key issue in original Confucian thought, equally deserves our attention.
- 9 Most translations of the *Zhuangzi* in this paper are adapted from (Watson 2013).
- 10 The tragic dimension that emerges from the early Confucian "debate on *xing* and *ming*" appears to have received insufficient attention in related scholarship.
- 11 Zhu Xi comments: "*Ming* refers to proper/rectified *ming*. A 'crumbling wall' 岩牆 is one that is about to collapse. One who understands rectified *ming* would not place themselves in a dangerous situation and bring upon themselves the disaster of being crushed. (命, 謂正命。巖牆, 牆之將覆者。知正命, 則不處危地以取覆壓之禍。)" (See Zhu 2011, p. 328).
- 12 Cheng Yi 程頤 likewise states: "'Seek it and you will get it; abandon it and you will lose it. This is seeking that benefits getting, and is seeking within oneself'—this refers to righteousness. 'There is a Way to seek it, but getting it depends on *ming*. This is seeking that does not benefit getting, and is seeking externally'—this refers to *ming*. As for the sage, he only follows righteousness, not *ming*. As it is said, 'To commit one unrighteous act, to kill one innocent person, and thereby gain the world—I would not do it.' This speaks only of righteousness, not of *ming*." (「求則得之, 舍則失之, 是求有益於得也, 求在我者也」, 此言義也。「求之有道, 得之有命, 是求無益於得也, 求在外者也」, 此言命也。至於聖人, 則惟有義而無命。「行一不義, 殺一不辜, 而得天下, 不為也」, 此言義不言命也。) (See Y. Cheng and Cheng 2004, p. 367). Zhu Xi likewise remarks: "The sage does not concern himself with *ming*, only with whether something accords with righteousness. Whether one is rich or poor, noble or base, all depends on where righteousness lies. This is what it means to be at peace with whatever one encounters." (聖人更不問命, 只看義如何。貧富貴賤, 惟義所在, 謂安於所遇也。) (J. Li 1986, p. 873).
- 13 The phrase "make unrelenting efforts to improve oneself" first appears in the *Zhouyi* 周易, also known as the *Book of Changes*. See (X. Li 1999, p. 10).
- 14 The phrase originates from the "Renjian Shi" 人間世 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, "to understand what one can do nothing about and to be at peace with it as with one's *ming*, this is the perfection of *de* 德 (power; virtue)." (知其不可奈何而安之若命, 德之至也) (Guo 1961, p. 155).
- 15 Liberation in the Confucian tradition is synonymous with social and cosmic harmony, and is conceived as an ongoing process without final completion. This attribute distinguishes the Confucian tradition from other traditions and may indeed constitute one of its strengths.

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