SECTION C

MORALITY
CHAPTER TEN
CONFUCIANISM AND THE IS-OUGHT QUESTION

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In this paper I aim to give a reading of Confucianism such that, if I am right, we can say that the Confucians showed us how to derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’ long before Searle did in his 1964 paper.¹ This is not to say that the medal should be taken away from Searle and awarded retrospectively to the Confucians instead. Indeed, I will show that thanks to Searle, we now realize that the Confucians were saying all along that ‘ought’ is derivable from ‘is’. I will use Searle’s derivation as a kind of template to read many of the central claims of Confucianism and through this process cast some light on the nature of Confucian ethics. It is not my intention to demonstrate that Confucianism is the source of counter-examples against the Humean thesis that Searle wants to put in doubt, let alone to argue that Confucianism can contribute to what Searle hopes for, namely “a theory which will generate an indefinite number of counter-examples” (p. 38)—on the contrary, there may be reason to think that there are no counter-examples to be drawn from Confucianism. It is even further from my intention to enter, through my reading of Confucianism, the debate between the (moral) naturalists and non-naturalists, and the related debate between the (moral) realists and non-realists, though it is possible to construct a Confucian perspective on these debates.

1. Deriving ‘Ought’ from ‘Is’ and the Confucian Context

In his paper, Searle argues that from the factual statement “Jones uttered the words ‘I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars’”, we can derive “Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars”. He claims (pp. 39–40) that if we add to the first, factual, statement two further factual