

Guan Zhong (管仲; ca. 720BC-645BC) was the minister who assisted Duke Huan of Qi so that the State of Qi became the leading state (hegemon) during the Spring and Autumn Period of ancient China. But Confucius apparently had harsh things to say about him:

“Guan Zhong is a man of small calibre! (관중은 쪼잔해! 管仲之器小哉!)” (八佾 3.22)

Someone asked clarification.

“You mean, he was frugal? 管仲儉乎?”

Confucius did not mince his words. He made scathing remarks about Guan Zhong’s staggering wealth. According to Confucius, Guan Zhong did not know Li 禮 either.

He had three residences, each complete with a full array of domestic staff. How could he be frugal? (管氏有三歸, 官事不攝, 焉得儉?)

Only a ruler can have a gate screen. But Guan Zhong had one. Only when a ruler entertains another ruler, can he have a cup stand. But Guan Zhong had a cup stand. If he knew Li, who didn’t? (管氏而知禮, 孰不知禮? 관중이 예의를 알면 개나 소나 예의를 알게?)

However, regarding the question of ethical resolve (仁), Confucius shows a very interesting response. Was Gaun Zhong a man of *ethical resolve*?

*That* was the question posed by Confucius’ students.

Zi Gong said, “Guan Zong lacked ethical resolve, did he not? When Duke Huan of Qi had his brother Jiu killed, Guan Zhong was unable to commit suicide. He instead served Duke Huan as his minister.” 子貢曰:「管仲非仁者與? 桓公殺公子糾, 不能死, 又相之。」(憲問 14.17)

Jiu was the elder brother of Duke Huan. Guan Zhong was originally serving Jiu. When there was an armed conflict between brothers who were competing for the throne of Qi, Guan Zhong attempted to assassinate Duke Huan. But the attempt was unsuccessful and Jiu had to flee to a neighbouring state. When Duke Huan eventually came to the throne of Qi, he put pressure on the rule of the neighbouring state (who harbours Jiu) to have Jiu killed. Jiu was duly killed and his body was pickled and presented to Duke Huan. When a ruler is killed, it was ‘appropriate’ and perhaps ‘ethical’ for his minister such as Guan Zhong to commit suicide. For instance, minister Shao Hu who had been serving Jiu committed suicide when Jiu was killed. But Guan Zhong not only not killed himself but somehow enlisted the help of his close friend Bao Shuya (鮑叔牙) who was an aide to Duke Huan. Bao recommended Guan Zhong to Duke Huan and Guan Zhong became his minister. Guan Zhong must have had a superbe skill of winning the mind of his former enemy. Zi Gong, however, denounces Guan Zhong’s apparent lack of ‘ethical resolve’.

However, Confucius replied as follows:

Guan Zhong acted as prime minister to the duke Huan, made him leader of all the princes, and united and rectified the whole kingdom. Down to the present day, the people enjoy the gifts which

he conferred. But for Guan Zhong, we should now be wearing our hair unbound, and the lappets of our coats buttoning on the left side. Will you require from him the small fidelity of common men and common women, who would commit suicide in a stream or ditch, no one knowing anything about them? 「管仲相桓公，霸諸侯，一匡天下，民到于今受其賜。微管仲，吾其被髮左衽矣。豈若匹夫匹婦之為諒也，自經於溝瀆，而莫之知也。」(憲問，14.17)

Zi Lu asked a similar question. Confucius' reply was even more definitive.

When the duke Huan caused his brother Jiu to be killed, Shao Hu died with his master but Guan Zhong did not die. May not I say that he was lacking ethical resolve? 子路曰：「桓公殺公子糾，召忽死之，管仲不死。」曰：「未仁乎？」

The Duke Huan assembled all the princes together without even using weapons of war and chariots - it was all through the influence of Guan Zhong. Have ethical resolve like him! Such ethical resolve as his! 子曰：「桓公九合諸侯，不以兵車，管仲之力也。如其仁！如其仁！」(憲問，14.16)

There is another passage where Confucius extols Guan Zhong's great virtue.

Someone asked about Zi Chan. Confucius replied, 'He was kind.' Someone asked about Zi Xi. Confucius said, 'Oh dear, don't ask me about him. Not him!' Someone asked about Guan Zhong. Confucius said, 'A great man (a man of ethical resolve). He grabbed the town of Pian which had three hundred households from the Bo family. The villagers only managed to have coarse meals, but no one had bad feelings until the end (even when they had no teeth from old age).' 或問子產。子曰：「惠人也。」問子西。曰：「彼哉！彼哉！」問管仲。曰：「人也。奪伯氏駢邑三百，飯疏食，沒齒，無怨言。」(憲問，14.9)

What then? All is well that ends well? The end justifies the means? All is forgiven as long as you get the result? Definitely not! There are simply too many passages where Confucius emphasised that the process counts, rather than the result. Even if you cannot hope to have a result, you must nevertheless endeavour in all earnest.

Ethical resolve, morality is far more complex. It cannot be simply explained in black on white. It is certainly not a matter of some "inflexible" principle. It is not something that can be approached from dogmatic or absolute terms.

A good deal of common sense and flexibility would put you on the right path, provided that you have the right training and the right frame of mind – provided also that you have the determination to improve yourself constantly.