Sample Essay 1 for Philosophy & Political Thought 1
Professor Van Norden

NOTE: This is a paradigm of a good first essay for PPT 1. This is NOT your actual first essay prompt. Look on Canvas for your actual prompt. This is just to give you an example of what style to write in.

Length: 600-900 words

Learning Goal: Carefully explain to your reader what is said in the passage under discussion.

At this stage, your goal is interpretation and explanation, not evaluation or presenting an alternative conclusion. (That will come later in the course.) More specifically, make clear what conclusion(s) the author is arguing for and what premises he is appealing to. In explaining an argument, it should be clear how the premises are supposed to support the conclusion. Imagine as the ideal reader of your essay an educated person who has not taken a course like this one. (For example, you might write for a sibling, a parent, or a friend at another college or university.)

Topic:

- Explain the disagreement between Zai Wo and Kongzi over the three-year mourning period in Analects 17.21.¹

Formatting:

- double-space;
- use 12-point font, preferably Times New Roman;
- provide page numbers at the bottom of each page;
- include a title and your student number centered at the top of the first page;

• use *Chicago Manual of Style* “Notes and Bibliography Style” for footnotes, except that you do not need to include a bibliography (notice that the footnotes in these directions illustrate the correct note format). If your work has been influenced by other sources in a general way but not so closely that a citation is in order, you should include acknowledgements.
Is the Confucian Mourning Ritual Justified?

Student Number: 12345678

Ancient Confucians claimed that one should mourn the death of a parent for three years. During the mourning period, one had to eat plain food, wear mourning clothes, and refrain from many activities. Another Chinese philosophical school, the Mohists, criticized such prolonged mourning as wasteful. However, it was not just other schools that criticized the Confucians on this issue. From the Analects, the sayings of Kongzi (Confucius), we learn that one of Kongzi’s own disciples questioned the wisdom of the three-year mourning period. In this essay, I shall explain the objection raised by Kongzi’s disciple, Kongzi’s immediate response, and the elaboration that Kongzi gives after the disciple leaves the room. Finally, I shall paraphrase Kongzi’s complete argument.

In Analects 17.21, Kongzi’s disciple Zai Wo argues that when mourning the death of a parent “one year is long enough,” because if “the gentleman” abstains from practicing rituals and participating in musical performances for three years, these activities will fall into disuse. Kongzi must concede that the neglect of ritual and music is bad, because in Analects 13.3, he himself states that “when ritual and music fail to flourish…the common people will be at a loss.” In addition, Zai Wo argues that, after only a year, there will be a pressing practical need to harvest new grain and make new tinder. In short, Zai Wo’s premises are that following the prohibitions dictated by mourning for three years leads to bad consequences. His conclusion is that mourning for one year is preferable, because it would not lead to these consequences.

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3 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 80-90.
4 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 50.
5 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 38.
In response, Kongzi does not deny Zai Wo’s premises that the practice of three years of mourning leads to the neglect of the rites and music, and that it presents practical problems. Instead, Kongzi asks Zai Wo whether, after one year of mourning, he would “feel comfortable then eating [his] sweet rice and wearing [his] brocade gowns?”6 When Zai Wo replies that he would, Kongzi concludes, “…if you would feel comfortable doing [these things], then by all means you should.”7 Kongzi explains that the gentleman avoids things like fine foods, music, and accommodations during the mourning period only because he “gets no pleasure…finds no joy…and feels no comfort” in these things.8 Kongzi’s question implies that Zai Wo should obey the rules of mourning only if he has the appropriate feelings. This is consistent with the emphasis in other passages on the importance of having the right emotions. For example, in Analects 2.5, Kongzi states that being filial involves more than simply “being able to provide one’s parents with nourishment.” It requires that one be respectful.9

At this point in the dialogue, it appears that Kongzi and Zai Wo are in agreement that Zai Wo should cease mourning after only one year, even though they disagree about why this is justified. It is therefore surprising that, after Zai Wo leaves the room, Kongzi exclaims, “This show how lacking in Goodness this Zai Wo is!”10 Kongzi argues that the fact that “a child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life” explains why it is true that “the three year mourning period is the common practice throughout the world.” Kongzi then concludes with a rhetorical question: “Did Zai Wo not receive three years of care from his parents?”11 We can convert this rhetorical question into

6 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 50.
7 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 50.
8 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 50.
9 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 6.
10 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 51.
11 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Readings, 51.
the following implied assertion: “Zai Wo did receive three years of care from his parents.” In other words, the justification for the practice of three years of mourning does apply to Zai Wo.

We can now paraphrase Kongzi’s complete argument as follows. In order to appropriately perform any ritual, one must have the appropriate feelings, so there is no reason to mourn for three years unless one is so sad that one “gets no pleasure” from the things one forgoes. Since Zai Wo is not motivated to mourn for more than one year, he should not do so. However, humans are “completely dependent” upon their parents for the first three years of their lives. Consequently, it is the “universal practice” for humans to mourn the death of a parent for at least three years. Thus, any human who is not motivated to mourn for three years is inappropriately unfeeling and, hence, “lacking in Goodness.” Since Zai Wo is like any other human in that he too was completely dependent upon his parents for the first three years of his life, the fact that he is not motivated to mourn shows that he is not Good.

In this essay I have examined the argument between Kongzi and his disciple Zai Wo about whether the practice of three years of mourning is justified. Zai Wo criticizes the practice as impractical, anticipating an argument later developed in more detail by the Mohists. Kongzi concedes that there is no reason for performing the ritual unless it expresses one’s genuine sadness. However, Kongzi is disappointed in Zai Wo, because he believes that any normal human being would feel such sadness for three years after the loss of a parent.
Is the Confucian Mourning Ritual Justified?

Student Number: 12345678

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At this point in the dialogue, it appears that Kongzi and Zai Wo are in agreement that Zai Wo should cease mourning after only one year, even though they disagree about why this is justified. It is therefore surprising that, after Zai Wo leaves the room, Kongzi exclaims, “This show how lacking in Goodness this Zai Wo is!” Kongzi argues that the fact that “a child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life” explains why it is true that “the three year mourning period is the common practice throughout the world.” Kongzi then concludes with a rhetorical question: “Did Zai Wo not receive three years of care from his parents?” We can convert this rhetorical question into

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Things to notice about the preceding essay:

1. This first assignment is about carefully reading and explaining a passage, not evaluating it. You will get a chance to evaluate arguments and develop your own position in later essays.
2. The essay helps us to understand better the arguments of Zai Wo and Kongzi. To do this, it makes explicit what the premises and conclusions of each argument are, and how they are related to one another.

3. Quotations are identified with quotation marks and the original source is provided.

4. Each paragraph has a coherent but distinct topic that contributes to the overall topic of the essay. No paragraph seems like an irrelevant digression.

5. Each sentence contributes to the topic of its paragraph. No sentence seems irrelevant to its paragraph.

6. There are signposts and transition words to let the reader know where we are going in the essay (“in addition,” “in response,” “instead,” “in other words,” etc.).

7. The introduction and conclusion avoid broad, unsubstantiated claims; they are brief and help the reader to understand the essay as a whole.

8. The writing style is simple and clear, rather than verbose and pretentious.