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Ontological Ethics

by

John Kowalko
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Abstract

How should we understand ethics and what is its role in our lives? I rely on Confucianism, modern virtue ethics, and psychological research to outline four features that I suggest are necessary for an adequate conception of ethics. In outlining these features, I present virtue as a perceptual ability, where our perception is understood as our holistic comportment to and engagement in and with the world. I offer this understanding of ethics as a way of opening the possibility for the incorporation of the ontological implications of Karen Barad, including her restructuring of notions such as agency and identity. Although I offer three ways to take ontology seriously within my ethical system, my thesis is left open-ended. The inclusion of Baradian ontology into our everyday ethical understanding is a continuous process that consists in completely reorienting our perception of the world. However, by recognizing the continuous nature of this process, we can appreciate ethics as having its foundation in continuous improvement.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Ethics is everywhere 4

Problematizing isolation and independence..... 5

Reconceptualizing ethics and ethicality..... 14

Use of Confucianism 23

Chapter One: Prioritizing virtue 26

The inadequacy of rules and principles 27

Rational-emotions of the heart-mind 32

Chapter Two: Perception and the cultivation of virtue..... 38

Virtue as a perceptual ability 39

Perception as the unity of knowing and acting 46

Perceptual cultivation 50

Confidence and improvement..... 62

Continuous striving..... 72

Chapter Three: The pervasiveness and interconnectedness of virtue..... 74

Pervasiveness of virtue 75

The morality of 'non-moral' virtues 78

Interconnectedness of virtue 85

Psychology and situationism 96

Conclusion: Taking ontology seriously 102

Significance of the ontological 103

Restructuring agency 108

Indeterminateness and responsibility..... 113

Summary..... 122

Bibliography 123

Introduction: Ethics is everywhere

A delicate tissue of ethicality runs through the marrow of being. There is no getting away from ethics – mattering is an integral part of the ontology of the world in its dynamic presencing. Not even a moment exists on its own.[1]

[1] Barad 396.

Problematizing isolation and independence

"It's not personal. It's just business." We have all heard the phrase. It is used on television, in movies, and in real life. Suppose that a boss says this to an employee they are going to fire. They use it to explain that their decision is based on neutral, economic factors. Maybe the company is losing money, and the boss has to take someone off the payroll to keep the business afloat. The boss wants to make it clear that the decision does not reflect back on the employee. The decision was not based on the quality of employee's personality or the employee's relationship with the boss. The boss was forced by economic factors. Maybe the employee was not as efficient as other workers or was just not suited for the job. The boss still would like the employee to know that this decision does not indicate a personal flaw, and maybe the boss would even like to continue to be friends with the one being fired.

This phrase indicates a supposed virtue of economical thinking. Economics provides an objective way to evaluate situations and reach decisions that ignores the personal and relies just on the facts. Objectivity here means that the decisions are independent of personal bias. We can consider issues purely economically, and on that basis, reach decisions that we can be certain show us the best way to act. This virtue is possible due to the underlying presupposition that economics is an isolated domain. Economics can provide a method of evaluation and understanding that is independent from other considerations. Economics, especially its more theoretical aspects, makes this isolation and independence seem not only possible, but essential

to economic success. We write down the formulas, fill in the data, and are given the answer. We expect those who act on personal vendettas or who are swayed by personal intimacies to do worse than those who act on the objective basis provided by economics.

From the perspective of economics, its isolation from external concerns seems to be a great advantage. Someone who has been on the receiving end of the phrase "It's just business," however, may have a very different understanding whether this is an actual advantage. The person being fired will hardly see the decision as 'just business', and even may understand the phrase as making an important part of the decision invisible. If I am fired, then, even though I may understand the decision was based on purely economical decisions, I cannot help but feel there is something personal. Why was I chosen to be fired? The decision certainly says something about me, at least in comparison to the other workers. And how can the decision be "just business" when it has drastically changed my life? The economic decision has affected me on a deeply personal level. I no longer have a job, and I must file for unemployment to avoid being without money. My priorities will have to change, and my personal relationships may suffer from the increase of stress and uncertainty in my life. Even with the disclaimer "It's just business," the personal seems to creep back into the decision.

Can we really isolate the domain of economics? Can the firing of any person ever be taken as entirely 'not personal' and simply 'just business'? Does acting from purely economical considerations free us from other forms of accountability, such as those taken to be external to the domain of economics? Are economical

considerations justifications for companies to ignore pollution and engage in environmentally destructive practices? Are these companies absolved from any form of ethical criticism? Often, they seem to be. We saw that attitude from business executives on Wall Street during the 2008 financial crisis in the United States. Despite the destruction they had caused, their companies explained the need to give them large bonuses: the companies could not risk losing their valuable talent, they told us. Although these people had ruined millions of lives, many of them had, after all, just been following what was economically most sensible at the time.

The political sphere supported that attitude of the executives during the financial meltdown. The government gave out vast sums of money with little oversight. They were not concerned with changing the flaws in the system that allowed for reckless investment, but only with maintaining that system according to the same economic principles and presuppositions. Similarly, when confronted about the need for companies to compensate those who they knowingly exposed to asbestosis, United States Representative Tom Carper from Delaware explained that he did not want to force those companies to go out of business. Internal memos show that companies were aware of the risks of asbestosis, but that they concluded it was economically more feasible to ignore the issue for the time being and deal with it later through litigation. Although my father may now die at any moment from the tiny particles in his lungs, I am supposed to understand that these companies were just trying to succeed in the economic world. Of course these companies did not hate my father – it was not personal; it was just business.

I have presented a predominantly negative characterization of economics so far. In fact, economics and economical thinking have highly positive sides. Economical considerations encourage innovation and efficiency. They can motivate people to find solutions to problems, such as cures for diseases. In these cases, we exalt the connection between economics and ethics. This connection and the ability of economics to have beneficial ethical effects allow for economics to be a virtuous enterprise in many contexts. It is undoubtedly responsible, at least in part, for many advances that benefit the world. Microfinancing, for example, offers small loans to persons in developing countries who would otherwise be unable to get loans or start businesses. Although microfinancing can be abused to exploit people, when it is used properly, it offers many opportunities to people who would otherwise have none.

Economics, especially through its connection to objective and unbiased reasoning, is also a powerful influence on our opinions. Economic explanations allow us to concretely and determinately see how certain policies or decisions will affect us. The belief that "the numbers don't lie" gives considerable weight to explanations that take an economical perspective. Using economics, people can be convinced of the future dangers of environmental destruction. Companies can be convinced to change their practices, such as exploitative child labor, when confronted with economic boycotts. Economical concerns played a large part in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Desegregation in restaurants and clothing outlets was a direct result of the economic pressures put on them by unified black communities. Before the support of the federal government, businesses played a significant role in advancing equal rights.

Economics is difficult to understand as separate from and entirely independent of ethics. For southern business owners in the 1960s, it was economical concerns that forced them to change their ethical perspectives. As their ethics changed, so did their economic perspectives. Economics and ethics seem to have an intimate relationship in which both reciprocally influence each other. We should not take ethics as something separate from economics, or even as something merely alongside economics. My point is not that when we are engaged in economics we should also recognize that we have ethical responsibilities and concerns to worry about. There are ethical concerns we should not ignore, but we cannot see them as separate from the economics, or as just one component. They are too entangled to grasp them as two separate domains that must be then brought back together. Ethicality infuses the whole of economics, even though the full force of their entanglement often shows itself only in exceptional cases. We can talk about economics and we can talk about ethics, but we cannot talk about one and then say that we make no claims on the other. Ethical concerns may be hidden or ignored when they are excluded from particular considerations or frameworks, but we should not understand these exclusions as absolute. The ethical issues remain, lingering in the background, affecting and being affected by what we do in the economical domain. Economics becomes corrupted and results in tragic outcomes, such as the abuse of microfinancing or the catastrophe on Wall Street, when exclusions are entirely ignored and the separation of economics and ethics is taken as absolute.

The two domains can never be separated in an absolute way. Anything that involves the use of money or resources is inherently ethical. Money and resources can

always be allocated to different uses, and how they are used can be better or worse. This does not imply that their use in economic ventures is inherently unethical or that we should condemn capitalism or profit. This paper makes no claims as to the value of economics. Rather, the current point is that we should recognize that the immersion of economics in ethicality implores the responsible and conscientious use of money, resources, and economical thinking. The isolationist presuppositions lingering behind "It's just business" prevent conversation about the ethical implications from ever beginning. They make a valid position, such as "Let us consider primarily the economical issues and implications for now," into a stark and absolute prohibition against ethical criticism or investigation. They appeal to an arbitrary distinction that implies complete separation of the two domains. We should instead move away from the questionable presuppositions that the phrase reinforces, and we should recognize our responsibility for the exclusions we make in positing the separation of economics and ethics. We should always be ready to answer challenges that question our use or reliance on that distinction.

Momentary exclusions can be used to progress an understanding of the issues that emphasize primarily one domain, but they should not be used to stifle criticism or inquiry from excluded concerns. For example, we may discuss the fiscal implications of carbon dioxide cap and trade and reach conclusions within an economic context. Those conclusions, however, do not have absolute authority in relation to the interconnected claims from excluded domains, such as ethics, precisely because those conclusions and considerations were made with such domains excluded and not properly taken into account. Even economic considerations do not always take into

consideration all the economic aspects. Cap and trade often does not account for the damage of pollution, including as clean up, damage to health, and broader problems, such as the attitudes of wastefulness that condoning pollution, or not forcing clean up, create in society. These issues resist ever being fully taken into consideration; frequently, they are not even recognizable. That is why it is all the more important for us to account for the framework being used to discuss and understand an issue or reach a conclusion. We need to recognize the exclusions we make and the implications of those exclusions on our understanding.

Science faces many of the same potential concerns that economics does in relation to ethics. Science makes one of the strongest claims to independent objectivity and domain isolation. Much of the strength of economics comes from its relationship to the objectivity of science and scientific practices. Scientific practices are supposed to be detached from personal bias or influence, offering universally valid truths that transcend any particular perspective. When we consider things like Newtonian equations, this perspective seems relatively uncontroversial. However, in issues such as the building of the atom bomb, the separation of the scientific and the ethical issues does not seem feasible. The ethical and scientific aspects – insofar as they can be considered separate – both inform our understanding. Theoretical physicist Karen Barad explains that "It is not possible to extricate oneself from ethical concerns and correctly discern what science tells us about the world."[2] In many cases, there does not even seem to be much of a separation between science and economics. Huge sums of money were dedicated to the project that eventually created the atom bomb. In fact, all scientific pursuits require resources and money. How can we isolate

[2] Barad 37.

science from ethical concerns if we are hard-pressed to isolate it from economical concerns?

Isolation of the domains of science and economics becomes even more problematic when we consider the persons who make those domains possible. Is a scientist just a scientist? Are not scientists acting as economic agents when they work for pay and receive a paycheck? And can we really separate the agent as scientist from the agent as ethical actor? All scientists are immersed in ethical considerations, ranging from obligations to their families to responsibilities to the scientific practices that make their achievements possible. Where do we draw the line between the scientist's "ethical" and "scientific" concerns? Not falsifying information is certainly essential to science and its practices, but is this not equally ethical? And what about scientists who cheat on their spouses? Will this affect their scientific endeavors? More importantly, what does it even mean to say that it will or will not?

Debating over whether or not science or economics, the scientist or the economist, are isolated and independent from ethical considerations seems pointless and largely arbitrary. Even in abstraction, how can we take "economics," "science," "economist," or "scientist" to have no connection to concerns outside their respective domains? I will argue that believing we can do so distorts our understanding and entire way of being. Indeed, we are all scientists and economists in some ways, just as we are all ethicists. We are all engaged in the ongoing practices that constitute the possibility and identity of those domains. Absolute isolation and its relations to a belief in certainty prevent an adequate understanding of the ways we engage in and with the world. Overcoming the problem of isolated domains or independent

individuals is not just a matter of taking ethics into our considerations. This would suggest that the problem is simply an epistemological shortcoming, and that it can be overcome with sufficient work. As I will explore, however, the real issue is one that has ontological dimensions, and its ontological character insists that overcoming these problems is a process of never-ending, continuous improvement. We need to take into account questions of existence if we hope to adequately understand our ethical life. I will suggest that for an adequate conception of ethics, we should not ignore the ontological incompleteness of all understanding, from the identity of domains such as science to the identity of individual persons. All aspects of the world are interconnected, impacting and influencing each other as the world continuously reconfigures.

Reconceptualizing ethics and ethicality

We need to rethink ethics and its place in our world. My thesis explicates a reconceptualization of ethics that attempts to overcome the "metaphysics of individualism"[3] that underlies most traditional approaches to ethics. The metaphysics of individualism is "the assumption that preexisting objects (individually determinately bounded entities) possess inherent properties."[4] It makes possible the conception of domains and individuals as isolated and independent. Rejecting the metaphysics of individualism prevents us from presupposing a determinate identity either for domains or for the individuals who constitute those domains. For Baradian ontology, who I am is not a matter of my identity as an isolated, determinate individual. Identity is constituted only within a web of relationships and entanglements. It is part of an endless process of transformation in which the entanglements that define it are continuously reconfigured as part of the ongoing flux of the world.

For an adequate conception of ethics, we should account for the dispersion of our identity across our web of entanglements. My relationships with other persons, things, and the world in general are inextricably interconnected with who I am. Outside of those entanglements, my identity is meaningless. Likewise, the domains and practices that become manifest through our collective activity cannot be understood as isolated or independent from each other. Only through their

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[3] Barad uses this phrase in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. This is one of her main targets of critique, both implicitly and explicitly.
[4] Barad 294.

engagement in the network of ongoing practices that serve to define our own identities do they become meaningful. Economics and science cannot be understood as isolated domains because all intelligibility, including the intelligibility of particular domains and the conclusions they reach, is part of the ongoing practices of engagement in and with the world.

In the ontology of Barad, intelligibility is not something we impose upon a neutral, external world. Neither does the world impose an understanding upon us as passive observers. Intelligibility comes from our entanglement and engagement in, with, and of the world. Intelligibility is part of existence.[5] The world becomes intelligible through differential patterns of mattering. We exist because things matter and make a difference to us, and intelligibility is "the differential responsiveness, as performatively articulated and accountable, to what matters."[6] Intelligibility, therefore, is not a human affair, but one of all matter and mattering. Intelligibility is the enactment of existence. Anything and everything that matters and makes a difference partakes in the ongoing articulation of the world, and thus takes part in the constitution of existence and meaning.[7] Differential patterns of mattering make the world intelligible through specific articulations of the world. These articulations that make the world intelligible are material-discursive practices.[8] Material-discursive practices mark the reconfiguring of the world through the differential enactment of

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[5] Barad describes intelligibility as "an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation" (Barad 149).
[6] Barad 335.
[7] "Intelligibility is not an inherent characteristic of humans but a feature of the world in its differential becoming" (Barad 335).
[8] 'Material-discursive practices' is Barad's phrase that is meant to displace our traditional notions of discourse. It is part of her critique against any frameworks that collapse the normative into the material (such as material realism) or the material into the normative (such as social constructivism), or that create an unbridgeable dualism between the two. Barad wants to place discourse back into the world, as something inherently material and not exclusive to humans, rejecting any non-discursive or material background practices that serve to enable human communication. All matter, even the world itself, is articulate.

boundaries. Boundaries are continually enacted and reconfigured, making the world intelligible to us through our accountability to those boundaries.

Through our entanglement with those material-discursive boundary-drawing practices, we take part in transforming the nature of reality as well as who we are and how we understand ourselves. Only through my engagement in and with the world can things become intelligible as salient in particular ways. The boundary-drawing practices that constitute the articulation of the world are also constitutive of my own existence and identity. I exist only as a locus within an interconnected web of mattering. The persons, contexts, and situations with which I am associated cannot be separated from my identity. Moreover, my identity should not be understood as something I possess as an individual. Identity is not something we have, but something we do. It is an agential enactment of meaning. Through the ways we engage in and with the world, we take part in the continuous enactment of our identity. Our identity becomes intelligible only insofar as we have a role in the material-discursive practices of boundary-drawing. Our role in those practices of intelligibility cause us to matter to the world and the world to matter to us.

Existence is constituted according to how things matter, and mattering cannot be separated from accountability to the boundaries enacted by material-discursive practices. Existence is therefore inherently ethical. We are responsible for mattering and accountable to what matters because things make a difference to us, whether or not we recognize or appreciate how they make a difference. That is why domains cannot be isolated from ethical concerns. Economics, science, and the actions

undertaken by individuals in their name, all engage in the enactment of differences. They matter, and mattering always involves ethical responsibility and accountability.

Whether on the level of domains or individuals, we cannot escape ethics. Ethics is not something we encounter only rarely, such as in moments of duress. It is the way we engage with the world; it is the background of material-discursive practices that enables all intelligibility and existence. Only through ethics are we are able to understand at all. Our ethical understanding constitutes the background from which we act or make any evaluation, determining our set of possibilities for perceiving and acting. Our ethical understanding orients and configures our perspective, allowing us to see the world as salient in particular ways. All of our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and motivations are part of our ethical perspective. Even in our attempts to ignore the ethical, we are taking an ethical stance. We are always engaged in ethics as part of the continuous reconfiguring of our lives, which determines how we see the world as salient. Taking ethics as a pretentious or detached field of inquiry undermines any potential insight before the pursuit can even get underway.

Ethics is constitutive of our understanding. How we understand the world cannot be separated from the ethical background that makes our understanding possible. Our understanding manifests itself as our perspective. Perception is our way of understanding the world such that it makes sense; it is our way of engaging in and with the world intelligibly. Perception, as openness to meaning, is determined from a particular point of view. We see the world in a particular, limited way, with certain aspects salient and other aspects excluded from significance. These limitations are not

to be overcome. Limitation is inherent to existence as part of the ontological indeterminacy of meaning. Intelligibility makes one part of the world meaningful to the exclusion of the intelligibility of the other part. The former part is made intelligible to the part excluded from intelligibility. Exclusions, although never absolutely excluded, are therefore necessary for meaning, because only part of the world can be made intelligible at a time, and this makes meaning never absolutely determinate. Ethics requires that we recognize these limitations so that we can reconfigure them in ways that will enable us to achieve a better perception of the situation. Through improving ourselves and our perception, we become able to engage with the world in a more virtuous manner.

My perception – my understanding of the world that is co-constituted with my identity – is dispersed across my web of interactions. I am not a single, determinate entity, but rather, my identity spreads out into my relationships with others and the world in general. We should not presuppose a clear distinction between the internal and external – such as between a subject and the world, or a knower and the known, or one domain and another – and that distinction certainly should not be taken for granted. Just as economics is not isolated to its own field but is dependent on its associations with other domains, my perception is not isolated to my body. It is shaped by those around me, by my situation, and by the world in general with which I engage. All those things with which I am entangled – including my metaphysical presuppositions – have an agential role in the shaping of my perception. I cannot understand the world separate from my entanglement with the agencies around me. If I do not recognize and appreciate the role played by agencies outside my body, then I

literally do not understand myself. My perception becomes limited in a crucial way because I am unable to account for the varied influences that have a role in constituting my identity and determining my actions. Ethics should not permit this shortcoming.

An adequate conception of ethics must be able to overcome the metaphysics of individualism – and the representationalist and humanist assumptions that it supports – and account for the varied agencies that are responsible for the constitution of our identity. Traditional Western approaches to ethics, particularly deontological and consequentialist strains, are deeply rooted in the metaphysics of individualism, causing them to rely on problematic notions such as free will and inherent rights. For these approaches, ethics is seen as a highly detached and reflective process. Rational beings – a designation that normally includes only humans – are taken as the only entities involved with ethicality. Through rational contemplation, we formulate rules and principles – such as the categorical imperative or the requirement the greatest good be done for the greatest number – that we then get ourselves to follow. These traditional approaches beg the question as to how we are supposed to comply with these normative prescriptions. They have already detached us from the material world. At the same time, they have detached ethics from the world and the world from ethics. By relying on the metaphysics of individualism, they are unable to fully account for our embodiment in the world and the role that embodiment has in the constitution of identity. These perspectives prevent ethics from being put back into the world we are engaged in and with.

Virtue ethics, as an alternative to deontological and consequentialist ethics, has the ability to account for the ontological reconceptualization of ethics that I am suggesting. Although the reorientation of ethics around the cultivation of virtue opens the possibility of understanding the essentiality of our entanglement with the world of which we are a part, most forms of virtue ethics still rely on the metaphysics of individualism. For virtue ethics to serve as an adequate conception of ethics, it will require substantial reworking of central terms, such as virtue, character, and agency. Fortunately, revising these notions does not force virtue ethics to abandon its focus on the cultivation of virtue.

In my thesis, I attempt to outline an understanding of virtue ethics that is able to incorporate the presuppositions of the ontological framework provided by Barad. I primarily deal with the explication of four features of virtue ethics that I see as necessary for the any adequate conception of ethics. I start by addressing the inadequacy of rules and principles, and I argue that the cultivation of virtue should be prioritized in ethics. Next, I suggest a rejection of the opposition between the rational and the emotional because this opposition is responsible for the traditional reliance on rules and principles, and it prevents a functional understanding of the cultivation of virtue. Virtue should be situated in the rational-emotional, material-discursive boundary-drawing practices of intelligibility.

For the third feature, I present the cultivation of virtue as a perceptual development that combines both the cognitive and emotive dimensions. Virtue is a perceptual ability – a way of 'seeing' the world. Perception should not be understood as a purely visual phenomenon. It is the way we understand and are engaged with the

world. With an adequate perception, we understand the world as salient in ways that elicit virtuous responses; due to the configuration of the ways in which things matter to us, responses that express virtue are seen as the only possibilities. I rely on the Confucian tradition as well as on insights from modern virtue ethicists to articulate the implications of a perceptual conception of virtue and to understand how to engage in the cultivation of virtue from this perspective.

Finally, I argue that the fourth feature of an adequate conception of ethics is the pervasive and interconnected character of virtue. If virtue is inseparable from our perceptual understanding and our perception is constituted by our entire way of being in and with the world, then we should recognize that all aspects of life are interconnected with and determine our virtue. This feature underlies the importance of taking the previous features seriously and is supported by modern psychological research. Our virtue should not be understood separate from the web of entanglements that constitute our perception. Relying on rules and principles or on the opposition between reason and emotion detaches us from our engagement in and with the world. Recognizing virtue as a perceptual ability, on the other hand, allows us to account for its interconnectedness.

I conclude by claiming that if we accept these features of an adequate conception of ethics, then we should not ignore their ontological implications. We can only adequately understand virtue if we recognize the inseparability of the ethical and ontological dimensions. The reconceptualization of notions such as virtue, character, and agency require us to take ontology seriously. I appeal to the presupposition of a Baradian framework as a way to understand the ontological implications of the virtue

ethical framework I present. Relying on those presuppositions, I suggest three ways that we can take the ontological implications of seriously.

According to Baradian ontology, the relationship is the most basic unit of existence, and pre-exists the relata. Through making a difference within a particular relationship, a distinction, or a cut, is made between an object and the agencies that enact the cut. Outside of a particular set of relationships, identity is open-ended, indeterminate, and interconnected with everything. Who we are – our character, our identity, our virtue – is continuously reconfigured as we form new relationships and entanglements. We are in constant, dynamic flux along with the world. By integrating this ontology with the four features I outlined, I hope to put ethics back into the world and provide a means to understanding what is necessary for an adequate conception of ethics.

Use of Confucianism

In this paper, I rely extensively on the Chinese philosophical tradition of Confucianism because it exemplifies the four features I identity as necessary for an adequate conception of ethics.[9] Confucianism emphasizes the cultivation of virtue over the following of rules and principles. Although Confucianism does contain rules, such as the rituals, these have secondary importance in relation to the cultivation of virtue. Rules and rituals do not serve primarily as prescriptions for how to act in particular circumstances, but rather, they are an aspect of the ongoing cultivation of one's character. We cultivate our character by developing the natural endowments of our *xin*, the heart-mind. The Confucian *xin* ignores the distinction between the emotional and rational elements of virtue. We cultivate virtue through rational-emotional education.

For the Confucians, the virtuous person has a more adequate perception of the world. As one develops her character, she comes to perceive the world differently. We must develop our entire manner of comportment – the way we engage in and with the world. In perception, knowing and acting are unified. A more adequate perception of the world enables the virtuous person to act virtuously without a need to appeal to 'strength of will'. The virtuous person becomes in tune with the coherence of the

[9] I rely mainly on classical Confucian texts, but appeal to Neo-Confucianism when I see it as making certain aspects of the classical texts more explicit. Translations of *Analects* passages are from Brooks and Brooks (1998) unless otherwise noted. Passages are cited according the translators' numbering. If this differs from the Legge numbering, then the Legge numbering has been provided in brackets after the translators' numbering. Translations of *Mencius* passages are from Lau (1970). Translations of Wang Yangming's writings are from Ivanhoe (2009). All translations have been edited to conform to the Pinyin system of romanization.

world, finding harmony in and with the world. With a cultivated character, she sees the world as salient in a way amenable to virtuous conduct.

The idea that only the fully virtuous person truly understands what the right response would be in situations is a potential difficulty for virtue ethical systems. If only the virtuous exemplar has the correct understanding, then this conceptualization of ethics may seem irrelevant to the less virtuous. Confucianism overcomes this problem by understanding virtue gradationally and the virtuous exemplar as an ideal towards which we continually strive.[10] We cultivate our character by modeling those around us who express virtue and by engaging appropriately in the rituals. Essential to our development is our expression of confidence in our actions combined with a willingness to engage in critical and continual self-examination.

For this paper, the most important contribution of Confucianism to the discourse of ethics is the emphasis on the interconnected nature of who we are. Confucianism opposes most Western conceptions of the individual, in which the individual is circumscribed at the epidermal level and seen as a "single, indivisible entity that is a member of a larger class or group by virtue of its having some essential property (or properties)."[11] Confucianism, on the other hand, understands the individual as essentially characterized by its entanglement in a larger set of relationships, where the individual is "a locus or focal point within a web of social relations," making "individuals and their groups inseparable."[12] The individual is

[10] As we strive towards the ideal, it progressively changes. A more adequate perception opens new possibilities for improving ourselves, past what we could even understand as part of the ideal before.
[11] Sarkissian (unpublished) 8.
[12] Sarkissian (unpublished) 8-9.

intimately entangled not only with other persons, but with the world in general, such as through situational contexts.

The Confucian concern with the interconnectedness of individuals is most evident in the depiction of the virtuous exemplar. The 'gentleman', as the virtuous exemplar is referred to in Confucian texts, has a superior *de*, or 'virtue', through which they influence the world around them. If we look at the vast and complex influence of the virtuous exemplar, however, we should recognize Confucianism as dealing with ontological issues, even if only implicitly. They too want to rethink agency and identity as something dispersed throughout our web of relationships and entanglements. We do not act as isolated individuals because we do not even exist as such. Only through our immersion in a meaningful world do we come to matter and thus exist. As our relationships and interconnections reconfigure, our identity – our style of being, our comportment, our way of engaging in and with the world – is continually reconstituted. Through continual reconfigurations of patterns of mattering, who we are literally changes. To adequately understand ethics, we should appreciate the indeterminateness of our identity and recognize that cultivating virtue is a continuous process in which we never stop seeking to improve ourselves.

I. Prioritizing virtue

If the question "How should one live?" could be given a direct answer in universal terms, the concept of virtue would have only a secondary place in moral philosophy.[13]

[13] McDowell 347.

The inadequacy of rules and principles

An adequate conception of ethics should have virtue as its primary concern, but we should not analyze virtue through universal rules and principles. We should cultivate who we are as a means to improving how we engage in and with the world. Rules and principles are inadequate. They seriously undermine ethics and leave it largely powerless. Hagop Sarkissian explains that "psychological implausibility of agents using general purpose moral rules, such as Kant's categorical imperative or Mill's principle of utility, as adequate guides to action," was a central motivating factor behind the late twentieth century revival of virtue ethics.[14] Rather than formulating principles from which to act, we need to develop our character through improving our understanding in order to adequately respond to the demands of the world.

Ethics cannot pursue the formulation and application of universal principles and rules as its main form of guidance without being severely limited. Not only do they lack a motivational component, but they also fail to grasp the complexities of the world. Principles and rules are bound to have exceptions because they must be interpreted to apply to the particulars of the situation. Different situations involve different persons with differing interests and abilities. In "Virtue and Reason," John McDowell labels this concern the "theory of uncodifiability."[15] It respects Aristotle's

[14] Sarkissian (unpublished) 3-4.
[15] McDowell 342-343.

belief that "a view of how one should live is not codifiable."[16] Although principles and rules can serve as general guides, informing our understanding of a situation and what a proper response would look like, they do so erratically and never fully account for the complexity of our decisions.

Rules such as "never kill" or "never lie" can be justified quite nicely in certain ethical systems, but in the actual world our duty to an abstract concept of morality may conflict with other responsibilities and ethical obligations. Adherence to a duty not to lie may hurt someone's feelings, such as if someone tells me that my clothing makes me look overweight. Even if I prompted the question, it may seem wrong for my friend to hurt my feelings in the name of truth or duty. In certain cases, this type of criticism seems more acceptable, such as informing a friend that she constantly stinks because of her addiction to cigarettes or that her appearance is really taking a toll from all the late nights of binge drinking. The feeling or intuition that it is more important not to lie in these situations cannot be captured in a system of universal principles such as Kant's. And these situations do not even come close to the complexities involved in whether or not to lie when hiding someone from another person who wants to kill or harm them.

Even consequentialist systems that opt for general principles such as the most good for the most number are drastically limited. Understanding what counts as happiness and determining whose happiness gets considered are difficult enough tasks, and the effort becomes all the more convoluted when using comparative analysis to arrive at determinate outcomes. Happiness and well-being resist such orderly quantification and assessment. Consequentialist systems also ignore crucial

[16] McDowell 342.

aspects of life that inform our ethical understanding, such as our bonds with other persons and things. The bonds with our parents, friends, and loved ones are an important part of who we are. They establish our connection with those who matter to us and play a significant role in our ethics. The death of a stranger and the death of a parent do not have the same significance, and for good reason. In a world of disinterested calculation, much of our ethical understanding and motivation would be lost.

A concern with virtue, instead of universal principles and calculation, is meant to offer a richer and more fulfilling understanding of our ethical life. As opposed to deontological and consequentialist ethical frameworks that formulation universal rules and principles to guide one's actions, virtue ethics appreciates the complexity of life and the inapplicability of such rules to most particular cases. The purpose of a concern with virtue is to give us direction and focus in life. In virtue ethics, principles and rules have a secondary role. Excessively abstract maxims and calculations that are arrived at through detached reflection and disengagement with the world and its particulars are disregarded. The main focus is on becoming the type of person who intuitively does the right things. Rules and principles serve as only one aspect of the framework that guides our cultivation of virtue. Virtue ethics helps develop our character, but it does not declare that it has the answer to difficult questions. No ethical system can entirely plan our actions or establish our way of life, especially when they are detached from the very life they are supposed to guide. Recognizing the impracticality of relying on universal rules and determinate answers, virtue ethics offers advice about the sorts of dispositions one should cultivate.

Virtue ethics is immersed in our everyday engagement in and with the world. The focus on virtue, a rational-emotional ability, allows for it to include the motivational compliance with what we think and feel is right. It also provides a solution to the problem of limited understanding that prevents us from ever being fully certain of the consequences of our actions. Virtue ethics deals with this problem by offering a progressively expansive ethical framework. Part of being virtuous is appreciating that our understanding is limited. Even as we strive to improve our understanding and the virtuousness of our actions, we should recognize our inherent limitations and adopt an appropriate sense of humility. With deontological and consequentialist systems, one either conforms to the principle or one does not, but with virtue ethics, every action is judged gradationally and this judgment is never final. Mistakes are only truly mistakes if we take no steps to correct them.

The claim that ethically praiseworthy choices and actions – indeed, rational choices and actions more generally – need not "be explicable in terms of being guided by a formulable universal principle"[17] may cause unease about the validity of the ethical justification for an act. However, we should not feel that we have somehow lost the objectivity of our ethical systems. This feeling comes about only through the mistaken assumption that there is something more than our continual attentiveness and evaluation, such as a transcendental rationality, that provides a definite endorsement or rejection of our ways of understanding.[18]

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[17] McDowell 337.

[18] Barad explains that, even in science, objectivity is about our accountability for what comes to be (Barad 361). It is not about understanding from an external or detached perspective, but about our accountability to how we are engaged with the whole set of material-discursive boundary-drawing practices of intelligibility.

Ethics is not about applying universal principles, but about perception – "being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way."[19] Virtue ethics recognizes and is built on this understanding of ethics. In contrast to ethical systems founded on deontological or consequentialist reasoning, virtue ethics emphasizes the development of one's character. A virtuous person is one who has cultivated the ability to respond reliably and adequately to the demands of her situations,[20] but not in a way that can be spelled out in universal principles. Virtue does not involve the strict following of rules or reasons. The virtuous person's perception of her situation justifies her actions.

Virtue depends on developing our rational-emotional understanding. By improving our understanding, our perception becomes more adequate. Thus, virtue ethics underwrites a blurring of the line between the rational and emotional. It does not disconnect the emotional motivation from the rational evaluation, but harmoniously fuses those two. A virtuous person acts a certain way – and feels a need to act in this way – because of how she understands and perceives her situation. If we recognize that rules and principles are inadequate, then, in order to prioritize the cultivation of virtue, we should reject an opposition between the rational and the emotional. This opposition prevents us from adequately understanding the process of cultivation because of the unbridgeable gap it creates between the two aspects of virtue.

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[19] McDowell 347.

[20] Christine Swanton defines a virtue as "a disposition to respond to or acknowledge, in an excellent (or good enough) way, items in the field of a virtue (whether those items are people, objects, situations, inner states, or actions)" (Swanton 1).

Rational-emotions of the heart-mind

Emotion and reason are not independent faculties. Together they function to provide a basis for our actions. In this functioning, they are never fully separate. The second feature of an adequate conception of virtue is that it should reject an opposition between the rational and the emotional. Rationality is not a rule-governed normativity that we impose upon ourselves. Rationality is entangled with the emotional as part of the way we are engaged in and with the world. There can be no use of reason without a role for emotional understanding, and there is nothing emotional that does not affect and is not affected by rational understanding. Even in contemplation, we should not take the rational and emotional components of understanding to be entirely distinct or disconnected. They are more like two sides of a coin. The perspective may vary, putting the emphasis more in favor of one or the other, but this does not alter the fundamentally holistic nature of our rational-emotional understanding.

A description of the basis of an act can emphasize either the emotional or rational dimensions, but it does not serve to mark an absolute separation; instead, it emphasizes which characteristics are more salient at the moment. It may also contain an implicit a moral judgment. Often, emotionality is associated with a subjective dimension and rationality with an objective one, but this characterization misses the broad range of uses for the terms. For example, I might complain that someone else is being too emotional if I disapprove of the seemingly incoherent, unfounded, or

reactionary response of that person in a situation. That person, however, might consider her own actions to be rational, seeing their coherence and logic. Alternatively, if I seek the counsel of someone, I might protest against the impersonal rationality of the advice that makes it unable to address my problem. My concern could be that the advice is impractical or that it does not sufficiently capture my personal situation. I might also praise someone for being rational or emotional. In the former case, I could be expressing the esteem I hold for her deliberation and the arguments that she presents. In the latter, my focus could be on the spontaneity and sincerity of the person. In all these cases, however, the rational and emotional should not be understood as separate. All understanding, including an understanding of virtue, is rational and emotional. When these components are opposed, we undermine the holistic nature of how we understand and comport to the world.

In order to get at the entanglement of reason and emotion, first consider how rationality is shaped by our emotional understanding and dispositions. One way of expressing this is to say that the emotional cannot be separated from the rational because it provides the basis through which we perceive certain features of the world as salient, and to which we apply our reasoning capacity.[21] The emotional limits the potentially infinite amount of information that could go into our considerations of how to act. A more adequate characterization its relationship with the rational, however, will go further in depicting the intimacy of their entanglement. Without a role for the emotional, the rational has no motivation and no substance. A scientist without passion will make little scientific progress. Without the emotional dedication to her pursuits, her rational ability is fundamentally limited. Psychopaths are a much

[21] Sarkissian (2010) 6.

more extreme example of how rationality can be fundamentally limited due to an emotional deficiency. Because of their lack of empathy, psychopaths do not appropriately take into account the suffering of others as part of their reasoning. This can result in their ability to act according to their rational deliberation and still cause great harm to others. The reasons that prevent ordinary persons from harming others are in many ways incomprehensible – and may even seem utterly absurd – to psychopaths. Psychopaths' conceptualization of rationality and what counts as rational is substantially different due to their different emotional attitudes.

An exceptionally virtuous person will also have a different conception of rationality than most persons. A virtuous person will count her feelings of compassion as sufficient reason for acting in ways that another person might be unable to understand. For someone like Mother Theresa, the only rational way to live is in the service of others who are less fortunate. On the other hand, giving up personal comfort and living in poverty would seem entirely irrational to an unscrupulous Wall Street banker who is guided purely by feelings of greed. Their conceptions of rationality differ because of the disparity in the configurations of their emotional attitudes. The banker and the saint see the world in their own way. The banker does not feel at a loss because she does not live in poverty. Her desires center on the accumulation of wealth, and that pursuit significantly influences her understanding of the world. The saint, however, does not regret her destitute life. She is guided by her feelings of compassion and empathy more than any desires for wealth or prestige. Both have their own perspective. From their respective perspectives, their actions seem rational, but they are unable to adequately understand

the rationality of the other. Only by taking into account the different composure of their emotional attitudes can the rationality of both come to light.

The dependence between the rational and the emotional is also evident in the opposite direction. Rationality cannot be taken out of emotions without seriously and negatively undermining them. Emotions are not mere whims; they are not spontaneous urges based merely on the pushes and pulls occasioned by an external world, disconnected from reason and lacking direction or sense. We feel anxious in certain situations because they are potentially dangerous. Even when we misjudge the situation or our emotional response is too extreme, there is still rationality that went into making the connection between the potential dangerousness of the situation and our feeling anxious. Our emotional response does not require any explicit reasoning, but elements of the rational remain.

An important aspect of the entanglement of the rational and emotional is that emotions are not rigid dispositions. Through rational-emotional cultivation, we transform our emotional attitudes. Emotions, such as compassion and kindness, develop through repetition of actions that elicit those feelings. Confucius remarks on this point, saying "If he is lavish, he will grow improvident; if he is frugal, he will grow rigid. Than improvident, be rather rigid."[22] The ways we act affect the person we are and will become. This idea also is evident in Plato's *Republic*, where he warns against developing the wrong dispositions through engaging in morally corrupt activities. The person who consistently acts unjustly will develop an unjust character.

Emotion and reason are not disconnected, and much less are they fundamentally opposed. The distinction between the two can be useful in certain

[22] *Analects* 7:36 [7:35], 86.

contexts, but treating them as if they are opposed is severely misleading. For example, an ethical system that opposes them will have difficulty accounting for why the emotions that we consider justified are stronger than those lacking justification. It will not appreciate how the hate of a racist grows as she sees her preconceived notions fulfilled. Despite the distortion of her perceptions, she uses them a rational basis to support her bigotry and hateful emotions. If we acknowledge the intimacy of our rational and emotional constitutions, then we have a better chance at recognizing and overcoming problems caused by their reciprocal influence. The contempt I feel towards a friend, who I consider especially annoying today, will be dampened if I realize that those emotions are the product of a bad grade I recently received on a test. Even the racist may question her feelings of hate once she begins to recognize that faults in her reasoning have distorted her perception of another race.

Ethical traditions that rely on a stark dichotomy, steeped in hostility between the rational and emotional, are limited in their application and practicality. Most Western ethical traditions fall victim to this fallacy. Usually they extol the virtue of reason and condemn the passions and emotions as impediments to a moral life. Either one is either expected to disregard one's emotions, or one's reason is tasked with the job of subduing or overriding the emotions that lead one astray. In virtue ethics, however, the main pursuit of the virtuous person is engaging in a cultivation that is rational and emotional. The virtuous person does not rationally find the one true answer or the objectively proper response, and then blindly follow the dictates of reason. Neither is virtue a purely subjective matter that can only be judged relative to oneself and one's personal experiences and emotions. Virtue is a rational-emotional

ability, and understanding how to act virtuously demands a role for both emotional and rational development.

The Confucian tradition exemplifies this way of understanding virtue ethics because of its lack of distinction between an emotional and rational faculty. The Confucian concept of *xin*, or the heart-mind, fuses the roles of the rational and emotional. *Xin* expresses how the cognitive, emotional, and volitional faculties are all located in the heart. For Confucians, virtue depends on cultivating the rational-emotions of the heart-mind. We do not first develop reasons and then shape our emotions accordingly. Neither do we cast away reason and follow the dictates of our emotions. The concept of the heart-mind recognizes that emotions themselves are rational and that reason has an emotional dimension, and, more importantly, that this recognition is essential to any effective moral education and improvement.

II. Perception and the cultivation of virtue

Although the point of engaging in ethical reflection still lies in the interest of the question "How should one live," that question is necessarily approached *via* the notion of a virtuous person. A conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out.[23]

[23] McDowell 331.

Virtue as a perceptual ability

An appreciation of the heart-mind prevents us from understanding virtue in a narrow way. Virtue is a whole style of comportment to the world. Through the cultivation of virtue we reorient our heart-mind, developing our understanding and determining our perception. Virtue is best understood in terms of this perceptual understanding. I take the third feature of an adequate conception of ethics to be a conceptualization of virtue as a perceptual ability. Our perception is constituted by our engagement in and with the world. It is our understanding – our way of comporting to intelligible configurations of the world such that things show themselves as salient. By cultivating virtue, we transform our perception of saliences and develop a relation to the world that is more adequately expressive of virtue.

Before delving into the Confucian ethical system, an explication of the concept of virtue found in John McDowell's article, "Virtue and Reason," can act as a guide to understanding the heart-mind and its perceptual implications. McDowell identifies virtue as perceptual ability, describing it as a reliable sensitivity to respond in a certain way to situations.[24] The deliverances of this sensitivity are cases of knowing. One understands what the situation requires in terms of a virtuous response, and consequentially acts on that understanding without doubt. This sensitivity involves a perceptual capacity, where the perception of a situation is constitutive of

[24] McDowell 331-332.

one's reason to respond virtuously.[25] A failure to act virtuously results from a clouded perception, or an inadequate appreciation of one's perception, of the situation.[26] The failure is not an issue of incontinence, where one understands the right thing to do but cannot get herself to do it. Neither is it an issue of balancing reasons for and against possible ways of responding to a situation, and then choosing the worse action. If one understands the situation fully and clearly, McDowell claims, then one will respond virtuously, as it is the only option: "genuine deliverances of the sensitivity involved in virtue would necessitate action."[27]

McDowell's conception of virtue is akin to the Confucian heart-mind, in that it overcomes the oppositional distinction between reason and emotion. McDowell anticipates that the non-cognitivist will object to his characterization of virtue as a cognitive notion. The non-cognitivist objection is that a genuinely cognitive capacity requires an additional appetitive component.[28] Cognition and volition are distinct, and the perception of the situation only discloses how the world is independently of oneself. Dispositions of one's will are then needed to explain how that perception manifests an action.

McDowell counters this objection by explaining that reason should not be understood as independent from our involvement with the world. Reason is intelligible and compelling because of our common forms of life through which we

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[25] "On each of the relevant occasions, the requirement imposed by the situation, and detected by the agent's sensitivity to such requirements, must exhaust his reason for acting as he does. It would disqualify an action from counting as a manifestation of kindness if its agent needed some extraneous incentive to compliance with the requirement – say, the rewards of a good reputation. So the deliverances of his sensitivity constitute, one by one, complete explanations of the actions which manifest the virtue" (McDowell 332).
[26] McDowell 334.
[27] McDowell 348, n. 10.
[28] McDowell 335.

all depend on a partially shared "whirl of organism."[29] There is no independently intelligible world that can be considered as "an object of purely theoretical contemplation."[30] The basis of understanding is not an independent faculty of cognition, but our actual engagement in and with the world, where things make a difference and those differences matter to us.

McDowell sees reason and emotion as so intertwined that he opposes the idea the idea that an appetitive component amalgamated into an independent cognitive domain. In doing so, he expresses a concern for the issue that the Confucian heart-mind overcomes. For both McDowell and the Confucians, virtue makes no sense when cognition and volition are seen as overly distinct. This distinction makes possible the problematic idea of an "act of will" which becomes a necessary addition to the perception of the situation. With virtue understood as a sensitivity, the perception of the situation is enough to explain the action. A virtuous person spontaneously responds with virtuous action without balancing reasons and without an additional act of will. As McDowell explains,

> The view of a situation which he arrives at by exercising his sensitivity is one in which some aspect of the situation is seen as constituting a reason for acting in some way; this reason is apprehended, not as outweighing or overriding any reasons for acting in other ways which would otherwise be constituted by other aspects of the situation (the present danger, say), but as silencing them.[31]

A virtuous person does not weigh reasons and then make a judgment in favor of one action or another. Rather, the virtuous person's perception comports them to the situation in a way that makes aspects of the situation salient in a particular manner.

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[29] McDowell 340.
[30] McDowell 336.
[31] McDowell 335.

Certain features are understood as important enough to prompt a particular action, and the person effortlessly acts on that basis.

McDowell's talk of 'silencing' is useful insofar as it captures the point that we cannot understand reason and emotion as independent. Competing reasons do not motivate us to act in a manner contrary to the superior reason because they are no longer seen as reasons at all. We do not have to overcome them by an act of will or by some other strength that is proportional to the weight we assign to the reason. For McDowell, we stop them from figuring into our reasoning at all, and thus prevent them from having any motivational hold on us. Our perception changes our rational-emotional constitution in a way that makes certain aspects of the situation unimportant. This mirrors the ability of the Confucian heart-mind to enable effortless action. Through cultivating our perception of the situation, we follow our spontaneous dispositions to act virtuously. The appetitive motivation is seen as integral from the start and does not need to be added as an independent or separate component. Our perception is a rational-emotional understanding constituted by our holistic engagement with the world. Reason and emotion express themselves together in our perception of the world and in our dispositions to respond to it based on our perception.

By characterizing the issue as one about 'silencing,' McDowell seems to go farther than the Confucians by suggesting that competing reasons are entirely absent from our perception. They are not just unimportant or insignificant in the current context, but they are not even present. The Confucian tradition offers a more adequate way to understand the supposed 'silencing' of competing reasons that does not

entirely banish them from our overall reasoning. For the Confucians, our perception is reconfigured in a way that makes other concerns no longer salient aspects, but these concerns still retain a role in shaping our perception. Other concerns are silenced insofar as they are understood as competing with our reason for acting, but they are not completely silenced as reasons. For example, although the present danger may not compete with our reason to act in a courageous manner, that does not mean that it is absent from our comportment to the situation. We still perceive the danger, and our actions heed our awareness of it. The recognition of danger does not prevent us from acting courageously, but it does shape how we act in the present situation, and we will be more cautious when confronted with particular types of danger than with others. A courageous soldier who runs into an area of enemy fire to save an injured comrade does not let the present danger prevent his rescue attempt. However, unless he is just foolish and not really courageous, he will certainly keep his head down.

Adequate perception is not seeing certain aspects of the situation as salient to the absolute exclusion of others, but rather, it consists in the configuration of the situation as a whole such that it is understood to demand a response that is expressive of virtue. Particular aspects are not silenced. Their relationship to other aspects, and to the situation in general, is reconfigured. They recede into the background, but they still constrain our possibilities for action. Consider the passage in *Mencius* about saving a drowning sister-in-law.[32] According to the Confucian rules of propriety, one should not touch one's sister-in-law. Chunyu Kun asks Mencius what one should do if one's sister-in-law is drowning. Mencius replies:

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[32] *Mencius* 4A17, 84.

> Not to help a sister-in-law who is drowning is to be a brute. It is prescribed by the rites that, in giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other, but in stretching out a helping hand to the drowning sister-in-law one uses one's discretion.

The importance of complying with the rituals recedes into the background when one uses discretion, but that does not mean that ritual propriety is lost. When I am saving my sister-in-law, although I use my discretion in stretching out my arm, I am not unaware of the rules of propriety. There are still inappropriate ways for me to touch her during the rescue, differing to various degrees depending on the particulars of the situation. I will be more cautious in how I save her when she is drowning in a lake than when she is being swept away in a wild river. After I get her out of the lake, although ritual propriety will become more important, the situation will differ depending on whether or not she then requires further care, such as the administration of CPR. Even if I must perform CPR, I will still be aware of where I am touching my sister-in-law.[33] The rules of propriety can recede into the background, but they are not silenced insofar as they have a role in shaping my understanding of the situation and determining my response.

Reason and emotion are entangled in the constitution of our perception. Understanding virtue as a perceptual ability enables ethics to overcome the opposition between the rational and the emotional. Virtue is not about acting according to one or the other, or silencing one so as to follow the other. To act virtuously, we must understand the world in a way that is adequate enough to elicit a virtuous response. As we cultivate our character, we come to literally 'see' the world in new ways. This

[33] The example of CPR offers a vivid example for modern society. Our response to a drowning person will depend on who that person is, such as whether they are female or male, and how we are related to them, such as whether they are an intimate or a student. We remain aware of how we are touching the person and of how that should change as she or he starts to come around. I thank Professor Angle for suggesting this example.

does not mean that we merely see new aspects of our situations as salient as other aspects become silenced. We reconfigure our entire comportment to situations. As we develop our understanding, we come to see contradictory concerns as no longer in opposition. Our whole way of being engaged in and with the world becomes more amenable to virtuous action. We follow the demands of our heart-mind, and our actions naturally express virtue.

Perception as the unity of knowing and acting

McDowell's account of virtue has strong resonances with the Confucian understanding of knowing and acting. For both, cognition and volition are not distinct faculties. Rather, as we cultivate our character, we come to understand and perceive the situation more adequately, and this automatically entails more virtuous responses. In Confucianism, the spontaneity of a virtuous act – the fact that it flows naturally and effortlessly from one's cultivated disposition – is a central aspect of sagehood. As with Aristotle, responding virtuously to situations does not require continence. Virtuous action does not require an independent strength of the will to enforce conclusions. The ability to follow through with what one understands as right is an integral part of one's disposition, or else one has not reached an adequate understanding. If one has to force oneself to comply, then she is not fully virtuous in that instance.

The concept of sagely ease implicitly expresses the Confucian concern with unity of knowing and acting. Confucius elegantly explains sagely ease in *Analects* passage 2:4,

> The Master said, At fifteen I was determined on learning, at thirty I was established, at forty I had no doubts, at fifty I understood the commands of Heaven, at sixty my ears were obedient, and at seventy I may follow what my heart desires without transgressing the limits.[34]

This passage concerns the cultivation of a spontaneous disposition, or sensitivity, to act virtuously. The last line refers to Confucius after he has undertaken lifelong

[34] *Analects* 2:4, 110.

cultivation; it describes how a virtuous person does not have to force herself to comply with the demands of virtue nor does she have to worry about vacillations of her heart-mind. The virtuous person's perception of situations has evolved. Her desires are transformed so that she perceives the proper saliences and effortlessly understands how and why to act. She sees and understands the aspects of a situation that would distract from a virtuous response as no longer significant or important. From her undistorted perception of the situation, she intuitively knows how to act.

The virtuous person thus does not first grasp a situation and then contemplate what action ought to be undertaken in it. This does not deny that there are acts of contemplation, but it does deny that they can be understood separately from the perception of one's situation. Contemplation changes our perception. It is one way that we can come to understand situations more adequately, and thus transform our perception of saliences. For example, when I am angry, if I reflect on the source of that anger, then I can make steps in reducing those hostile emotions. Consider a scenario in which I am yelling at my child because I am annoyed at the volume of her playing. Reflection on that situation may reveal that I am actually upset by my day at work. Maybe upon further reflection, I realize that it was not just the day at work, but really the persistent negative attitude of my boss that has got me so frustrated. Then, maybe I realize that the issue at the bottom of all these negative emotions is that I am unhappy with my job because I feel I should have achieved more by this period in my life. After all this contemplation, I doubt that I will see my child's playing as irritating as before. I might even realize that my anger is not that important in the grand scheme

of things.[35] My frustration has been misdirected towards my child as part of my ignorance of other, more salient issues. But one does not even have to go this far. My acceptance of the thought that I am being too harsh on my child because I am in a lousy mood may be enough to curb my attitude. Acts of contemplation help us see things as significant in the same way as the virtuous person. Through a more adequate perception of the situation, we are able to act in a more virtuous manner.

In the Neo-Confucian tradition, Wang Yangming explicitly discusses the importance of the unity of knowing and acting in ethical development. In the following passage, Wang responds to a student who is unable to grasp the unity of knowing and acting. The exchange starts with the student:

> I said, "For example, there are people who despite fully knowing that they should be filial to their parents and respectful to their elder brothers, find that they cannot be filial or respectful. From this it is clear that knowing and acting are two separate things."
>
> The Master said, "They already have been separated by selfish desires; this is not the original state of knowing and acting. There never have been people who know but do not act. Those who 'know' but do not act simply do not yet know. Sages and worthies taught people about knowing and acting so that people would return to the original state of knowing and acting and not just do what they could and quit."[36]

The original state of knowing incorporates the reasons for acting and a prompting to respond in a particular manner as a natural aspect of the knowing. There is no separate desire or strength needed. The child who is not filial has not grasped the situation in its entirety and does not see that her knowing requires certain acting. Her knowing is actually inadequate, and hence she does not yet really know at all. She

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[35] For the Confucians, anger should never be a salient emotion. See *Analects* 4:4, 14: "The Master said, If once he sets his mind on *ren*, he will have no hatred." Also, see *Analects* 6:2 [6:1b], 31: "There was Yan Hui who loved learning: he did not transfer his anger; he did not repeat a fault."

[36] Wang, "A Record for Practice," in Ivanhoe 140-141.

may think she knows, but knowing is not merely thinking. Knowing does not permit any doubt that would enable one to avoid acting on that knowing.

Wang would clearly take issue with the non-cognitivist objection described by McDowell. The required appetitive aspect cannot be separated from the cognitive domain and then fused back in later. Cognition itself has been intrinsically expanded to include the emotional dimension. In the constitution of one's disposition, the emotional and rational sides are inseparable. We cannot separate what we understand and what we feel, as Wang makes clear when he continues:

> Thus, the *Great Learning* gives us examples of true knowing and acting, saying it is 'like loving a beautiful color or hating a bad odor.' Seeing a beautiful color is a case of knowing, while loving a beautiful color is a case of acting. As soon as one sees that beautiful color, one naturally loves it.[37]

If one sees a beautiful color but does not love it, then one does not actually see it as beautiful to begin with, although one may think that others would consider it beautiful. If one really sees the color as beautiful, though, then one must feel the love. As with McDowell, knowing is not based on a narrow conception of cognition, but is itself enough to account for the acting. Moral education develops the rational-emotional understanding in which our knowing and acting are unified. We improve the way we are engaged in and with the world, and hence, our perception becomes more adequate. The goal of perceptual cultivation is to "transform oneself – to become Confucius at seventy – so that one always acts correctly."[38]

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[37] Wang, "A Record for Practice," in Ivanhoe 141.
[38] Angle 119.

Perceptual cultivation

The original state of knowing and acting that Wang refers to is not easy to achieve. Few people, if any, are entirely filial and never waiver in their duty to their parents. The abilities of Confucius at age seventy seem even less attainable. Whose heart never leads her astray or tempts her at times? A person of such character can only be called a sage. Sages embody virtue and have seemingly superhuman abilities. Their almost mystical power can be seen in Confucius' remark that "The wise have no doubts, the *ren* have no anxieties, the brave have no fears."[39] Achieving the original state of knowing and acting enables the sage never to vacillate. Sages, and only sages, fully understand virtue. With their adequate perception, they are able to follow her hearts desires without worry or concern.

Passage 17:19 of the *Analects* presents an example of the superiority of the sage's perception and how it enables more virtuous understanding.[40] The conversation begins between Confucius and a man named Zai Wo. Zai Wo questions the three-year length of the mourning period. He is worried that ceremonies and music will suffer and perhaps vanish if people do not engage in them for three whole years. Confucius tests him by inquiring into how he would feel shortening the mourning period, and asks him, "If you were to eat your rice, and wear your brocades, would you feel comfortable with yourself?" When the man assents, Confucius rebukes him by saying:

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[39] *Analects* 9:29 [9:28], 56.
[40] *Analects* 17:19 [17:21], 165.

> If you would feel comfortable, then do it. But as to the gentleman's way of being in mourning: if he ate dainties he would not find them sweet; if he heard music he would not find it enjoyable; if he abode in his usual place he would not be comfortable; therefore he does not do them. But if now you would be comfortable, then do them.

After Zai Wo leaves, Confucius criticizes him for lacking *ren*.

The exchange shows the importance of having the proper rational-emotional attitude so that one perceives the situation rightly. The sage does not mourn for three years because he is blindly following the ritual; rather, his rational-emotions let him know that three years is right. The sage simply feels what the virtuous thing to do is. As Confucius goes on to explain, this feeling is not just a whim, but based on rational principles. Confucius ends the previous passage with an explanation of his criticism of Zai Wo:

> Only when Zai Wo had been alive for three years did he finally leave the bosom of his father and his mother. Now, a three-year mourning is the universal mourning custom of the world. Did Zai Wo receive three years of love from his father and mother?

The mourning period is rational because it reciprocates the period that parents sacrifice to care for their children. The virtuous person does not have to ponder the situation and rationally determine the correct amount of time to mourn. He intuitively feels that three years is what is needed. A less virtuous person, however, is unable to grasp this aspect of the situation because she has not developed an adequate rational-emotional understanding. Confucius' criticism of Zai Wo attests to the importance of this development. We can only hope to achieve sagehood through the gradual cultivation of our perception.

The criticism of Zai Wo is not meant to imply that he lacks all virtue. Confucianism does not demand that everyone be a sage; it recognizes that everyone

lacks virtue in some ways. Indeed, the Master doubts that he has met anyone even close to being a sage.[41] Sagehood, at least in its most ideal form, is an impossible realization. However, the Confucian conception of virtue, like McDowell's, is not undermined by the fact that most persons will not be able to fully understand the virtuous actions of sages. Virtue is a gradational notion, and we all are virtuous to some extent. Although the only way of knowing the most virtuous response for every situation is to be a sage, where one's perception of the situation enables one to always act virtuously, we should not see this conception of virtue as irrelevant for non-sages. The point is to gradually but continuously improve our own virtue by striving towards the ideal of the sage.

Confucianism does not guarantee sagehood, but offers a method of improvement. Through modeling those who are more virtuous and performing the rituals with propriety, we cultivate our perceptual understanding in the manner of the sages. We gradually become more virtuous through developing a more adequate perception. Modeling the virtuous and performing the rituals allows us to comport ourselves in ways amenable to the cultivation of virtue. Through comporting ourselves according to these guides, we develop our ability to adequately perceive the world. We cultivate the rational-emotional constitution of the sages' perception.

Modeling those with virtue is an essential aspect of our perceptual cultivation. With no one to model ourselves after, it is unlikely that we will ever develop very far before falling astray.[42] Confucius advises us to recognize the qualities of others, and

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[41] *Analects* 7:26a [7:25a], 43: "The Master said, A *sagely* man, I have not managed to find; if I could find a *gentleman*, it would be enough."

[42] *Analects* 5:3 [5:2], 22. "A gentleman indeed is this man! If Lu indeed had no gentleman, where did he get *that* from?" As the editors note, "The implication is that the way to become a gentleman is to imitate one."

use them to evaluate and improve ourselves: "The Master said, When he sees a worthy man, let him think how he might come up to him; when he sees an unworthy man, let him examine within himself."[43] We should use those with virtue to direct our development and those who lack virtue to notice our faults. We should recognize the positive and negative aspects of others and then apply what we learn to our own lives and character.

Confucian rituals also serve as models. They act as constant guides, providing a basic direction to our cultivation. They are there for when we have no other suitable models, and they also serve as a supplemental method of cultivation. By affecting us and allowing us to see the world as salient in particular ways, they cultivate our ability to comport ourselves properly to our situations. Out of the vast amount of ways we could understand our situations, the rituals highlight the aspects that those who came before us thought we should recognize. Even Confucius needs guidance from the rituals; he explains, "I am not one who knows things from birth. I am one who loves antiquity and seeks after it with diligence."[44] He does not claim to understand the lessons of antiquity. His concern is with the constant pursuit to emulate them, and thereby gradually make them his own. To promote this, the Confucians develop the ritual forms, the enacting of which leads its followers – indirectly, in a way I will shortly show – to act properly in a given situation, and over time to shape their characters by developing the right dispositions.

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[43] *Analects* 4:17, 16.
[44] *Analects* 7:20 [7:19], 42.

The rituals are passed down through the ages for us to follow.[45] We strive to understand them at least implicitly, if we cannot do so explicitly. They offer a reliable path for our ethical development, and even Confucius follows them. The primary purpose of the rituals is to help us cultivate our rational-emotional dispositions in the absence of universal principles. The rituals rarely take the form of prescriptions that outline how to act in particular situations.[46] Most of the rituals outlined in the *Analects* deal with topics that are seemingly devoid of moral content.[47] Their purpose is to act as the foundation on which we can "take a stand" in our moral development.[48] The rituals also emphasize the unity between knowing and acting. We cultivate our rational-emotional knowing through performing the rituals. By engaging in the rituals, we develop the adequacy of our engagement in and with the world.

Essential to the effectiveness of the rituals is the proper rational-emotional investment. One cannot just go through the motions and expect to benefit from this. Although many persons will not be able to fully understand the rituals – and Confucianism recommends for them to just follow[49] – this does not mean that the rituals can be taken as empty gestures. Without an investment of the proper rational-emotional significance in performing the rituals, they lose their educative function

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[45] *Analects* 3:14, 82: "The Master said, Zhou could look back upon the Two Dynasties. How splendid was its culture! And we follow Zhou." The Zhou people followed the rituals passed down from the Two Dynasties, and Confucius followed the rituals passed down by the Zhou. Important to note is that this is a continuous and cumulative process.

[46] When rituals do take this form, we must remember that *Mencius* passage 4A17 advises the use of discretion in certain circumstances, such as morally difficult ones. For similar advice, also see *Mencius* 5A3 and 7A35. Although we should try our best to adhere to the rituals, in drastic situations, we are often forced to find creative solutions. The rituals are better suited to guiding our action in ordinary, everyday situations.

[47] The possibility of the distinction between 'moral' and 'non-moral' is discussed later.

[48] *Analects* 8:8, 126: "The Master said, He is inspired by the Shi, given foundation by Ritual, and completed by Music." Also, see *Analects* 16:13, 157: "If you don't study the rituals, you will have nothing on which to take your stand."Also, see *Analects* 1:2, 145: "One whose deportment is filial and fraternal but loves to oppose his superiors, is rare. One who does not love to oppose his superiors but does love to foment disorder, has never existed. The gentleman works on the basis; when the basis is set, then the Way comes to exist. Filialilty and fraternity are the basis of *ren*, are they not?"

[49] *Analects* 8:9, 126: "The Master said, The [petty] people can be made to follow it; they cannot be made to understand it."

and become a mark of insincerity.[50] Even for rituals that are impossible for anyone to understand, such as the *di* rite[51] or certain aspects of the art of music,[52] we can still express the proper rational-emotions when performing them. The rituals depend upon this expression. They allow us to manifest our substance in practice.[53] The mourning ritual, for example, can serve as an outlet for the full expression of one's filial feelings when one has had no other opportunity.[54] Through investing ourselves in the rituals, we come to better understand ourselves and our feelings. Expressing those rational-emotions in our actions and performances, guided by the medium the rituals provide, allows them to develop into true virtue.

Insofar as the rituals are educative, they are meant to change our perception of the various situations in which we find ourselves. They spur us to develop our rational-emotional endowment that is evident in the spontaneous compassion we naturally feel for the child on the verge of falling into a well.[55] The passage about the child and the well is meant to show that we all have the potential to be virtuous. We are all endowed with the "heart of compassion" – the "germ of benevolence" – and

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[50] *Analects* 3:26, 85: "The Master said, Occupying high position without magnanimity, performing rituals without assiduousness, attending funerals without grief – how can I look on at such things?" Also, see *Analects* 17:9 [17:11], 163: "The Master said, '*Ritual, ritual*' – does it mean no more than jade and silk? '*Music, music*' – does it mean no more than bells and drums?"

[51] *Analects* 3:11, 82: "Someone asked for an explanation of the *di* sacrifice. The Master said, I do not know. The relation of one who *did* know to All Under Heaven would be like holding something here. And he pointed to his palm."

[52] *Analects* 3:23, 85: "The Master, in discussing music with Lu Grand Preceptor, said, The art of music, or the part of it that may be understood, is that when it first begins, it is tentative, but as it continues along, it settles down, it brightens up, it opens out; and so it comes to an end."

[53] *Analects* 15:18 [15:17], 169: "If a gentleman has right as his substance, and puts it in practice with propriety, promulgates it with lineality, and brings it to a conclusion with fidelity, he is a gentleman indeed!"

[54] *Analects* 19:17, 187: "Zengzi said, I have heard from our Respected Master, A man who has not had occasion to exert himself to the full will surely do so in mourning his parents."

[55] *Mencius* 2A6, 38: "Mencius said, 'No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others…My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human.'"

the rituals prompt us to cultivate those rational-emotional dispositions into full-fledged, matured virtues. As Christine Swanton explains, our (rational-)emotional attitude "renders certain features salient, and others invisible or unimportant."[56] Therefore, through the development of our emotions, we transform our perception of saliences. Our engagement in the rituals will help us pursue the feelings expressed in situations such as when we feel compassion for the child near the well. If we have cultivated our character through ritual propriety, we will not only spontaneously feel compassion for the child as a result of our natural interconnectedness, but we will move to act on the basis of that feeling.

Rational-emotional education is important to our ethical development because it is the only way to ensure we develop along the virtuous path. We cannot develop virtue in a more direct way because there is no way to understand virtue outside of intuitively feeling and knowing the right thing to do. As we saw with McDowell, no neutral, external standpoint exists from which to judge the virtuousness of our actions.[57] The concerns and valuations that prompt virtuous responses are not intelligible "independently of appreciating a virtuous person's distinctive way of seeing situations."[58] Only with the perception of the virtuous person do we see the rationale and consistency in her actions. That is why virtue should not be founded on universal principles. There is no basis for the value of those principles because intelligibility is not separate from an appreciation of a particular perception of

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[56] Swanton 112.
[57] The Neo-Confucians also reject valuation independent of our perception of a particular set of saliences. See Angle 235, n. 10.
[58] McDowell 346.

saliences.[59] Independent from our actual engagement in and with the world, virtue is meaningless.

We should not analyze virtue simply in terms of universal principles. If our moral development is not grounded in the proper rational-emotions, then our perception of situations will be distorted and the perceived moral demands will not have normative force for us. Swanton captures this point by saying, "Mere knowledge of moral demands does not motivate in a frictionless way unless desire to respond to them is built into the fabric of one's emotional disposition."[60] Rules are not enough to ensure virtuous action, and they become even less effective when we seek to develop our virtue. Our rational-emotional understanding should be the focus of our development from the start or else our efforts will largely be in vain.

A scene from *Mencius* metaphorically expresses the need for the natural development of one's emotions. According to Mencius in the passage, one must not understand rightness as external, but must cultivate it and express it from within.[61] Mencius continues by comparing virtue to seedlings. He describes a man who "pulled at his seedlings because he was worried about their failure to grow." Of course, when his son goes to look at them later in the day, they have shriveled up and died because they were pulled out of the ground. Mencius explains:

> There are few in the world who can resist the urge to help their seedlings grow. There are some who leave the seedlings unattended, thinking that nothing they can do will be of any use. They are the people who do not even bother to weed. There are others who help the seedlings grow. They are the people who pull at them. Not only do they fail to help them but they do the seedlings positive harm.

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[59] McDowell 345.
[60] Swanton 66.
[61] *Mencius* 2A2, 33. Also, see *Mencius* 6A4-5. Mencius explains that rightness is an expression of internal states.

The passage cautions us against forcibly attempting to make our virtue grow. This does not mean that we should abandon all effort, but rather, we should cultivate our virtue through the natural course of our rational-emotional education. The metaphoric seedlings are related to our four natural endowments: the heart of compassion, of shame, of courtesy and modesty, and of right and wrong.[62] These endowments are the beginnings of virtue. Through proper cultivation, they grow into the virtues of benevolence, dutifulness, ritual propriety, and wisdom.

Our natural endowments can only mature into their respective virtues if we naturally tend to them through rational-emotional education. We should gradually develop our virtues from their beginnings, slowly accumulating our ability to perceive like the sage. Once again, Swanton expresses this aspect of Confucianism from the perspective of modern virtue ethics. Swanton advocates against being "virtuous beyond our strength."[63] Only if we have first developed the proper (rational-) emotional strength can we then increase the virtuousness of our responses.[64] We should not set goals that go beyond our ability to fulfill them. These pursuits may backfire, and our aim towards virtue may actually result in viciousness. We may forget to care for ourselves or those who are close to us, and we may even cause harm.[65] We may make situations worse by interfering in ways that were better left alone or for someone else to handle. Swanton outlines a way to avoid these errors:

> Tailoring virtue to one's strength, provided that is compatible with making room for (gradually) improving one's strength, is basically a requirement that one's virtue be

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[62] *Mencius* 2A6, 38. Also, see *Mencius* 6A6, 125. There is controversy over how closely related the 'beginnings' or 'tips' [*duan*] of our virtue are to the metaphoric seedlings of 2A2.
[63] Swanton 198.
[64] We should not confuse our (rational-)emotional strength with a strength of the will.
[65] For example, consider the case of Zell Kravinsky, who strives to be moral to the detriment of himself and those around him. Angle explains that he "seems to see those close to him as burdens, keeping him from doing as much good as possible" (Angle 90-91).

> constrained by one's effectiveness, the desideratum of expressing self-love, and the availability of other agents who will do a job for which one is not very adequate.[66]

In a Confucian context, Swanton's suggestion is a component of self-examination, which will be discussed shortly. We should be aware of what we know and do not know – of what we can do and cannot do – to avoid falling astray by acting beyond our strength.

Swanton's advice also is also relevant to how we model the sage. As we saw, the sage is a lofty ideal and we should not expect to live up to such an extraordinary example. Although we strive towards the goal of Confucius at age seventy, we should not expect to be able to fully imitate that ideal and blindly follow our heart-mind's desires. Our actions, overall, should be far less spontaneous than the moral exemplar's. The sage is a model to guide us in our own development, but we should recognize that this development is a process without an end. We should realistically evaluate ourselves through self-examination and determine how and in what ways we can best emulate the sage without going too far.

If we are successful in cultivating our character, then our perception of saliences will gradually but drastically change. The sage whom we imitate has an exceptional perception. She sees the world in such a way that desires and emotions that could distract from a virtuous life are rendered insignificant. Consider the example of Yan Hui, a favorite of Confucius[67] because of his exemplary character:[68]

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[66] Swanton 205.

[67] *Analects* 11:10 [9:14], 71: "When Yan Yuan [Hui] died, the Master wailed for him movedly. His followers said, The Master is moved. He said, Am I moved? If for such a man I am not moved, then for whom?" Also, see *Analects* 11:9 [11:8], 71: "When Yan Yuan died, the Master said, Ah! Heaven is destroying me! Heaven is destroying me!" Confucius mourns for Hui as he should for a son. For this point, also see *Analects* 11:11 [11:10], 71.

[68] For examples of Hui's superior character, see *Analects* 6:3 [6:2], 31: "There was Yan Hui who loved learning: he did not transfer his anger; he did not repeat a fault. Unfortunately his allotted span was short, and he has died. Now there are none, nor have I *heard* of any, who love learning." Also, see *Analects* 6:7 [6:5], 33: "The Master

> The Master said, Worthy indeed was Hui! One dish of food, one dipper of drink, living in a narrow alley – others could not have borne their sorrow, but Hui did not waver in his happiness. Worthy indeed was Hui![69]

Hui does not see his hardships as important. He displays no conflict of desires or vacillation of the mind. Hui is concerned with his constant improvement because of his love of learning. His concerns for virtue and its cultivation[70] take precedent over – though they do not silence – desires, such as hunger and thirst, that normally impinge on an ordinary person's happiness. His superior character makes the quality of his housing and quantity of his food and drink no longer salient interests for him. His perception is markedly different from those of less virtuous persons, allowing him to keep his heart from departing from *ren*.

Confucius displays similar qualities to Yan Hui in another passage that underscores the deep link between virtue and the perception of saliences:

> The Prince of Shv asked Dz-lu about Confucius. Dz-lu did not reply. The Master said, Why did you not say, "This is the kind of man he is: in his enthusiasm he forgets to eat; in his happiness he forgets his sorrows; he is not even aware that old age will soon be at hand.[71]

This passage reinforces the idea that one's character – the kind of person one is – changes how one sees and understands the world. Adding to the quote regarding Hui, Confucius is shown as completely lacking all competing desires and interests in his moments of enthusiasm and happiness. They not only fail to encroach on his happiness but are absent from his current concerns. In his enthusiasm and happiness,

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said, Hui: he could go three months without in his heart departing from *ren*. The others: they can manage it for a day or a month, but that is all."

[69] *Analects* 6:11 [6:9], 33.

[70] The importance of focusing one's concerns on the virtue and its cultivation is expressed in *Analects* 7:30 [7:29], 44: "The Master said, Is *ren* really far away? If I want *ren*, then *ren* is already there."

[71] *Analects* 7:19 [7:18], 41.

his perspective changes, and he no longer has to worry about distractions. They have no hold on him, and he can effortlessly follow the virtuous path.

No appeal to continence or 'strength of will', which are founded on the metaphysics of individualism, is necessary insofar as one is virtuous. Unlike rule-based ethical systems, in virtue ethics, normative motivation is an integral part of perceptual cultivation. Virtue ethics appreciates the inadequacy of ethics when it is broken down into a rational ability to discover universal principles and an emotional ability to follow the dictates of that reasoning. Rather, the concern is with becoming the type of person who sees and understands situations in a specific way that makes virtuous action the only possibility. Only by cultivating virtuous dispositions can we act rightly. If we have to force ourselves to act virtuously, then we will fail at truly expressing virtue. In such cases, our first priority should be to understand why we are not motivated to act virtuously without this force.

Confidence and improvement

> Yan Yuan sighed deeply and said, I look up at it and find it lofty, I bore into it and find it hard; I behold it in front of me, and then suddenly it is behind. Our Master in his solicitude is good at guiding people. He broadens me with culture; he limits me with propriety. I want to desist, but I cannot, and when I have utterly exhausted my capacity, it still seems that there is something there, towering up majestically, and though I want to go toward it, there is no path to follow.[72]

Given that virtue is understood as a perceptual sensitivity, the transformation into Confucius at seventy will involve a reconfiguration in our perception of saliences. This reconfiguration is a continuous process that we achieve through constantly cultivating how we engage with the world and comport to things. The world is in constant flux, and we cannot stop improving if we wish to maintain virtue. Despite the fact that we can never have a flawless character or a perfect grasp of our situations, we should still act with a certain confidence. An important part of being virtuous lies in this confidence. However, the status of our virtuousness is never secure, and we should maintain a healthy humility to prevent confidence from becoming arrogance.

For the Confucians, like McDowell, an important part of a virtuous life depends on having an adequate or unclouded perception of the situation, and from that unclouded perception, the virtuous person can act with confidence, knowing that she understands things adequately. Confucius remarks on this early in the *Analects*:

> The Master said, The gentleman's relation to the world is thus: he has no predilections or prohibitions. When he regards something as right, he sides with it.[73]

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[72] *Analects* 9:11 [9.10], 53.
[73] *Analects* 4:10, 15.

This passage expresses the confidence the virtuous exemplar has in her conclusions based on her capacity to see things as they are and not how she wishes they are or could be. The virtuous exemplar does not need to vacillate or worry about her decisions because she can be sure of the competence of her perception.[74] As we become more virtuous, we transform our relation with the world; we see and relate to things in an open and direct way that is more congenial to the effortless production of virtuous action. In doing so, we become confident that we take part in the world virtuously.

Confidence is important because it signals an awareness of our situations in which our perception provides us with necessary and sufficient reason to act in a certain manner. The virtuous Confucian does not perceive the situation and then decide how to act by balancing reasons. Her perception of her situation is enough to put her into action, and her confidence allows her to put all her energy into her actions. Without confidence, our actions lose much of their effectiveness. Confucius warns against a lack of confidence:

> Ran Qiu said, It is not that I do not take delight in the Master's Way, but that my strength is not sufficient. The Master said, One whose strength is not sufficient gives out along the way, but you are drawing the line.[75]

We should not judge our own limitations without having tested them. A lack of confidence can prevent us from trying and thus from ever discovering our capabilities. This nicely supplements Swanton's point about not being virtuous beyond our strength. We should not assume to already be at the level of the sage without that attitude backfiring. We should evaluate our strengths and weaknesses,

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[74] Though, as I will discuss shortly, we should not be fully confident that we are virtuous, and this prevents our confidence in our actions from becoming arrogance.
[75] *Analects* 6:12 [6:10], 34.

and we should also continually strive to improve ourselves and do what is right. Self-examination provides us with guidance on how we need to improve, and it enables us to foresee how we may err, but it does not impose absolute limitations on our ability to act virtuously. This lack of absolute limitations, in turn, should not be taken to mean that we can model the sage exactly; we may not have the requisite strength to do so. Rather, the focus is on continuous improvement.

Those areas of our character that are lacking are important to recognize and improve, but they should not be used as an excuse to not try when situations call for difficult responses; indeed, our ability to evaluate our strengths may be one of our weaknesses. I would be in a different situation than Ran Qiu if, for example, I had tried to offer advice to a ruler, only to then have that advice backfire because I was as yet inept in the art of ruling. Although Confucius was able to virtuously advise rulers, that does not mean I have that same ability. Having tried and failed, I may need to tell the next ruler that I must improve myself through studying statecraft before I can provide counsel. After educating myself, I can go and offer my advice with confidence, although I should be open to the possibility of having to once again correct myself.

We should not confuse confidence with arrogance. One shows confidence by putting all of her energy into her actions. One believes in what she is doing because she strives to do what is right. Her focus is virtue, and in this she can express confidence, but that does not mean that she is immune to error. Awareness of the ever-present possibility of falling astray is essential to a virtuous Confucian. For example, consider passage 15:30: “To make a mistake and not change: this is what

one calls making a mistake."[76] Arrogance is shown when one assumes she is fully virtuous and is unwilling to question her own actions or rebuke herself. Confucianism is aware of its emphasis on trusting in the ability of our character to deliver virtuous actions, and it explains that we should not take this as a validation of all actions done in the pursuit of goodness or with the belief that they were right. We should be open to our fallibility so that we are able to correct our mistakes and right where we go wrong.

Confucius himself is certainly not one to be arrogant. Modesty and humility are prevalent throughout his teachings.[77] Although others call him a sage,[78] we never see the Master refer to himself as one. He even explicitly denies being a sage.[79] He comments on his own inadequacies, saying:

> The ways of the gentleman are three, and I am not capable of them. The *ren* man is never anxious, the wise man is never in doubt, the brave man is never afraid. Zigong said, This is our Respected Master's own Way![80]

Confucius' concern is not the superiority of his character, which others are quick to point out, but with his own improvement. He is acutely aware of the extent of his shortcomings, asserting that he would need at least another fifty years to be without major faults, not to mention minor flaws.[81]

Confucianism stresses the gradational and progressive nature of virtue. Virtue is not something one has or does not have. Confucius may have far to go on the path

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[76] *Analects* 15:30 [15:29], 142.
[77] For an example of modesty, see *Analects* 1:3, 146: "Artful words and an impressive appearance: seldom are they ren."
[78] *Analects* 9:6 [9:6a], 52.
[79] *Mencius* 2A2, 34: "Zigong once asked Confucius, 'Are you, Master, a sage?' Confucius replied, 'I have not succeeded in becoming a sage. I simply never tire of learning nor weary of teaching." Also, see *Analects* 7:34 [7:33], 44: "The Master said, If it is a matter of a Sage or of *ren*, how dare I presume? But if one looks to acting for others without tiring of it, or teaching others without growing weary in so doing, perhaps something might be said."
[80] *Analects* 14:28 [14:30], 140.
[81] *Analects* 7:17 [7:16], 41: "The Master said, Give me several more years; with fifty to study, I too might come to be without major faults."

to virtue, but this does not mean that Confucius lacks, or even considers himself to lack, virtue. Even Yan Hui, who Confucius considers better than himself,[82] can only remain on the virtuous path for a short time.[83] Confucianism is acutely aware of the imperfection of the world. It does not require – and in fact, it admonishes that we should be wary of – setting unrealistically high goals for our virtue. As passage 14.12b explains:

> He said, As for a perfect man in the present day, why must he be thus? To see profit but think of right; to see danger but accept orders; despite constant pressure, not to forget his lifelong words – that too could be a perfect man.[84]

The 'perfect' man is perfect in relation to the situation that is presently at hand. We cannot judge perfection or virtuousness from a neutral, external standpoint. One's virtue can only be understood within the immediate context. Virtue is both gradational and highly dependent on our situations, meaning that our pursuit should focus on improvement rather than reaching a particular completed state.

As a result of our natural endowment,[85] we all possess virtue to some extent and have the potential for that virtue to grow. The Confucian aim is to cultivate what virtue we have, and to work on minimizing and eliminating the bad aspects of our character. Often, we do this best by imitating, which is why even Confucius admits to having much to learn from others: "When I am walking in a group of three people, there will surely be a teacher for me among them. I pick out the good parts and follow them; the bad parts, and change them."[86] A person as great as Confucius can always

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[82] *Analects* 5:9 [5:8], 23: "The Master said to Zigong, Of you and Hui who is abler? He answered, How dare Si even look at Hui! If Hui hears one thing, he can find out ten; if Si hears one thing, he can find out two. The Master said, Not as good as him: you and me *both* are not as good as him."
[83] *Analects* 6:7 [6:5], 33: "The Master said, Hui: he could go three months without in his heart departing from *ren*. The others: they can manage it for a day or a month, but that is all."
[84] *Analects* 14:12b [14:13b], 121.
[85] See *Mencius* 2A6.
[86] *Analects* 7:22 [7:21], 42.

learn more. In fact, as we have seen, part of Confucius' greatness is his recognition of this and his continual pursuit of learning.

Indeed, no one can match Confucius in his desire to learn and improve. This is evident when Confucius offers himself as an example of the effort one must put into becoming virtuous:

> The Master said, In any town of ten households, there will surely be someone as loyal and faithful as Qiu [Confucius], but he will not be equal to Qiu in love of learning.[87]

The love of learning is essential to virtue because improvement is necessary. We should not be satisfied with our given abilities, but should constantly look to others and try to improve from the examples they set.[88] One's love of learning induces a certain kind of humility, in that one is willing to learn from others and admit her own limitations. It also plays a positive role by providing understanding through that learning. Although we can never be so arrogant as to assume that we cannot improve our understanding of how we pursue the virtuous path, a love of learning provides us with the confidence that our pursuits at least attempt to strive after the correct understanding.

Confidence in our pursuits and actions does not mean we can be satisfied with who we are. Even the most virtuous worry about not being virtuous enough. That is why continuous, gradual improvement is necessary. A core aspect of Confucianism is concerned with this:

> The Master said, The world of the Model Maxims: can one not assent to them? But the point is to *change*. The words of the Select Advices: can one not delight in them? But the point is to *progress*. Those who delight but do not progress, who assent but do not change – I don't know what is to be done with them![89]

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[87] *Analects* 5:28 [5:27], 27.
[88] For example, recall *Analects* 7:20 [7:19], 42: "The Master said, I am not one who knows things form birth. I am one who loves antiquity and seeks after it with diligence."
[89] *Analects* 9:24 [9:23], 55.

Confucianism is not meant as a list of principles to be memorized. One should not merely know the words of advice, but should put them into practice and change oneself.[90] Until they start to understand their own ignorance, nothing can be done with those who think they know when they do not. As the Master says, "One does not simply inquire of the oracle and then stop."[91] Those persons will look at the advice of the sages as mere knowledge, and will never develop the appetitive component that is required for true knowing.

Therefore, although Confucius may express confidence in his actions, we should remember that a lack of doubt comes long before the age when one can follow her heart's desires without transgressing the limits.[92] That is why Confucianism recommends a vigilant attentiveness to one's character. The sage's self-examination expresses the insecurity over the status of his character and virtue, and also helps to keep us modest. In the *Analects*, Zengzi explains his daily ritual of self-examination:

> I daily examine myself in three ways. In planning on behalf of others, have I been disloyal? In associating with friends, have I been unfaithful? What has been transmitted to me, have I not rehearsed?[93]

The Confucian can never be sure she has acted virtuously, even if she undertakes those actions with confidence. A constant awareness that one could always go astray is necessary to balance the confidence one must have in order to effectively make her daily choices and engage in her actions.

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[90] For example, consider *Analects* 13:5, 100: "The Master said, If he can recite the 300 Poems, but in applying them to government he gets nowhere, or being sent to the four quarters he cannot make an apposite response, then, many though they be, what are the good for?"
[91] *Analects* 13:22b, 116.
[92] See *Analects* 2:4, 110. Confucius has no doubts (at age forty), before he even understands the commands of heaven (at age fifty) and before his ears are obedient (at age sixty).
[93] *Analects* 1:4, 146.

Along with arrogance, overconfidence also has no place in Confucian ethics. Understanding the limits of one's knowing is essential to a virtuous character. The following passage exemplifies this aspect of virtue: "Shall I teach you about knowing? To regard knowing it as knowing it; to regard *not* knowing it as *not* knowing it – *this* is knowing."[94] Rigorous self-examination helps us clear our perception and uncover the limits of our knowing. As the earlier passage from Wang Yangming on the unity of knowing and acting makes clear, to regard not knowing as knowing can lead to serious ethical lapses and problems with our actions. Considering deficient knowing as adequate can cause us to overlook important aspects of our situations. We might cause harm to another person in a way that could be prevented if we had better understood our situation.

To regard not knowing as knowing can also result in a sense of contentment, where we no longer feel the need to improve because we are satisfied with our perception and understanding of the situation. Self-examination is necessary to check ourselves and keep our confidence appropriate. It is part of the foundation of the Confucian ethical system that allows for our virtue to gradually progress. We should never assume to have a full or unquestionable grasp of any situation and especially not of any virtue in general. Even self-examination is not always sufficient for discovering our faults. Often our presuppositions, preconceptions, and deeply-held prejudices prevent us from noticing certain defects. However, self-examination at least makes a step towards correction and better understanding. One who does not even try to evaluate her faults will certainly have severe ethical shortcomings.

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[94] *Analects* 2:17, 112.

The importance of self-examination, and especially its relation to humility, is expressed in a wonderful passage from *Mencius*. Mencius explains that when one feels she has not been treated properly, one should look to oneself for faults before judging another person:

> Suppose a man treats one in an outrageous manner. Faced with this, a gentleman will say to himself, "I must be lacking in benevolence and courtesy; how else could such a thing happen to me?" When, looking into himself, he finds that he has been benevolent and courteous, and yet this outrageous treatment continues, then the gentleman will say to himself, "I must have failed to do my best for him." When, on looking into himself, he finds that he has done his best and yet this outrageous treatment continues, then the gentleman will say, "This man does not know what he is doing."[95]

Only after twice examining oneself for faults can one then pass judgment on another. The virtuous person is never so sure of herself that she can put herself above others. Not only should one look into oneself before judging others, but only after having been treated poorly for the third time is one entitled to conclude that the problem lies in the other person.

This does not undermine the confidence in one's actions. The end of the passage explains that the true lack of confidence lies in the belief that one is a sage. The only worry of a virtuous exemplar should be the worry that he can still improve himself and become more like the sage:

> Hence while a gentleman has perennial worries, he has no unexpected vexations. His worries are of this kind. Shun was a man; I am also a man. Shun set an example for the Empire worthy of being handed down to posterity, yet here am I, just an ordinary man. That is something worth worrying about. If one worries about it, what should one do? One should become like Shun. That is all.

The virtuous exemplar is not one to waver or have "unexpected vexations." However, we are all just ordinary people, and we should never presume to be at the level of the greatest. If Confucius can always improve, then certainly we can, too. This

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[95] Mencius 4B28, 94.

improvement is a life-long task, as shown by the virtuous exemplar's "perennial worries."[96] Although we should strive to do what is right and be confident in our decisions when we make them, we should also always be attentive to the possibility of mistakes that results from the fact that we are always in a state of improvement. The virtuous exemplar has no "unexpected vexations," such as anxieties, doubts, or fears,[97] but she still worries about her continual improvement. For Confucianism, the priority is not on how one acts in particular circumstances, but on who one is. The virtuous exemplar concerns herself with developing who she is, and through that development, the understanding of how to act comes as a matter of course.

Yan Yuan's passage at the beginning of this section conveys the persistence that virtue requires. Virtue is not something we can hope to ever wholly grasp or completely achieve. Even with direction and guidance, we can never fully understand the path to follow. The sage and other virtuous exemplars are lofty ideals that are hard to keep in one's view or deeply penetrate with understanding. The rituals may guide our emotional education, and the advice of Confucius may help us understand and broaden ourselves, but there is no alternative to a personal dedication to following the virtuous way. No guidance could possibly replace the necessity of this determination. No matter how hard we strive, our perception will never be fully adequate, and we will always have farther to progress.

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[96] Angle 27.
[97] *Analects* 9:29 [9:28], 56: "The Master said, The wise have no doubts, the *ren* have no anxieties, the brave have no fears."

Continuous striving

We can never fully achieve Confucius's state at age seventy or Wang's original state of knowing and acting. Rather, they are ideals they we constantly strive to progress towards. We do so by methods of improvement such as modeling the sage and engaging in the performance of rituals. Despite the irrelevance of many specific Confucian rituals to the modern times, we can still recognize the importance of the underlying message that we should engage in activities that train our way of comporting to the world and shape our perception. Essential to these methods of improvement are the components of confidence and critical self-examination. These aspects of moral education compliment our improvement, such as by enhancing their effectiveness. When properly understood, they also keep us aware of our limitations and help us remain on a path of improvement towards virtue.

As we come ever closer to the more virtuous understanding of the world set by our ideals, we open up new possibilities for understanding in what improvement consists. Not only is who we are always under improvement, but even the ideals we set before us continually progress. Our ideals are not static or determinate goals, but only guides to our improvement. Universal rules and principles are inadequate at capturing the essentiality of these aspects of continuous improvement because they take ethics out of the world. They not only deny a unified understanding of the world, but they also prevent an understanding of the holistic nature of our improvement.

An opposition between our rational and emotional understanding increases our inability to grasp the holistic nature of our improvement. Understanding virtue as a perceptual ability provides a way to unify reason and emotion as equally part of our moral education and ethical cultivation. The cultivation of virtue is a never-ending process that changes our whole way of comporting to and engaging in and with the world. By prioritizing virtue, our ethics can accommodate the inherent indeterminacy of understanding and inadequacy of perception. Virtue ethics, in contrast to other ethical systems, is thus much better suited to appreciate the complexities of life and the need for continuous improvement.

III. The pervasiveness and interconnectedness of virtue

> There are no singular causes. And there are no individual agents of change. Responsibility is not ours alone. And yet our responsibility is greater than it would be if it were ours alone. Responsibility entails an ongoing responsiveness to the entanglements of self and other, here and there, now and then.[98]

[98] Barad 394.

Pervasiveness of virtue

Ethics is a pervasive aspect of life that interconnects with all forms of understanding. The pervasiveness of ethics expresses the inherent indeterminacy of the intelligibility of existence. No identity is absolutely determinate or fully intelligible. The previous three features of an adequate conception of ethics are a product of these limitations. Ethical systems that rely on universal rules and principles or posit an opposition between reason and emotion fail to appreciate our limitations because they rely on an untenable notion of certainty. They assume that we can figure out the way to live and follow that path relatively blindly. A concern with virtue, on the other hand, provides a better way to guide our lives, despite our limitations, because it puts the focus on improving ourselves rather than on having 'the answer' or figuring out the definitively right way to act. We are continuously developing the adequacy of our perception in order to improve the virtuousness expressed by our actions.

Ethics is everywhere and intertwines us with all else. Who we are is never an issue of fully determinate or static conceptions of selfhood. We are not isolated individuals, but are immersed in interactions – with the world, with other persons, with situations, with all matter and all that matters. Independent from our engagement in our web of interactions, we have no identity, and virtue becomes meaningless. We should recognize, and take responsibility for, the ways that we participate in the constitution of identity and meaning. We should understand how we are inextricable

and necessarily related to other persons and how we directly affect their virtue and ability to be virtuous, and vice versa. Everything is interconnected – there are no absolute separations – and only through this recognition can we appreciate the pervasive and interconnected nature ourselves and our virtue.

The final feature I suggest as necessary for an adequate conception of ethics is this recognition of the pervasiveness and interconnectedness of virtue. Virtue – not to mention vice – is pervasive because every aspect of our lives takes part in shaping who we are and how we will perceive what is important, and virtue is present whenever acts of self-definition and self-conception occur. Every action involves our holistic conception of how to live. This conception is not "simply an unorganized collection of propensities to act, on this or that occasion, in pursuit of this or that concern."[99] It is the background that shapes our perception of saliences and allows us to see certain features of a situation as important or not. Everything we do, every interaction in which we have a role, affects how we perceive the world.

Consider the domains of science and economics. Viewing the world through a scientific or economic mindset will change our understanding and perception. An overly scientific attitude could limit our ethical understanding through an emphasis on the objectivity of scientific practices at the expense of a concern with our personal relationships with others. On the other hand, a similar emphasis could also benefit our ethical understanding through showing how our personal relationships become manifest through scientific practices. Likewise, viewing the world on economic terms can increase our understanding of our duty to others. For example, it can prompt us to recognize and take seriously the future economic costs involved in pollution, such as

[99] McDowell 343.

the damage to our health and environment. But an economic attitude can also limit our ethical understanding by encouraging us to cover over those future costs by focusing our interest on immediate economic concerns.

Every way we engage the world changes how we understand and perceive. The slightest alterations in our perception affect our ethical outlook. This prevents us from detaching any aspect of our lives from our ethics. We should see ethics as intimately intertwined with every aspect of our lives lest we allow unexamined presuppositions to creep into our ethical understanding. My point is not that we should try to escape from presuppositions or from the effects of our interconnectedness. Rather, they are essential to understanding and existence, and we should therefore take them seriously. This can only be done by recognizing that there are not two separate domains, one moral and the other non-moral or devoid of moral content. Morality is everywhere and everything is ethical; only by gradually expanding our understanding to recognize this can we hope to secure virtue in ourselves and in others.

The morality of 'non-moral' virtues

A central obstacle to understanding the pervasiveness of virtue is the arbitrary distinction "between a narrow set of 'moral' virtues (the cardinal virtues) and other so-called 'non-moral' virtues such as tact and charm."[100] All virtue involves morality because every action is ethically significant. Swanton describes this pervasiveness by saying that "virtue (and vice) seep into every nook and cranny of life."[101] If we do not recognize the pervasive nature of virtue, then our ethical understanding will have significant inadequacies.

In considering the pervasiveness of virtue, Swanton considers such virtues as magnificence, tact, wit, charm, and cheerfulness. Through these examples, Swanton shows how all aspects of personality are involved with one's ethical constitution. Swanton explains that we should take seriously the way these traits are morally relevant. If we deny that they can be virtues, or deny that their character is moral, then, when they have negative consequences, we can deny that traits express vices; this denial suggests that "the agent is in no sense to be blamed for failures to ameliorate or attempt to ameliorate these tendencies, or is in no sense to take responsibility for inappropriate behavior associated with them."[102] Without recognizing their ethical roles, we will fail to appreciate their (morally) positive or negative effects, and we will be unable to take the proper responsibility with respect to them. To illustrate the important role of 'mere' personality traits, I will go through

[100] Swanton 69.
[101] Swanton 69.
[102] Swanton 75.

the examples Swanton provides, expanding on what she puts forth and offering more depth to certain discussions.

Swanton's examples show that seemingly morally insignificant virtues can have major effects on our ethical life. Tact, for example, "is an important virtue relating to daily interactions."[103] Lack of tact "can hurt, harm relationships, destroy diplomacy, be expressive of hostility," and excessive tact can "harm relationships through a failure to confront problems, to disclose concerns, to communicate." For Swanton, the quality of relationships is essential to moral life. Not only can tact be a vice, however, but the possession of tact can benefit our relationships and our communications in them.[104] A virtuous person with tact can foster dialogue when tensions are strained. She can produce more fruitful relationships by encouraging interlocutors to be more frank, thereby breaking through to their emotions and ideas. Additionally, a concern with being tactful may focus our understanding on the ways our attitude affects others and cause us to be more attentive to the needs and concerns of others.

Charm is not a 'mere' personality trait, either. Charm "can be aimed at the good and fine, or misaimed at the evil or sleazy."[105] For example, charm can express our goodwill and love for others. It can make others feel good about themselves and about the challenges they face. A charming personality may motivate others to follow that person's example. A virtuous person will influence others to be more virtuous, while a person with a deplorable character will spread her viciousness and perhaps

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[103] Swanton 72.
[104] Hodges and Byrne (1972) compared the effect between expressing oneself in open-minded and dogmatic terms. More intolerance was expressed towards dissimilar strangers who expressed their attitudes in dogmatic terms.
[105] Swanton 74.

cause others to value the base things she does. An unscrupulous person may use her charm to get an unfair attention and praise at work, or to take advantage of unsuspecting others. A complete lack of charm may marginalize any affect we have on others. It may even be mistaken as a coldness or harshness, putting others off and preventing collaboration.

Cheerfulness, especially in relation to optimism and pessimism, is also clearly moral. Cheerfulness can produce the same effects as charm, such as extending and amplifying our influence. Optimism and pessimism have related effects. Optimism can work positively, through inspiring hope in oneself and others. It can also be negative, causing a blindness of one's constraints and limitations. Likewise, pessimism can function in a positive way by letting one realistically face her limitations, or it can be negative by causing one to overvalue her constraints and thereby spread apathy. Optimism and pessimism can vastly change our perception of the world, altering what we see in the world as important and what things we see as salient.

Swanton's lesson is not that these traits, or any traits, are virtues or vices in themselves. We should never assume that a certain characteristic is necessarily good or bad. Even the best ethical generalizations will have exceptions. Any virtue can be corrupted by an evil purpose or exploited by a vicious person. The ethical concern is not with classifying traits and their values, but with taking their role in our life seriously and being aware of their ethical implications. We should openly confront the way they function, understanding not only whether they express virtue or vice, but also how they fit into our personality at large.

Personality functions holistically. If someone is always lazy or depressed, then that person's ability to impact the world virtuously is severely limited. Virtue works holistically through the cumulative impact of all aspects of one's personality. Personality traits can expand or constrain the possibilities for our virtuous impact in the world, and those that undermine it must be taken seriously as expressing vices. We can only secure a more virtuous existence by confronting our problems, admitting when we make mistakes, and correcting where we go wrong.

In the Confucian tradition of virtue ethics, the holistic nature of one's personality is represented by *de*. *De* is one's excellence, and all virtue is ultimately part of one's *de*. *De* expresses the Confucian acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of virtue. Every interaction – whether with other persons, our situations, or the world in general – involves it. *De* is not isolated and enclosed; my *de* is entangled with all others, constantly influencing and being influenced by them. This social aspect is essential to the Confucian understanding.

De, and especially its social significance, cannot be fully or adequately understood when presupposing a distinction between 'moral' and 'non-moral' virtue. In the *Analects*, the detailed concern with seemingly superficial matters of conduct highlights the Confucian belief that all virtue – indeed, all interaction – is infused with ethicality. Consider the following passages:

> The gentleman does not use violet or puce as accents, nor are red or purple worn as casual dress. During the hot season his unlined garment is of hemp or linen, but always as an outer lawyer. With a black garment he wears a fleece mantle, with a plant garment a fawn mantle, and with a yellow garment a fox mantle.[106]

> If his mat is not straight, he will not sit on it.[107]

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[106] *Analects* 10:5a [10:6a], 61.
[107] *Analects* 10:6e-7a [10:8e-9a], 62.

For the modern reader, especially from a Western perspective, these concerns may at first seem largely superfluous and unimportant to virtue. In Confucianism, however, they have deep connections with our ethical life, affecting who we are and how we interact with others and the world around us. Let me explain why.

The first passage is concerned with modesty in dress. Reds and purples are unsuitable for casual dress, and an open-weave robe requires an under-robe.[108] This modesty is important not only for how others see us, but also for how we see ourselves – for instance, keeping our personality in check. Even today, we have quotes like "Dress for success" and "Dress for the job you have, not the job you want." We understand that our appearance and how we dress affects how people see us, and the respect and attention they give us. Also behind these quotes is the idea that our attire shapes the type of person we are and how we act. Not only will we change because people treat us in a certain manner, but we will act differently based on our appearance. As the Latin proverb has it: vestis virum facit ('clothes make the man'). Our attitude will be different if we always go to work in causal, laid-back clothes as opposed to more formal attire. Appropriate dress is a means to cultivate the proper boundaries in our conduct and develop our sensitivity to our contexts.

The second passage also emphasizes this sensitivity to our situation. We must be attentive to our situations to be sure that we do not overstep the bounds. Even the straightness of one's sitting mat is important. This attentiveness is necessary for both our own self-conception and for our interaction with situations and other persons. A modern example would be pushing in one's chair after using it. Although a minor

[108] Brooks and Brooks 61. [in editors' comment on passage]

detail, if no one observed this rule of propriety, then often we would find it difficult to maneuver in, for instance, a crowded restaurant. The restaurant's disorganization would affect not only those moving around, but the whole atmosphere. Through propriety, we come to be more sensitive to our surroundings, making us less likely to miss (subtle) possibilities for virtuous action and more likely to increase those possibilities.

In Confucianism, modesty and propriety are essential to the cultivation of virtue. For example, speech should express modesty, with the appropriate conduct depending on whether the context is a county association, a temple, or a court.[109] Whether one is speaking to a dignitary or ruler must also be taken into account.[110] All conduct is ethically significant, requiring attention to context, likely effects, and meaning, as the following passages make evident:

> Confucius said, "The gentleman focuses on nine things: when looking, he focuses on seeing clearly, when listening, he focuses on being discerning; in his countenance, he focuses on being amiable; in his demeanor, he focuses on being reverent; in his speech, he focuses on being dutiful; in his actions, he focuses on being respectful; when in doubt, he focuses on asking questions; when angry, he focuses on potential negative fallout; and when presented with the opportunity for profit, he focuses upon what is right.[111]

> There are three things in our *dao* that a gentleman values most: by altering his demeanor he avoids violence and arrogance, by rectifying his countenance he welcomes trustworthiness, through his words and tone of voice he avoids vulgarity and impropriety.[112]

The seemingly 'minor' virtues conveyed by our conduct, such as tact or charm, can have significant ethical implications. Even our tone of voice plays a role in the character of our virtue. Conduct is an important way through which we express and

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[109] *Analects* 10:1a [10:1], 59: "In the county association he is hesitant, as though unable to speak; in the ancestral temple or at the court, he is forthcoming, but circumspect."
[110] *Analects* 10:2 [10:1b], 59: "When at court, speaking with the lesser dignitaries, he is unassuming; when speaking with the greater dignitaries, he is formal. When the ruler is present, he is deferential; he is open."
[111] *Analects* 16:10, trans. Sarkissian (unpublished) 9-10.
[112] *Analects* 8:4, trans. Sarkissian (unpublished) 10.

cultivate our virtue. Changing how we act towards others plays a critical role in our ethical development. For this reason, things like appropriate dress and countenance are essential to the proper function of the rituals.[113]

In Confucianism, both style and substance are significant to a flourishing, virtuous life.[114] There is no distinction between 'moral' and 'non-moral' concerns. Both style and substance are important to our ethical understanding, and an overemphasis on either side creates flaws that limit our virtue and prevent us from becoming virtuous exemplars. This suggests, too, that our attitudes and conduct are partly a function of our relation with others and indeed the world, and thus an account of virtue must include a discussion of this as well.

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[113] For the importance of our dress in rituals, see *Analects* 10:5c [10:6c-7a], 61: "He does not visit the bereaved in fleece robe or dark cap. On auspicious days, he always attends court in his court dress. When fasting, he always has clean clothes, and of linen." For the importance of our countenance, see *Analects* 10:18 [10:16d], 64: "On seeing one fasting or in mourning, even if it is an intimate, he changes expression. On seeing an officiant or blind man, even if it is an acquaintance, he assumes the proper attitude. Those in ill-omened garb he bows to; he bows to one carrying planks. When there are piles of delicacies, he changes expression and rises. On hearing thunder, or if the wind gusts, he changes countenance."

[114] *Analects* 6:18 [6:16], 35: "The Master said, When substance predominates over style, it is crude; when style predominates over substance, it is pedantic. When style and substance are in balance, then you have the gentleman." Also compare *Analects* 7:38 [7:37], 86: "The Master was warm but strict, imposing but not aggressive, respectful but calm."

Interconnectedness of virtue

> Yan Yuan asked about *ren*. The Master said, To overcome the self and turn to propriety is *ren*. If one day he can overcome himself and turn to *ren*, the world will turn to *ren* with him. To be *ren* comes from the self; does it then come from others? Yan Yuan said, I beg to ask for the details. The Master said, If it is improper, do not look at it. If it is improper, do not listen to it. If it is improper, do not speak of it. If it is improper, do not do it. Yan Yuan said, Though Hui is not quick, he begs to devote himself to this saying.[115]

The pervasiveness of virtue ultimately derives from the interconnected nature of life. Our virtue is inseparable from our immersion in relationships with other persons and the world. We are entangled with the personalities and virtues of the persons with whom we have relationships, such as those whom we care about or those who are in our presence. Other persons, our situations, and the world in general influence us. Through that influence, our entanglements have a role in constituting our own personalities and virtues.

Those who raise us, for example, have a significant role in shaping who we turn out to be. Our daily interaction with our family causes and constitutes much of our character. Those interactions are not only an indirect presence or influence. Part of our character consists in those entanglements. We also should not understand our virtue separate from the situations in which we are immersed. Confucianism is notable for its concern with this aspect of ethical life, and, as I will discuss, many of its insights have been vindicated by modern situationist psychology.

This interconnectedness, however, does not dispose of the idea of character traits or virtues. Rather, it forces us to expand and deepen the way we understand

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[115] *Analects* 12:1, 89.

ethical responsibility. Ethics is not just about interaction with the 'other', but about how we constitute and are constituted by the 'other', and what that constitution includes and excludes. Ethics fundamentally revolves around recognition of the ways we matter and the differences we make. We should be aware of the ways that identity is formed and shaped, and this requires recognition of how our entanglements with the world and others affect our character and virtue. Through that awareness, we come to appreciate our ethical obligations in and to the world.

The earlier discussion of the Confucian concern with our conduct and demeanor hinted at the Confucian recognition of the ways we influence, and the ways we are influenced by, others. It takes this reciprocal interaction as central to ethical concerns. As Sarkissian puts it, "The idea that our behavior is highly interconnected with others is pervasive in classical Confucian thought in general, and the *Analects* of Confucius in particular."[116] The Confucian tradition insists that *de* cannot be separated from its entanglement and interrelatedness with others.[117] For example, passage 4:25 asserts that "Virtue is not solitary; it must have neighbors."[118] The passage is not about mere physical isolation. It expresses the interconnection our virtue has with those around us. The thought is that no matter how virtuous one is, the full expression of that virtue is limited if it is surrounded by vice.[119]

Our entanglements with others can have a positive or negative role in our expression of virtue. Our friends, for example, can be important to sustaining and

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[116] Sarkissian (unpublished) 9.
[117] Indeed, in Neo-Confucianism, *de* is expanded to cosmological dimensions. See Angle 57.
[118] *Analects* 4:25, 115.
[119] For example, see Richardson et al. (1979). They investigated how female retaliative behavior is affected by those around them. They found that subjects were more aggressive with no other observers than when there was an audience. When in the presence of another person, responses were more aggressive when the observer was supportive than when silent.

cultivating our virtue, and they can also be powerful sources of mischief. Consider passage 12:24: "The gentleman with his culture gathers friends, and with his friends supports *ren*."[120] Even today, we recognize the powerful role our friends play in our lives. As children, we were all warned to choose our friends wisely and to avoid the "wrong crowd." These warnings convey how our friends can have a negative role in shaping our character, but implicit in them is also the positive function of friendships. In Confucianism, cultivation through moral education depends on associating with the virtuous.[121] Through our associations, we can see how to correct our faults and develop our virtue. Because of the significant impact our relationships have on our virtue, we should be careful in choosing with whom we associate and attentive to the ways we associate with them – and we should also remember that these relationships are not just with other humans.

Confucianism emphasizes not only how others affect our virtue but also our influence on others. We can be a positive or negative force in our associations: "The Master said, The gentleman completes the good in others, and does not complete their evil. The little man does the opposite of this."[122] If we are not aware of our influence on others, even the minutest forms, we could negatively affect the virtue of those around us. Even if we "do the right thing," our uncooperative or begrudging attitude may dishearten others, causing them to fall sway to vice. Their lack of virtue, in turn, could reciprocate and impair our own virtue. We could be severely hurting others' development, as well as our own.

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[120] *Analects* 12:24, 96.
[121] See *Analects* 1:14, 148: "The Master said, If a gentleman in his eating does not seek to be filled and in his dwelling does not seek comfort, if he is assiduous in deed and cautious in word, if he associates with those who possess the Way and so is corrected by them, he can be said to love learning."
[122] *Analects* 12:16, 93.

The Confucians emphasize that those with strong and influential personalities should be more aware of how they impact the world. For example, those in positions of power and authority should be more cautious with not only their actions, but also their dispositions:

> If the superiors love ritual, then among the people none will dare but be assiduous. If the superiors love right, then among the people none will dare but be submissive. If the superiors love fidelity, then among the people none will dare but respect the facts.[123]

The virtuous dispositions of the superior person will induce virtue in those around them and those who look up to them.[124] People, like celebrities and athletes, who are highly visible and admired by many, have a responsibility to act appropriately to their situation. As our impact expands, we should recognize the amplified ways we influence others, and we should accordingly act more virtuously. We should take responsibility for this influence that we have on each other because it is a critical aspect of overall harmony, and of the rational-emotional education of both us and them. New parents, for example, would be wise to limit their late-night partying, especially as their child grows. We all act as examples to others, and as we set an example for more people, we should be more aware of the ways we act and the type of person we are.

Their concern with the cultivation of virtue causes the Confucians to put more emphasis on the strong personality of the virtuous exemplar over that of the morally deficient. The virtuously superior exert their influence far beyond their immediate

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[123] *Analects* 13:4, 99.
[124] Also compare *Analects* 12:18, 94: "Ji kangzi was worried about robbers, and asked Confucius. Confucius replied, If somehow *you* had no desires, then even if you offered them rewards, they would not steal."

context or associations. Consider Confucius' plan to leave his homeland for a more barbarous place:

> The Master wanted to dwell among the Nine Yi. Someone said, They are crude; how will you manage? The Master said, If a gentleman dwelt among them, what crudity would there be?[125]

The virtuous exemplar can affect a whole other culture merely by her presence. We see similar examples of this in modern times with people like Mahatma Gandhi. Just through his presence, he inspired hope in those who admired him and bent the hearts of those who were against him. His influence even extended outside this immediate context, such as to Martin Luther King, who in turn influenced countless others. The astonishing effects and seemingly 'magical'[126] power of the *de* of the virtuous exemplar is beautifully expressed in passage 12:19:

> If you desire the good, the people will be good. The virtue [*de*] of the gentleman is the wind; the virtue of the little people is the grass. The wind on the grass will surely bend it.[127]

Those who are in positions of authority or power and also have a strong, virtuous character will have an even greater influence on those around them. As we will see, the Confucian concern with the virtuous exemplar's impact is vindicated by psychological research.

We should also recognize that our responsibility to others is progressively expansive. As we become more virtuous and our influence becomes greater, our obligations extend farther and farther. Consider the following passage:

> Dz-lu asked about the gentleman. The Master said, He cultivates himself so as to produce assiduousness. He said, If he achieves this, is that all? He said, He cultivates himself so as to ease the lot of others. He said, If he achieves this, is that all? He said, He cultivates himself so as to ease the lot of the Hundred Families. If he cultivates

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[125] *Analects* 9:14 [9:13], 105.
[126] In Sarkissian (2010) 10, the power of *de* is referred to as "social magic."
[127] *Analects* 12:19, 94.

> himself so as to ease the lot of the Hundred Families, could even Yau or Shun criticize him?[128]

In this passage, Confucius asserts that ethical responsibility is unlimited. Only when we have cultivated ourselves to be able to help all others can we be without flaw. Of course, this is an impossible feat. Our obligations extend to people in general – and, as I will discuss, beyond just other people to include all of nature. Our ethical tasks are thus never complete. To compensate for this, we should be continually aware of the balance of our style and substance and the ways that we influence those around us through them. Cultivating our own virtue in isolation is not enough, or even truly possible. Rather, we must cultivate our character simultaneously with our understanding of our entanglement with others and the world in general.

The Confucians put the recognition of our relation to other persons as a central, if not the central, aspect of virtue. Without understanding others, we will lack an essential component of developing our character. The following exchange expresses the importance of understanding our entangled nature:

> Dz-gung asked, is there one saying that one can put in practice in all circumstances? The Master said, That would be empathy [*shu*], would it not? What he himself does not want, let him not do it to others.[129]

Here we see a version of the Golden Rule along with the claim that forming connections with others and understanding from their perspectives can guide us in all our situations. For the Confucians, the interconnectedness of human life necessitates the importance of empathy. Only applying empathy in every situation will ensure that we appreciate our entanglements and responsibilities with other persons. That is why Zengzi says of Confucius, "Our Respected Master's Way is simply loyalty and

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[128] *Analects* 14:42 [14:45], 124.
[129] *Analects* 15:24 [15:23], 137.

empathy."[130] Although empathy does not exhaust the requirements for virtue, it is an essential part of interaction, and is thus critical to our moral development.

The importance of understanding others and our connections to them is central to our rational-emotional education. Indeed, Confucius has a persistent concern with being involved with others, and it is characterized as one of the few worries we should have.[131] Concerns that deal only with one's own self are not admitted in the virtuous person's character. As the following passage expresses, the focus should be outward:

> Fan Chi asked about *ren*. The Master said, Loving others. He asked about knowledge. The Master said, Knowing others. Fan Chi did not understand. The Master said, If you raise the straight and put them over the crooked, you make the crooked straight.[132]

Virtue and knowing are poised around our entanglement with others. Through appreciating and developing those connections, we are able to develop our own virtue. Without empathy and understanding for other people, our virtue is limited, and its cultivation is prevented.

A concern for our interconnectedness with other persons, however, is not enough. We should recognize the ways that we are connected with all that exists – other animals, other life, and indeed, all other matter. For example, in one scene in *Mencius*, a king is moved through his recognition of an ox's fear as it is led to be sacrificed.[133] He spares the ox, replacing it with a lamb. Mencius explains to him:

> It is the way of the benevolent man. You saw the ox but not the lamb. The attitude of a gentleman towards animals is this: once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to

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[130] *Analects* 4:15, 149.
[131] For example, see *Analects* 1:16, 171: "The Master said, He does not worry that others do not know him; he worries that he does not know others."
[132] *Analects* 12:22, 95.
[133] *Mencius* 1A7, 9-11.

> see them die, and once having heard their cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. That is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen.[134]

This abundance of empathy for all things is essential to becoming a virtuous person. Although Mencius rebukes the king for caring about the ox more than his own people, this does not undermine the necessity of extending our empathy beyond humankind. Instead, it makes clear that we should realize all the ways that we are entangled in and with the world. We should prioritize that with which we have the strongest connections and deepest relationships, but we should also recognize connections far beyond that. A concern for one's family does not permit one to ignore all other people, and a concern for humanity does not permit one to ignore our responsibilities and connections with animals.

The extent of our empathetic concern goes beyond animals as well. The following passage by Wang Yangming expresses the need to understand our connection with all that exists. He also makes explicit that our connection with others is ontological in character. Just as our parents are a literal part of being, so are all forms of life, matter, and mattering. We are, after all, conglomerations of matter, composed in the same way as all else. We can recognize ourselves in other animals fairly easily, but we should also do the same with other life, such as plants, bacteria, and cells, and even that to which we usually deny vitality, such as trees, proteins, atoms, planets, and grains of sand.

In an elegantly rich and insightful response to a student, Wang expands on the Mencian passages that deal with our empathy for the child on the edge of the well and the ox on its way to slaughter, emphasizing the ontological message:

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[134] *Mencius* 1A7, 10.

> Great people regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures as their own bodies. They look upon the world as one family and China as one person within it. Those who, because of the space between their own bodies and other physical forms, regard themselves as separate [from Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] are petty persons. The ability great people have to form one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures is not something they intentionally strive to do; the benevolence of their heart-minds is originally like this. How could it be that only the heart-minds of great people are one with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures? Even the heart-minds of petty people are like this. It is only the way in which such people look at things that makes them petty. This is why, when they see a child [about to] fall into a well, they cannot avoid having a sense of alarm and concern for the child. This is because their benevolence forms one body with the child. Someone might object that this response is because the child belongs to the same species. But when they hear the anguished cries or see the frightened appearance of birds or beasts, they cannot avoid a sense of being unable to bear it. This is because their benevolence forms one body with birds and beasts. Someone might object that this response is because birds and beasts are sentient creatures. But when they see grass or trees uprooted and torn apart, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of sympathy and distress. This is because their benevolence forms one body with grass and trees. Someone might object that this response is because grass and trees have life and vitality. But when they see tiles and stones broken and destroyed, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of concern and regret. This is because their benevolence forms one body with tiles and stones.[135]

We are ontologically entangled, and not merely epistemologically or causally. The virtuous recognize that they form one body with others and that this thereby entangles them with the virtue and harmony of the world. They appreciate that they are not isolated, discrete, individual entities.

Despite only the virtuous recognizing their ontological entanglement, Wang emphasizes that all persons are this way; petty or less virtuous persons simply do not see this aspect about themselves. He continues:

> This shows that the benevolence that forms one body [with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] is something that even the heart-minds of petty people possess. Such a heart-mind is rooted in the nature endowed by Heaven and is naturally luminous, shining, and not beclouded. This is why it is called 'bright virtue.' The heart-minds of petty people have become cut off and constricted, and yet the benevolence that forms one body [with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] is able to become unbeclouded as what Heaven originally endowed. This occurs in those times when they have not yet been moved by desires or obscured by selfishness...As soon as there is obscuration by selfish desires, then even the heart-minds of great people will become cut off and constricted, just like those of petty

[135] Wang, "Questions on the Great Learning," in Ivanhoe 160-161.

> people. This is why the learning of the great person indeed lies only in getting rid of obscuration of selfish desires, thereby making bright one's bright virtue and restoring the original condition of forming one body [with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures]. It is not anything that can be added to this original state.[136]

Virtue is stunted by selfish desires. Those whose heart-mind is clouded by selfish desires do not realize the extent of who they are, and thus cannot adequately express virtue.

Wang also comments on the continually expansive nature of empathy in his response to a student's question right after the previous passage:

> Making bright [one's] bright virtue is the state of forming one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures. Loving the people universally extends the operation of forming one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad things. And so, making bright [one's] bright virtue must find expression in loving the people, and loving the people simply is the way one makes bright one's bright virtue. This is why it is only when I love my father, the fathers of other people, and the fathers of everyone in the world that my benevolence truly forms one body with my father, the fathers of other people, and the fathers of everyone in the world. It is only when I truly form one body with them that the bright virtue of filial piety begins to be made bright. It is only when I love my elder brother, the elder brothers of other people, and the elder brothers of everyone in the world that my benevolence truly forms one body my elder brother, the elder brothers of other people, and the elder brothers of everyone in the world. It is only when I truly form one body with them that the bright virtue of brotherly love begins to be made bright. It is the same in regard to rulers and ministers, husbands and wives, and friends; it is the same in regard to mountains and rivers, ghosts and spirits, birds and beasts, and grass and trees. It is only when I truly love them all and universally extend my benevolence that forms one body with them that my bright virtue will be made bright in every respect, and I can really form one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad things. This is what it means to 'make bright one's bright virtue throughtout the world.' This is what it means to 'regulate the family, order the state, and bring peace to the world.' This is what it means to 'fulfill one's nature.'[137]

Our love not only expands to all persons, but indeed, all matter. Wang makes explicit that empathy is not a bridge between two closed off subjects. Empathy is a recognition of one's entanglement with another. Through empathy, we express our recognition of the intimate way that the 'other' is constitutive of who we are.

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[136] Wang, "Questions on the Great Learning," in Ivanhoe 161-162.
[137] Wang, "Questions on the Great Learning," in Ivanhoe 162-163.

Wang's earlier comment that the virtuous person's ability to form one body is not an intentional striving is important. We do not have to strive to become one body with all. Rather, we are already entangled – although the degree varies according to others' relationship with and similarity to us – and our concern should be with a recognition and appreciation of that fact. If we spend all day callously and mindlessly breaking rocks or tearing down trees, we are going to damage our character. This effect is not derivative. Wang's position has no place for the Kantian idea that we have only indirect duties to animals because our treatment of them will reflect back on our relationships to other humans. For Wang, hurting animals and breaking rocks directly hurts our virtuousness because we are one with those animals and rocks. Our entanglements with other things, our situations, and the world around us are essential to our identity and character. If we do not appreciate those entanglements, then we drastically stunt our ability to improve our relationships and thereby cultivate virtue.

Psychology and situationism

Modern psychological research attests to the influence of our entanglements with others, including other people and our situations. Despite the Confucian focus on the virtuous exemplar, every person engages in influencing and being influenced by others. This reciprocal impact is part of every interaction. Just as virtue is gradational, so are the influence and entanglements in which we have a role. For example, in relation to other people, contemporary research attests to the fact that our interactions with others are shaped by small details of our manners and comportment.[138] A friendly countenance can help people work together, while a hostile gaze can prevent dialogue from ever happening. Even something as simple as a smile can have significant impacts on our relations with others.[139]

The interpersonal influence does not merely affect the relationships among persons, but it even causes changes in our character and personality. Relevant to the Confucian emphasis on the *de* of the virtuous exemplar, who has a more influential character, Friedman and Riggio (1981) tested the influence that highly expressive and unexpressive people have on each other.[140] Three people, one expressive and two unexpressive, were put in a room, facing each other for two minutes. Even without talking, the unexpressive people were substantially affected by the personality of the expressive person. The expressive person, however, was not likely to be affected by the unexpressive people. The Confucian emphasis on the influence of the virtuous

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[138] Sarkissian (unpublished) 2.
[139] Scharlemann et al. (2001) found that a smile can make trustful and increase cooperation.
[140] Friedman and Riggio (1981).

exemplar captures the importance of strong personalities in shaping others. Our rational-emotions and personalities are inextricably intertwined with the people with whom we associate, even the most minor relationships. We should be aware of how we affect others, and those with more influence have greater responsibility.

Psychological research also vindicates the claims of Wang Yangming that our interconnectedness expands beyond just our human relationships and entanglements. Our relation to the world is a fundamental aspect of who we are and how we act. Situationist psychological research has shown that ethical considerations cannot ignore the situations in which they take place. Situationists offer advice that in line with Mencius' warning to the king. They recommend that we avoid those situations which could potentially tempt us or threaten our virtue. Gilbert Harman is one example:

> If you are trying not to give into temptation to drink alcohol, to smoke, or to eat caloric food, the best advice is not to try to develop "will-power" or "self-control". Instead, it is best to head [*sic*] the situationist slogan, "People! Places! Things!" Don't go to places where people drink! Do not carry cigarettes or a lighter and avoid people who smoke! Stay out of the kitchen![141]

Importantly, this avoidance is only part of the solution, for staying out of the kitchen involves its own 'self-control'. We should also realize that most issues do not have simple ways to avoid that which detracts from virtue, and that some situations we cannot avoid.[142] Even though the situationist slogan is not the entire solution, it certainly has a vital role that should not be ignored.

In order to grasp the importance of situationism's critique of virtue, consider two of the most famous experiments in situationist psychology: Milgram's obedience

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[141] Gilbert Harman, "No Character or Personality." Business Ethics Quarterly 13.1 (2003): 91.
[142] Sarkissian provides the example of meeting with one's in-laws. Although they may make one irritable, such encounters are not entirely avoidable. See Sarkissian (unpublished) 6.

studies and Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment. In the former, the subjects were highly influenced by the context of supposedly being in an experiment, and especially by the presence of a lab-coated authority figure and that authority figures' prodding to continue the experiment.[143] Given this understanding of their situation, the subjects were willing to shock another person with increasing intensity, even when the other person was apparently screaming in pain. The context of the subjects' actions was a significant determination of their ability to express virtue.[144] After the experiment, even when told that no shocks had really been delivered to the reputed victim, these people were deeply disturbed with themselves for how viciously they acted.

In the Stanford prison experiment, undergraduate students were randomly given roles as either inmates or guards in a fake prison constructed at their school.[145] They became so deeply immersed in their roles, however, that the experiment had to be shut down early. The fake inmates started to see themselves as helpless prisoners who were forced to obey their superiors, despite the fact that these students knew they could leave at any moment. The guards, in turn, developed an intense identification with their own roles, becoming progressively more demanding of submission. As a result, they acted increasingly violently, and the experiment became too dangerous to continue.

In both these experiments, the participants were highly immersed in particular situations, which may partly explain the extreme results. Other experiments, however, show that even much more subtle variables in our situations can have considerable

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[143] Milgram (1963).
[144] The importance of their contextual situation is evident by the fact that the subjects only hesitantly went along with the entire experiment. Three subjects even experienced uncontrollable seizures.
[145] Zimbardo et al. (1973).

ethical impacts. One study found that seminary students who were on the way to a lecture were significantly less likely to help a shabbily dressed man, who was slumped in a doorway, coughing and groaning, if they were in a hurry.[146] Other variables, such as their type of religiosity and whether or not they were going to hear a talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan, were not statistically significant in predicting actions.[147] Another study found that the discovery of a dime in a public payphone had enormous influence on whether or not a person would help someone who had dropped a stack of papers.[148] Those who found a dime in the payphone were fourteen times more likely to help than those who did not. Although a mere ten cents might seem highly insignificant to one's ethical perspective – just as the minute matters of conduct that concern the Confucians seem to modern perspectives – it can have profound impacts. Aspects of our situations have a role in determining our perception of those situations, affecting our ethical outlook and the possible virtuousness of our response.[149]

We should not conclude from these results that we are therefore hopelessly at the whim our contexts and situations. Rather, we should understand that our ethical responsibility extends to the situations of which we are a part. We are an aspect of our situations and have a role in how they unfold, and we must recognize the responsibilities that this entails. As Sarkissian puts it, "we influence the situations we

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[146] Darley and Batson (1973).
[147] The significance of time constraints is also evident in Kelly and McGrath (1985). In this study, variations in time limits had a significant effect on group interaction and cooperation.
[148] Isen and Levin (1972).
[149] We should not understand situations in a narrow sense. Situational variables extend throughout our environment. For example, Rotton and Frey (1985) investigated the correlation between air pollution and weather and the rate of violent crimes. Ozone levels, temperature, and humidity were found to be positively correlated with rates of assaults and family disturbances. Similar results were found in Cunningham (1979). This study also suggested that the amount of sunshine reaching the earth was predictive of helpfulness.

find ourselves in as much as they influence us."[150] Our situations, like the relationships we have with other persons, have an intimate role in the constitution of our virtue, but that does not mean we cannot strive to make our situations more amenable to virtuous conduct. In contrast most situationist literature that focuses on how our situations affect us, Sarkissian wants to emphasize the "details of ourselves that we introduce to our situations."[151] The virtuous exemplar must not only work at her own character, but the characters of other persons and the situation at large. We are responsible for making a better world, and, in doing so, we improve ourselves. Sarkissian explains that, "'attending to the features of our environment that influence behavioral outcomes' can just as well be understood as attending to our own persons. We are important features of our own situations, tied up inexorably with the actions of others."[152]

In understanding the significance of our entanglement with our situations and other persons, we should remember the insight of Wang Yangming. These connections are so important because of their ontological character. We are, in a very serious and fundamental way, entangled with the being of others – indeed, the being of the world. Viewing ourselves as isolated individuals, even as isolated individuals with extensive responsibilities and relationships, is not sufficient to grasp the full nature of our entanglements. We should not be like the "petty man" who fails to see the ontological significance of his connections with others. The ontological aspects have implications that affect us whether or not we recognize them. We should

[150] Sarkissian (unpublished) 7.
[151] Sarkissian (unpublished) 7.
[152] Sarkissian (unpublished) 7.

appreciate the ontology, both theoretically and practically, to properly understand virtue and how we can cultivate it in ourselves.

Conclusion: Taking ontology seriously

> Ethicality is part of the fabric of the world; the call to respond and be responsible is part of what is…Questions of responsibility and accountability present themselves with every possibility.[153]

[153] Barad 182.

Significance of the ontological

The conception of ethics I have outlined contains fundamental ontological implications that should be taken seriously. If we want to take ontology seriously, then we need to rethink its relationship to ethics. We also need to reconceptualize the notions of agency and certainty that underlie the importance of the features explicated above. I will appeal to the presuppositions of Baradian ontology to understand three ways in which we should take ontology seriously.

In the first sense, we should take ontology seriously by not separating the practices of knowing from the practices of being. This helps us adequately understand the sense of perception I have developed as a holistic comportment to the world. As we develop new ways of perceiving the world as salient, we take part in the unfolding of the world, blurring the distinction between ontology and epistemology. Epistemological and ontological concerns do not relate to disentangled, separate dimensions. Any epistemological change has ontological implications. Karen Barad explains that the "separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of the metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and non human, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse."[154] If we ignore the ontological connections, then we are led down mistaken lines of inquiry based on unjustified presuppositions and faulty distinctions. Barad's ontology, however, changes the terms of debate, nullifying many inadequate lines of inquiry by exposing and removing faulty or misleading presuppositions.

[154] Barad 185.

By taking ontology seriously, we can begin to understand ethics adequately and start to see how "the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter."[155] We move beyond an ethics situated purely in epistemology, and start to recognize how a concern for being is essential to the development of our perception. How we understand and perceive the world is not only a matter of epistemology, but a matter of reconfiguring how we are ontologically situated in and with the world. Our understanding and our being are inextricably entangled, and can only develop together. Changing our perception requires ontological considerations, and we can only adequately understand ethics as a perceptual cultivation if we recognize both the epistemological and ontological aspects. We should not separate ethics from our engagement in, with, and of the world. We need what Barad calls an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology*, which appreciates "the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being."[156]

Ethics can only be adequately understood if it is recognized as constitutive of the nature of reality. We should remove the metaphysics of individualism that support the inadequate representationalist and humanist conceptions of ethics,[157] and that prevent us from understanding the full interconnectedness between ethics, ontology, and epistemology. The individual should not be understood as a preexisting and predetermined entity that is independent from a larger material arrangement of relationships. Rather, we should recognize that the individual is constituted by the relationships in which it is entangled.

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[155] Barad 185
[156] Barad 185.
[157] For example, the belief that value is inherent to the individual enables the utilitarian view, which says that we should use quantitative representation and comparison of value as the principle for determining right action.

For Barad, the subject and object emerge together as co-constituted through specific patterns of what she calls 'intra-action.'[158] Within an intra-action, an "agential cut" is made that delineates between the subject and object.[159] Boundaries and properties become determinate, and thus meaningful, only within specific relationships. Intra-actions, therefore, establish identity, determining who we are and how we understand ourselves.[160] However, we should not understand the agential cut, or the resulting distinction, to be absolute. Drawing on her work in the field of quantum physics, Barad explains that "Not only subjects but also objects are permeated through and through with their entangled kin; the other is not just in one's skin, but in one's bones, in one's belly, in one's heart, in one's nucleus, in one's past and future. This is as true for electrons…as it is for the differentially constituted human."[161] Although our intra-actions allow us to become intelligible as distinct entities, at the same time, those intra-actions bind us all the more with the 'other' that plays a role in our constitution.

This ontological framework allows for us to appreciate the pervasiveness and interconnectedness of virtue. Our character is never isolated or independent from the larger arrangement of which we are a part. Our identity constantly changes as we reconfigure how we engage with and are engaged in the world. For both Barad and the Confucians, who we are is never static but is always dynamically unfolding as part of the continuous flux of the world. How we live our lives constitutes our ethics,

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[158] Barad uses the word 'intra-action' to capture the profound conceptual shift of her ontology, which sees relationships as ontologically basic. They are prior to and constitutive of the relata (Barad 33).
[159] Barad refers to the subject and object as the "agencies of observation" and "object of observation," respectively. The "agential cut" enacts a causal structure where the object (the "cause") makes a mark (the "effect") on the agencies of observation. The implications for an understanding of agency are discussed shortly.
[160] Barad 139.
[161] Barad 393.

which determines our understanding and perception of ourselves and the world. Our life as a whole, our style of being, the way we live our lives, our whole field of impact and influence – these are the things for which we are responsible and to which we should hold ourselves accountable. Barad explains that "We are responsible for the world of which we are a part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our own choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped."[162] No actions – or, rather, intra-actions – escape ethical responsibility, even if unnoticed or unintentional, because they affect the configuration of the world and the constitution of existence. Ethics is infused with every intra-action, every moment, every thing.

We are the loci of entangled webs of relations. Our identity, our perception, and our virtue are constituted by the larger arrangement of material-discursive boundary-drawing practices in which we are entangled. These practices go beyond us, including not only all other humans, but all animals, things, and matter, and, indeed, the world as a whole. Economics and science are not isolated domains; they are woven together with all domains – especially the domain of ethics – as part of the material-discursive practices of intelligibility. Their objectivity, as a result, cannot be a product of their independence or isolation. Their claims to objectivity consist in their involvement in the practices to which we are accountable. Likewise, if we accept the ontological framework provided by Barad, then we cannot understand agency as the possession of discrete individuals. We are not separate, isolated entities who act as individual agents in possession of a discrete will. All existence is

[162] Barad 390.

interconnected and entangled with the constitution of who we are and how we perceive the world, and this consequently requires a reconceptualization of agency.

Restructuring agency

The second way an adequate conception of ethics should take ontology serious is through recognizing that a fundamental restructuring of agency lies at the basis of the features explicated earlier. Reconcecptualizing agency helps us overcome both a reliance on rules and principles and an opposition between reason and emotion, and thus provides a way to adequately grasp the holistic nature of our perception. Agency, and consequently identity, should no longer be understood as something we posses as individuals. Rather, it is better understood as a way of being in the world. For Barad, agency is a 'doing' rather than an essence or property.[163] It is the way we engage with our web of relations; it consists in the enactment of intelligibility, where through our embodiment in and with the world, things come to matter and thus become meaningful. She explains:

> Agency is 'doing' or 'being' in its intra-activity. It is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices – iterative reconfiguring of topological manifolds of spacetimematter relations – through the dynamics of intra-activity. Agency is about changing possibilities of change entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices in the enactment of a causal structure.[164]

Agency is not something we possess, but consists in what we do with the possibilities that the reconfigurations of the world open up for us. Anytime we (intra-)act and

[163] Barad 62.
[164] Barad 178.

make even the smallest difference, we take part in reconfiguring the possibilities of the world.

The changing dynamics of possibilities, however, cannot be separated from the entire web of influence in which we are involved. Our agency can only be understood within the interconnected field that constitutes our identity because agency is a cumulative process that includes all relevant factors. Our agential possibilities are shaped by all that is related to us: by our societal and personal histories, by anyone who affects us, such as those we care about and those around us, by our situations, both physically and contextually, by all the norms and cultural-material-discursive practices that involve us. Ultimately, we are entangled with everything – all matter and mattering – and this entanglement is only adequately understood as an *ethico-onto-epistem-ological* relationship.

In the Baradian framework, the entanglement of everything is understood through the open-endedness of the agencies of observation. The configuration of the agencies makes an object determinate for that particular (re-)configuration of the world. However, the agencies remain indeterminate, lacking an exterior or outside boundary as long as they make the object intelligible. Therefore, although science may investigate the human as an 'objective' body, when we understand ourselves as the subject we do not have such seemingly determinate boundaries. We go beyond our body. At the same time, our body is expanded because the separation between subject and object is never absolute. The constitution of both dynamically unfolds.

Barad uses the Stern-Gerlach experiment as an example for understanding the open-ended nature of the agencies of observation.[165] The Stern-Gerlach experiment was the first successful demonstration of election spin. The experiment consisted in sending a beam of silver atoms between two magnets and observing their diffraction pattern on the detecting screen, which was a glass plate. However, the success of the experiment depended on Otto Stern's sulfuric breath, caused by his smoking of cheap cigars. The addition of sulfur was required for the pattern of silver atoms on the glass plate to become visible.

Barad explains that this experiment shows that we cannot narrowly confine the agencies of observation to the laboratory equipment or the persons engaging in the activity. The cigars that Stern regularly smoked were integral to observing the data. The cheapness of the cigars, which caused them to contain so much sulfur, was also essential. Barad argues that this makes Stern's gender, nationality, ethnicity, and class all important.[166] And, going further, we must also include all those material-discursive practices that made the experiment possible, such as the theoretical framework of quantum physics and the practices of intelligibility that make any understanding possible. All the concepts, reasons, and motivations that have a role are included in the agencies of observation. They are not separate aspects within the agencies, but come together as a dynamic unity that makes the observation possible and its experimental results determinate.

The interconnectedness of agency can also be seen in the example of building a house. The collective agency of all workers is responsible for its completion. Each

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[165] Barad 162-168.
[166] Barad 167.

worker performs her own task, and certain parts of the house may be completed by certain workers, but the house as a whole is only built through the actions of all of them together. For the Confucians, the state only functions when everyone contributes and recognizes their role in the process. All are responsible for its success.[167] Similarly, the house is only built through the combined efforts of all involved, everyone must contribute, and together they can successfully construct a house. A worker with the wrong attitude or a poor work ethic can impede the whole process. He negatively affects not only other workers, but the project as an interconnected whole.

In building the house, though, the agency of the workers extends far beyond those who were present at the scene; the responsibility is open-ended. For example, the spouse that makes a worker breakfast, enabling the worker to get to work and maybe increasing her productivity, has a role. This role is, in a fundamentally sense, no less direct, even if considered less significant. Likewise, the makers of the tools that are used, and even the tools themselves, are responsible for making the completion of the house possible. With different tools, different work would be done, and a different house would be built. A heavier hammer may get its job done quicker and allow more time to be spent elsewhere. Or maybe the hammer is too heavy and causes a worker to break a countertop, which is then replaced by a different one. In

[167] See *Analects* 12:11, 92. "Qi Jinggong asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, The ruler is a ruler, the minister is a minister, the father is a father, the son is a son. The Prince said, Good indeed! Truly, if the ruler is not a ruler, the minister is not a minister, the father is not a father, and the son is not a son, even if I have millet, will I be able to eat it?" As the editors note, this passage expresses the social interdependence required for a state to function properly. All roles must contribute and must do so appropriately. The ethical-ontological point is that all make a difference and together matter to the success, and therefore all have an agential role that requires recognition of responsibility.

either case, the tool has an essential role in determining the final production of the house.

Through various influences, what matters to the project and has a role in the agential becoming of the house extends throughout an entire web of relations. The cultural-material-discursive practices that involve the workers provide them the resources to perform their job. They enable the understanding of how to use a hammer and build a house, and even of what a hammer or a house is and means. The world becomes intelligible through those practices, and with that enactment of meaningfulness comes an agential responsibility. Agency is a conglomerate practice; the entire universe has a role in configuring and reconfiguring the possibilities for (intra-)action.

Indeterminateness and responsibility

> Ethicality is part of the fabric of the world; the call to respond and be responsible is part of what is…Questions of responsibility and accountability present themselves with every possibility.[168]

The implications of the entanglement of agency on our interconnectedness can only be adequately grasped by recognizing the entanglement of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. We should take ontology seriously on all levels of understanding and recognize it as integral to everyday life. We should not grasp the importance only abstractly, but should make it part of who we are, how we see the world, and how we cultivate our virtue. The process of ethical cultivation is an ontologically significant one. A change in our being is already involved, and we must appreciate that or be held responsible for its exclusion. If we do not recognize the exclusions we make, then our perception becomes limited in a serious way, and we are prevented from understanding when and how we fall astray. Our clouded understanding will prevent us from expressing our virtue to its fullest extent.

One way our expression of virtue will be limited is that we will be unable to adequately grasp the extent of our influence. The *de* of the sage is an example of the ways that influence goes beyond traditional notions of causality and materiality. These narrow conceptions are unable to accommodate the full transmission of the sage's influence. The sage is responsible for a subtle, virtuous influence that impacts the entire world. Sarkissian's critique of situationism moves in a direction that attempts to account for this influence. Sarkissian suggests that this 'magical'

[168] Barad 182

influence is a product of our everyday inference of "motives, meaning, and intentions from words, gestures, and expressions."[169] The sage has considerable influence because she is aware of these signals and is able to fine-tune her own. Others, often unconsciously, then pick up on the sage's mannerisms and conform to their style because of the influence that those with strong personalities exert.

The transmission of influence, however, does not seem to be adequately captured by these channels of sense-data. Even things such as one's silence or position in the room can influence others to a great degree. Further, the Confucian sage does not only affect those with whom they come into contact. This is partially accounted for by the ways that those whom we influence then go on to influence others. However, psychological research suggests that this successive, direct influence is limited.[170] To truly appreciate the full impact of the sage, we need to situate the influence of her *de* within the broader web of material-discursive practices. The sage, and everyone to some extent, takes part in the configuration of understanding. The virtuous person has a significant role in shaping how we understand ourselves, and consequently, in determining the possibilities for our expression of virtue.

By recognizing our ontological entanglement, we are better able to cultivate and spread virtue. We can begin to overcome things such as linear notions of causality and consequence, and start to see our integrated, holistic effect on the world. If we deny our interconnectedness with others, however, then we will miss a crucial

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[169] Sarkissian (2010) 9.

[170] Christakis and Fowler 28-29. They give evidentiary support for what they call the "Three Degrees Rule." It expresses how we influence and are influenced by our friends (first degree), our friends' friends (second degree), and our friends' friends' friends (third degrees), but generally not beyond that.

aspect of our ethical life. Consequently, we will be unable to realize the extent of our ethical responsibilities, and are more likely to inadequately express, or even fail to express at all, the virtue that would otherwise be demanded by that understanding.

Psychological studies attest to the importance of recognizing our entanglement with others. At the level of social groups, cooperation and open-mindedness have been seen to increase when we understand ourselves to be working with shared responsibility towards a common goal as opposed to when we understand ourselves to be working with sole responsibility. Tjosvold (1998) investigated these effects.[171] Subjects took roles as departmental representatives at a college. Some were told that both their recommendations and another department's would be used in reaching a decision, while others were told they had sole responsibility. Those in the former group showed significantly more willingness to engage in discussion and help their partner from another department when under the pretext of shared responsibility. This attests to the ethical importance of understanding the ways that we are engaged in practices in which we share an agential role.

In a more remarkable study, simply hearing oneself described as isolated, deterministic entity had noticeable ethical effects. Undergraduates were read the following passage from Francis Crick's *The Astonishing Hypothesis*:

> You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. Who you are is nothing but a pack of neurons.[172]

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[171] Tjosvold (2008).
[172] Vohs and Schooler (2008).

After being read this passage, participants were found to be more likely to cheat on a test. This suggests that by localizing the identity of the participants to "a pack of neurons," the experimenters changed how the participants perceived the world, causing noticeable ethical consequences. If our ethical frameworks incorporate or are founded on similar presuppositions that deny our agential interconnectedness, then we should expect our own expression of virtue to be impeded.

We should not be constraining our agency to the deterministic actions of neurons. We need to free ourselves from the isolation of the metaphysics of individualism. If we are to live healthy, flourishing lives, we must recognize the ontological issues that our morality presents to us. The interconnectedness of agency, and consequently virtue, is crucial to an adequate perception of our ethical responsibilities. We should never assume conclusiveness in the quest to grasp this infinite interconnectedness. Who we are is always in flux, and as its changes, so does the whole world. We should never be certain of our virtuousness because virtue is cultivated and sustained only through the *ethico-onto-epistem-ological* process of continuous improvement.

Recognizing the fundamental limitations of existence is the final way we should take ontology seriously. From this recognition, we are better able to appreciate the pervasiveness and interconnectedness of virtue. Indeterminateness is an ontological, and not merely epistemological, aspect of existence. We can never be certain of our virtuousness because certainty, especially absolute certainty, is denied by the dynamics of our very existence. In every (re-)configuration, certain exclusion

are necessarily made, even though these exclusions are never entirely separated out of their entanglement with what they are excluded from. As Barad explains:

> Exclusions are constitutive elements of the dynamic interplay (intra-play) of determinacy and indeterminacy. Indeterminacy is never resolved once and for all. Exclusions constitute an open space of agency; they are the changing conditions of possibility of changing possibilities.[173]

New possibilities are opened with every development. As new things are included and others excluded, the whole field of entanglements shifts. As the world reconfigures, our responsibilities and interconnection follow suit.

We should not look for a single answer or a definite understanding. A full appreciation of the indeterminacy and inadequacy that we can never escape can only be achieved by taking ontology seriously. Metaphysical presuppositions, such as the presumed isolation of domains or independence of individuals, play an important role in shaping our perception. They ignore the indeterminate nature of boundaries, imposing an unfounded 'given' from which derives the traditional notion of objectivity as independent from ethics. Based on that objectivity, certainty is understood as absolute, and our confidence turns into arrogance. Through that arrogance, we perceive the world as providing objectively correct ways of acting that are independent from our involvement in particular arrangements of relationships. We no longer focus on continuous improvement, but rather, we see ethics as something that we need only appeal to in times of crisis. Ethics becomes merely a tool for discovering 'the answer', and we lose sight of the pervasive and interconnected nature of ethics.

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[173] Barad 179

Recognition of the ontological issues implores us to see ethicality as inherent to existence. Ontological indeterminacy, in turn, makes ethical understanding a continuous pursuit. There are no singular causes, but that does not paralyze action. Rather, it prohibits certainty or freedom from perplexity in our actions and understanding. We should not, for example, understand the ideal of sagehood as a predetermined goal. Susan Wolf's article, "Moral Saints," is a perfect example of what happens when one takes the supremely virtuous as a predetermined and static ideal. There is no definitive way for being a virtuous person, and therefore we should engage in a diverse and fulfilling life that enables us to reach our fullest potentials. Wolf offers examples of pleasures that are supposedly missing from the supremely moral life, such as reading Victorian novels or improving one's backhand.[174] However, if we recognize that the cultivation of virtue is a process that involves our whole way of engaging in and with the world, then these activities should in no way be denied from the virtuous life. They are highly intertwined with our ethical cultivation when we engage in those activities in an appropriate manner because they are part of our overall comportment to the world. We should heed the advice of Baruch Spinoza when he says, "It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another."[175] Wolf's error is that she takes ethics as focusing on living up to certain expectations, rather than as emphasizing our continual improvement. She separates morality into its own isolated

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[174] Wolf, "Moral Saints," (location: publisher, year) 421.
[175] Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*,4p45s2 (location: publisher, year) 225.

domain in a way that prevents recognition of ethics as interconnected with every aspect of life. Contrary to Wolf, our personal ideals are always moral ideals, whether or not we recognize the ethicality of the former.

We are always cultivating our moral outlook – our ethical understanding – and we should recognize this so that we can inquire into the adequacy and appropriateness of our path of cultivation. No aspect of our identity can be understood as 'non-moral', which makes it senseless to say that "a person may be *perfectly wonderful* without being *perfectly moral*."[176] We all have ways of best expressing our moral 'perfection'. Comedians and artists are not following their 'non-moral' goals to the exclusion of their 'moral' ones. No matter what choices we make in life, we are always engaged in ethics. Some persons simply express their ethical characters in different ways. Many artists, for example, certainly see their pursuits as part of their expression of virtue. Those who do not recognize the ethicality of their pursuits are blind to the significant ways that ethics is inescapable.

By not recognizing the inherent indeterminacy of any conception of the morally superior, Wolf fails to realize that an essential part of becoming more virtuous consists in continuously progressing one's conception of virtue and the virtuous exemplar. The ideal of sagehood becomes determinate only within particular relationships; as we develop towards that conception, the relationship reconfigures and the ideal changes. As we become more virtuous, then new possibilities for being virtuous open up. There is never a final goal of which we can be certain and then simply move towards. We should be continually revising and reconfiguring what we are striving towards. We should remember that even Confucius, one of the most

[176] Wolf 236.

virtuous and sagely, recognizes that improvement has no end, and for this reason, he loves learning. We should love learning and love our own continuous development, leaving ourselves open for new possibilities of improvement.

All answers are determinate only within particular situations, and outside of the ever-fleeting moment in which they have their fit, they become unintelligible. When we uncritically presume a certainty that does not exist, then we hinder our recognition of other perspectives as well as our willingness and ability to understand from their viewpoints. Although confidence is important to progress on any path of understanding, all paths are necessarily incomplete. We should therefore have, as Swanton suggests, a pluralistic view of ethics. Through things like ritual performance, imitation of the virtuous, and self-examination, we open ourselves up to those new paths of understanding and being.

Only if we take the ontological issues seriously, do we then become able to fully grasp the ethicality inherent in the world's becoming. Responsibility is not the result of us having the status of free, liberal subjects. Ethics is not based around the responsibilities of one isolated individual to another. Barad explains:

> What is on the other side of the agential cut is not separate from us – agential separability is not individuation. Ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.[177]

Responsibility is part of our entangled embodiment in the material-discursive becoming of the universe, in which agency goes far beyond us and is part of the intrinsic nature of matter and mattering. In other words, responsibility is "embodied

[177] Barad 393.

in the very worlding of the world."[178] It is fundamental to existence, and it requires an accountability to the entanglements that 'we' (including nonhumans) "help enact and what kind of commitments 'we' are willing to take on, including commitments to 'ourselves' and who 'we' may become."[179] Ethics is about how we take part in the dynamic unfolding of the world's becoming and about "accounting for our part of the entangled webs we weave."[180]

[178] Barad 160.
[179] Barad 382.
[180] Barad 384.

Summary

The four features I outlined as part of an adequate conception of ethics are meant to enable an incorporation of the Baradian framework. They offer a path to understanding notions, such as identity, virtue, and agency, which have undergone substantial revision due to the presuppositions of Baradian ontological-ethics. They move us away from individualistic ethical traditions and towards a more adequate conception of virtue ethics. Through the prioritization of virtue and an understanding of it as a perceptual ability, ethics is put back into the world and concentrated around our engagement in and with the world. Knowing and acting are no longer separate because agency is not something we have and can exert in conformity with our knowing. The only way to have any security about the possibility that our acting will express virtue is to engage in continuous ethical cultivation that develops our perception.

The account I have provided, however, is not complete. It is only meant to provide a way that we can more adequately understand ethics, and it offers the presuppositions of Baradian ontology to help understand why those features are needed. The full explication of the ontological implications, and their connection with the ethical features, is a monumental task that will require us to not only rethink ethics and its place in our lives. Our entire way of understanding and perceiving the world will have to change.

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