Moral Beauty as An Overriding Imperative in Confucianism

by

Immanuel Lokwei

Class 2012

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Philosophy

Middletown, Connecticut

April 2012
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

4

## INTRODUCTION

7

*Thesis statement and summary*

## CHAPTER ONE: MORAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: AN ESPOUSAL OF MORAL GOODNESS AND MORAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

13

1a. *Introduction*  
1b. *Consistency in Moral Behavior*  
1c. *Objectivism in Confucianism*  
1d. *Against Internalism and Externalism*  
1e. *Refuting Particularism*  

## CHAPTER TWO: SITUATIONAL MINUTIAE, MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND MORAL PERCEPTION

45

2a. *Introduction*  
2b. *An Overview and Redefinition of Situationism*  
2c. *Stages of Moral Development*  
2d. *Rituals and Moral Perception*  

57
CHAPTER THREE: THE ROLE OF MORAL BEAUTY IN CONFUCIAN ETHICS

3a. Introduction 80

3b. Defining Delight and Aesthetic Bliss 91

3c. Moral Beauty as Unified Symphony 96

3d. Attainment of the Unified Symphony of Moral Beauty and Its Character 99

CONCLUSION 108

Thesis’ Relevance to the contemporary debate on moral principles and moral motivation, and to public life 110

BIBLIOGRAPHY 114
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank the following three people:

Professor Stephen Angle – Thesis Advisor
Professor Alice Hadler – English Department
Christina Elim Eipa – My Mother

Thank you so much Prof. Angle for your inestimable influence since the first day I took Classical Chinese Philosophy and your guidance through out the whole process of writing this thesis. You have not only been challenging my views and resourceful in my research, but you have been abundantly patient with the pace at which I worked. Despite missing a few deadlines, your encouragement never ceased to flow my way.

What can I say about you Prof. Hadler? You have been a teacher, mentor and mother to me. Since the first days of English tutorials classes - when English was truly the meaning of foreign and strange - up until now, you have never stopped showing me the light and the way forward academically. Thank you, first for helping me get better at speaking and writing in English, and second for the time you set aside to comment, edit and review my work. Thanks a lot.

Itio (mother), it is funny that despite you having not stepped into a classroom in your life, you have been very instrumental in inspiring and pushing me forward to the completion of this thesis. And as you know that without you having been very strongly opposed to my attempts to drop out of school, I could not have reached this far.

Second, I cannot forget friends and instructors I have met here at Wesleyan University and other places. But sorry guys, I have already exhausted my praises
above. But that does not mean that your guys have been any less important to me or that I have not learned anything that relates to the work of this thesis from you. No at all! As you will read this thesis, and I know for sure you will, you will see that parts of you are reflected in ways that I express my ideas in this thesis; ideas that I would not have necessarily formed if it were not for our common interest in different philosophical subject matters and our undying discourse in these subject matters. I will just mention a few of you; those that I know will for sure twist my throat if I do not mention their names. Gideon Too, Protus Kipleting, Josephatt Koima, Jesse Humm, Lizah Masis, Howe Pearson, Allan Tsoi, Abaye Steinmetz-silber, Sylvia Jebiwot, Rogers Morogo, Sarah Cassel, Kiptoo Magutt, Jeremy Keim-Sheink, Caleb Morogo, Matthew Humm and Ofer Levy.

I cannot forget the influence of these people in my life: Mrs. Kanja (St. Joseph’s Primary School), Mr. Gitahi (St. Joseph’s Primary School), John Manners (KENSAP), Bill Hill, Professor Mike Boit (Kenyatta University), My beloved guardians Mr. Nahashon Saina and Reverend Hannington K. Munyao, Professor Elise Springer (Wesleyan University) and Zena Chemeli.

To the rest not mentioned here - know that this is not the last piece of this thesis-project. With our continued interactions and quest for the meaning of life, there will be many other opportunities that you guys will explicitly be reflected in my life and work. Besides that you guys are the unsung heroes of this work.

Thanks a lot.
Dedicated to my brother:

Samuel Echakan Lokwei, (June 4, 1981 - August 15, 2009)
INTRODUCTION

Knowing the Dao is not as good as loving it; and loving it is not as good as taking delight in it.

Confucius [Analects\(^1\) 6:20]

Though Confucianism and the majority of Western philosophy share numerous overlapping and similar viewpoints on moral subjects, one primary difference calls for our exploration. This is Confucius’ categorization of a moral act as a derivative of moral knowledge and affective properties. In most Western schools of thought, the moral will is rational. Any failure to respond accordingly (rationally or morally) to a moral situation, these schools would argue, is a mark of deficient reason and hence should be credited as irrational and involuntary. This demarcation of moral and nonmoral acts on the basis of moral knowledge and moral agency has spurred a good deal of debate about the cause and nature of moral principles and moral motivation.

There are exceptions among western thinkers like David Hume who emphasized the superiority of affective properties to reason. But their (these philosophers) relation to Confucianism is beyond the scope of this thesis and not necessary for its completion. The term Western Philosophy is used here in a special collective way to mean only

---

\(^1\) Analects is a collection of Confucius writing. Unless otherwise stated, all Analects
those Western philosophers and thinkers who held the view that morality can be equated to rational action with no or very minimal focus on affective properties of moral agents.

While the Western perspective is appealing at first sight, it has limited the scope of moral evaluation, in that the analysis of moral acts is confined within this rational framework. By this I mean that the structure of contemporary debate on moral imperatives has been laid on the presumptive viewpoint that it is the rationality of the moral agent that needs philosophical investigation and nothing more. Hence for those debaters who have found flaws in logical arguments and conclusions concerning nature of moral principles and moral motivation have asserted that moral imperatives are hypothetical; while other debaters, more like protégés of Plato, have countered the criticism and held their ground on the categorical nature of moral imperatives.

Even if the Platonic view of the causal powers of moral knowledge is allowed, it still ranks lowest on Confucius’s scale\(^2\) of moral perfection\(^3\). Elements of aesthetics in moral practices top the scale and are revered as attributes reflective of an agent’s harmonization with moral codes.

The concept of Rightness\(^4\) and the concept of Goodness are not undervalued in any way, but Confucius shows how their applicability is contingent on the circumstances surrounding a moral agent. It is these circumstantial aspects of these two concepts, moral rightness and moral goodness, that deprive the two concepts of

\(^2\) From the opening quotation, the Confucian scale depicts hierarchy of knowledge, love and beauty in morality.

\(^3\) This statement will make more sense in the following chapters.

\(^4\) Or the Concept of Uprightness. I will interchangeably use these two terms.
universality and necessity. Hence they cannot be labeled as causal factors but rather as factors that facilitate the process of moral discernment, objective assessment\(^5\) of a moral situation, and response to the moral demand.

A rationally responsive act can be purely mechanistic, where the need to act rightly dominates the agent’s thoughts or the goodness of an end overshadows the “contrariness of the will.” The agent may feel compelled to act rationally due to fears of failing to act irrationally or being labeled as irresponsible\(^6\). If so, the agent’s action (though seen from an outside perspective as rational) falls lower on Confucius’ scale, since it is merely a response to a particular rationale, and there is no or very minimal engagement of physiological and spiritual energies (affective properties).

Confucian scale is not an outright attack on Kant’s moral philosophy; rather, Confucius’ emphasis on duty is as strong as Kant’s. It is anti-Kantian in the sense that the norm of moral action is not solely based on the Concept of Rightness. This idea will be elaborated further in chapter one.

Confucius in early stages of his moral pursuits acknowledged that though he was well-versed in moral knowledge, he was still an infant when it came to apprehending the aesthetics of these moral laws. Through ritualistic, spiritual and educational practices, Confucius wants to develop his ability to apprehend and experience of moral aesthetics. Through these endeavors, he could cultivate that

---

\(^5\) Objective in the sense that all cultivated moral agents can agree upon.  
\(^6\) For instance, at the time when slavery was abolished, there are some slave-owners who stopped perpetrating this act for a few reason. Either they feared enforcers of the new policy (feared punishment) or did not want to fall in bad favor with their micro-social group (e.g. a network of friends) who deemed slavery as wrong. So this fear, and not really an understand of the value of each individual’s liberty, motivates them to act.
corner of our rational minds that is capable of detecting salient features of beauty in normative principles and in so doing, annul the habitual response of our mind that perceives enactment of moral laws as contradictory. It is only through the ability to comprehend the aesthetic qualities of morality that he, Confucius, can be assured of a consistent and rational response to diverse moral situations at all times.

The project of this thesis is first to formulate or rather trace the coherent concept of moral aesthetics in Confucius’ thought among the rich and complexly woven texts of the *Analects* and Mencius texts⁷. Second, it aims to trace Confucius’ conceptualization of the limits of rationality and consequently why moral knowledge is ranked so low on Confucian scale.

Third and finally, the project will show the nuances of these Confucian concepts and how they shed light on the current debate about moral imperatives. The hypothesis we will be working on is the statement that the Moral Aesthetic is an over-riding imperative in moral motivation that supervenes from alteration of our perspectives; this supervenience is made possible by fully cultivated mental and affective properties. Spiritual and institutional disciplines are a rich ground for development of these perspectives.

In chapter one, I argue against the idea that moral principles can aim at contradictory ends, for instance the goodness or well-being of an individual agent and the flourishing or well-being of groups of individuals agents (societies and institutions) by explicating Confucian understanding of the concept of Moral Righteousness. The

---

steps that I take to achieve this goal are first refuting Internalism, second Externalism and third Subjectivism and finally Particularism. These are the four major Western philosophical traditions whose subject matter is at the center of the debate about the nature of moral principles and motivation. At the end of this chapter, I propose Confucian understanding of the self as situated in a societal context and argue that the discrepancy among moral principles is only conceptual. Understanding Confucian conceptualization of Moral Righteousness as an espousal of both individual goodness and societal goodness debunks this tension.

In chapter two, I start by arguing against Situationism before I propose a new way of defining Situationism based on Confucian texts. I then proceed to explicate Confucius’ understanding of agents’ moral development (cultivation) and moral perception. The aim of this chapter is to show the relationship between situational contexts, our moral tendencies and perception of moral principles and the importance of this relationship in a moral agent’s development.

The main project of chapter three is defining and elaborating the concept of Moral Beauty. Due to the existence of numerous kinds of beauty, the first step I take is distinguishing Moral Beauty from other forms of beauty that are not necessarily connected to morality. With the help of Confucian texts, I define Moral Beauty as the unified symphony that a fully cultivated moral agent experiences. I proceed to show the prerequisite conditions for an agent to experience Moral Beauty. In discussing these prerequisite conditions, which are cultivation of both the mental and affective faculties of an agent, I connect this third chapter with the content of the preceding two
chapters. Finally, I argue that the phenomenology of Moral Beauty is the hallmark of a fully cultivated moral agent and that its attainment is possible; any human being has the capacity to attain it.
CHAPTER ONE: MORAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: AN ESPOUSAL
OF MORAL GOODNESS AND MORAL UPRIGHTNESS

The Master said, Those with whom one can be together all the day long, but who
never speak of what is right, or who love to carry out little acts of kindness: They are
difficult indeed.

Confucius [Analects, 15.17]

1a. Introduction

To understand the concept of Moral Aesthetics in Confucianism we have to
understand first what Confucians mean by Moral Righteousness. The thesis’s
hypothesis, that Moral Beauty is an overriding imperative in Confucianism, demands
that we begin the search from scratch, from the root, which is to figure out the
conception of moral principles in Confucian thought and what it means for a moral
agent to act within or upon these moral principles.

In the majority of Western philosophy, there has been a long-standing
philosophical tradition that has insisted on the distinction between moral goodness
and moral rightness. This tradition has been partly responsible for the diverse views
about moral principles and the nature of their imperativeness and the view that
tensions exist between principles of moral goodness and moral rightness. Moral
goodness (as I see it) focuses mainly on flourishing at an individual level (virtues
such as self-love) while Moral rightness mainly aims at maintaining and promoting
factors and conditions necessary for the orderly and progressive existence of broader
contexts like societies or institutions (virtues such as justice and benevolence). An
individual might want to pursue a career that can actualize their potential but doing so
might jeopardize both the roles they are expected to enact in society and the lives of
people dependent on the proper execution of those roles. A good example would be a
student of art who would like to pursue this interest but is forced not to by external
factors such as responsibilities (parental, national or religious) where doing so might
be seen as an act of betrayal, selfishness or treason. So the big question when we
weigh this conundrum: What is good and right: pursuing one’s interests or not?

Particularism, for instance, arises out of this conceptual disparity between
good and right. Particularism has argued that since moral principles aim, most of the
time, at ends that seem antagonistic to each other – at the well-being of an agent and
at the fraternal (societal or deontological) expectations of an agent – then the
relevance of any moral principles depends on the circumstances that moral agents
find themselves in.

---

8 Particularism is a broad branch of philosophy that holds different ideas about the nature of
moral principles. Its central claim, as pointed out by Simon Kirchin, is that “what can be a
reason that helps to make one action right need not be a reason that always helps to make
While Particularism is enchanted by the determinative powers of situations over moral judgments, Internalism and Externalism on the other hand, are two of the broader branches of the Western philosophical split that capitalize on moral conundrums (such as the art student dilemma) to argue their differing stances about the nature of moral judgments and moral motivation. Internalism\(^9\) holds that moral principles are categorical imperatives; that moral knowledge necessarily motivates once an agent attains it. Externalism\(^10\) holds the opposite view, that moral principles are hypothetical imperatives; that there is no necessary connection between moral motivation and moral knowledge.

These are a few branches of philosophy that have resulted from the modern Western philosophical view that there is a need to make a distinction, at least conceptual, between moral goodness and moral rightness.

Contrary to these differing views (Internalism, Externalism, etc.), Confucianism offers a different approach to our inquiry on the nature of moral principles and moral motivation. The approach takes into account individuals’ mental and affective capabilities, unlike the Western philosophical tradition that concentrates mainly on analyzing the rational dimensions of agents. The Confucian strategy also helps to dismantle the idea that there is a tensional relationship in enacting moral principles. We will discuss in detail the above claims in the following sections.

\(^9\) “According to Internalism, a person’s judgment to the effect that an action is right is sufficient for her to be motivated to perform the action.” Carl Strandberg, “Externalism and the Content of Moral Motivation”, Springer Science + Business Media B.V., 29 January 2007

\(^10\) “For Externalists, something has to be added to the belief to produce the requisite desire, or the motivating force.” A. T. Nuyen, 2009, “Moral Obligation and Moral Motivation in Confucian Role-Based Ethics”, Springer Science + Business Media B.V., 13 January 2007
Confucians offer an alternative way of understanding the notion of moral principle, one that accommodates personal moral growth and social order. We will discuss this notion in the last section of this chapter. In short, Confucianism is the antithesis of these Western philosophical split-offs: Particularism, Internalism and Externalism. It is antithetical in the sense that it refutes the conclusive air of certainty assumed by arguments of each of these philosophical branches. But at the same time, Confucianism does not ignore the strengths of each of these philosophical branches. It actually incorporates these strengths in its model; hence Confucianism can be argued as an integrative model of all the accurate elements captured by particularists,’ internalists’ and externalists’ perspectives. Our quest will therefore be to find out how this is so.

1b. Consistency in Moral Behavior

We must begin by highlighting the crucial role of consistency both in matters of character and theory in Confucian thought, for it is a necessary building block in the foundation of Confucian moral concepts. Constant effort towards our moral aspirations puts agents in a better position to attain these moral ends. Without steadfastness in moral behavior, agents can be said to be involved in wishful thinking. A strong moral character is evident in the constant commitment we have to moral goals.
There are passages in the *Analects* that illustrate the character of constant moral behavior that Confucius is espousing. Confucius praises the singular character of pine and cypress trees, and the unwavering character of the legendary horse Ji (verses [9.28] and [14.33]). Confucius insists on a particular quality that promotes constancy in moral character: namely correct perceptions of facts within moral situations. The Master said, “A good man, I have not been able to find; if I could find a constant man, it would be enough. But when lacking seems having, empty seems full, and privation seems opulence, it will be hard to find constancy.” From the above quote, it is quite clear that having a mistaken conception of phenomena in the moral realm leads to inconsistency in moral behavior. Since we do not get a correct picture of how situations present themselves to us (lacking seems having…), Confucius argues, we therefore lack a basis in which to root our moral behaviors.

A summary of the above three passages (9:28, 14:33 and 7:26b) supports two qualities of behavioral constancy: First, this behavioral consistency should align with a correct perception of situations as they present themselves to us (moral knowledge). Second, the agent should always be willing to view the world in moral terms and always act morally (have a moral identity). Acting morally should not be a seasonal matter. The pine tree, for instance, stays green throughout the seasons and similarly the moral agent’s motives should constantly align with moral aspirations.

---

11 The Master said, “When the year grows cold, only then do we discover that the pine and cypress are the last to fade.”
12 The Master said, “A Ji is not praised for its strength; it is praised for its character.”
13 *Analects* [7:26b]
What kind of behavioral consistency might Confucius be critical of? Does Confucius recognize that even immoral agents, or people with misguided perceptions of situations, can exhibit a constant behavioral pattern, for instance a barbarian can throughout his lifetime always be barbaric? Confucius acknowledges that people, commoners, sometimes base their behavior consistently on norms that are misguided or miss the moral mark. He criticizes this form of consistency.

Commoners acquiesce in institutional regulations with a shallow understanding of what these regulations entail. Confucius belittles this mentality of conforming to social expectations without a critical regard or assessment of the nature of actions and the effects of their corresponding consequences. Commoners take moral principles at face value. They do not try to understand them but rather think that their duty is just to follow these moral principles. Their way of according with moral or institutional regulations is quite mechanical (inorganic), in that they lack a deeper grasp of the meaning of these moral or social demands.

As a way of refuting commoners’ consistency in behavioral acts, Confucius mentions and praises Gwan Jung’s actions as a model for morally cultivated behavioral consistency. His decisions, Confucius argues, though they seem contradictory from a commoner’s point of view, do not fall short of moral aspirations.

14 Analects, [14.17], Dz-gung said, Gwan Jung was not rvn, was he? When Hwan-gung killed Prince Jyou, he could not bring himself to die, and even served him as minister. The Master said, Hwan-gung was leader of the lords, and united All Under Heaven; the people down to the present receive the benefit of it. Without Gwan Jung, we would be wearing our hair long and lapping our robes to the left. How can this be compared to the consistency of some common man or common woman, to cut his own throat in some ditch or drain, and no one would ever know it?

15 Analects, [14.17]. See footnote (11) for more information on what Gwan did.
*Analects* 14:16 says, “The Master said, That Hwan-gung nine times assembled the several Lords without using arms or chariots was Gwan Jung's doing.” He brought peace through non-violent means. Unlike the commoners, Gwan Jung does not adjust his actions to the expectations of mainstream culture.

What differentiates Gwan Jung from the commoners is that he exercises discretion instead of a blind fetishism to follow socially expected behavioral patterns. Anyone can be made to follow a rule, but to understand the value of the rule one has to apply his mental efforts. Confucius calls commoners who act consistently based on the opinions of the masses the “village worthies.” They, Confucius argues, distort the concept of consistent character to mean acts that are pleasant and generally acceptable in the eyes of the people. “Village worthies” promote an uncultivated (shallow understanding) adherence to moral principles.

1c. Objectivism in Confucianism

The Objectivistic account we would like to attribute to Confucianism is the one that holds that there exists an independent morality that morally cultivated individuals can agree on. It encompasses Michael Smith’s notion of objectivism, the convergence of opinions about moral codes, and the notion of an existent body of morality independent of human consciousness. In this section we claim that we can explicate a Confucian account of objectivism that maintains the idea that morality

---

16 The Master said, “People can be made to follow it; they cannot be made to understand it.”
exists even if individuals will always disagree on what a moral principle ought to be
and the idea that morally-cultivated individuals, at what we will call the third level of
moral development, can identify moral principles independently and embrace a
common morality.

To touch briefly on the concrete evidence in Confucianism that supports our
claim about an objective account of morality in Confucianism, let us turn to the three
prominent Confucians: Confucius, Mengzi¹⁸, and Xunzi. Their teachings, especially
the latter two, are basically an explication and defense of the essential views of
Confucianism. These include the significant role that Heaven (tian) plays in laying
out the pattern for the Way (Virtuous living), the need for an individual effort through
study to follow this Way, and the necessity of rituals to aid individuals’ moral
cultivation.

Confucians generally urge that we should emulate the sagely ways of the
ancients. Mengzi argues that all the sages were able to identify the common
importance of a virtuous life. He says, “What is it that hearts prefer in common?...The
sages first discovered what our hearts prefer in common…order and righteousness.”¹⁹
Thus morally cultivated individuals do come to concur on what the moral values are.
From this quote, and from Confucians’ acknowledgement and emphasis on the role of
Heaven, morally significant rituals and Human Efforts²⁰ in morality, we can argue
that there is an objective account of morality in Confucianism. But to strengthen this

---

¹⁸ Some ancient texts refer Mengzi as Mencius. I will interchangeably use these names to mean
the same person: Mengzi.
¹⁹ Mengzi, [6A:7]
²⁰ Individual efforts applied in learning about morality and cultivating moral sensibilities.
claim, let us explore criticism that objectivist interpreters of Confucianism have encountered.

James A. Ryan comes to the fore with his challenges. Ryan objects to this Confucian objectivist argument by citing the divergent approaches of the sages (Bo Yi, Yi Yin and Liuxia Hui)\(^\text{21}\) as proof of the subjective-relativistic nature of moral principles in Mengzi’s philosophy and consequently Confucianism. He points out that universal desires (to achieve order and righteousness) are “too general to constitute an absolute set of values of the kind required to establish objectivism.”\(^\text{22}\) Since the sages adopted different means through which to achieve the absolute values of righteousness and order, Ryan argues, moral principles (as instrumental tools for acquiring moral ends) are therefore relative; in that one of the sages approved a particular way of living virtuously while the other two approved different ways. Ryan argues, “…approval is not a normative but a natural property of an agent.”\(^\text{23}\)

But this is a misguided conclusion. This conclusion, which implies that each individual has or may have a different set of moral codes that are valid, stems from two sources. One, the conclusion is a product of the error of the exaggerated “mind-

\(^{21}\) Mengzi replied, “Bo Yi was someone who would stay in a subordinate position rather than put his worth in service to those who were unworthy. Yi Yin was someone who five times sought out Tang and five times sought out Tyrant Jie. Liuxia Hui was someone who did not disdain to serve a corrupt ruler and would not decline a minor post. These three masters [sages] did not have identical Ways, but what they moved toward was one…It is Benevolence…” Norden, Mengzi, [6.2].


\(^{23}\) Ryan [p. 25]
dependence of morality,” (we’ll elaborate on this point shortly). Two, this conclusion is also a result of a failure to see that differences in the sages’ methodological approaches are not synonymous with a disparity between ideas of Right and Wrong. Furthermore, the failure is rooted in a myopic perception of moral means as entities distinct from the moral ends they are meant to achieve. These insights come from Xiaomei Yang’s distinction between instrumental and constitutive means. A useful Confucian passage that will help us challenge Ryan’s view is the Gaozi-Mengzi passage.

Let us first explain what happened in this Gaozi-Mengzi passage. There was an argument between Gaozi\(^{24}\) and Mengzi about the nature of righteousness and benevolence. Gaozi argues that Benevolence is internal while Righteousness is external. Gaozi says in Mengzi, [6A4]\(^{25}\),

“That man there is old and I treat him as elder. He owes nothing of his elderliness to me, just as in treating him as white because he is white I only do so because of his whiteness which is external to me. That is why I call it external… My brother I love, but the brother of a man from Ch’in I do not love. This means that the explanation lies in me. Hence I call it internal. Treating an elder of a man from Ch’u as elder is no different from treating an elder of my own family as elder. This means that the explanation lies in their elderliness. Hence I call it external.”

Gaozi argues that since people are respectful of all elderly people, and since elderliness is an external property like whiteness, then righteousness must be external. Righteousness is a response to duty and therefore, Gaozi does not see the motivation

\(^{24}\) Gaozi was a contemporary of Mencius. Though Mencius and Gaozi were Confucians, they had some differing views on some subjects such as human nature.

\(^{25}\) Mencius, Translated by D. C. Lau, Copyright Penguin Books, 1970
coming from inside the individual. But since Benevolence deals with love, and individuals are very picky about whom they love, this means (to Gaozi) that the source of motivation to act benevolently is internal.

Mengzi refutes this Gaozian conclusion with an analogy of savory meat (we’ll discuss this analogy in the next section). Using Mengzi’s arguments and basing this argument on A.T. Nuyen’s article on “Confucian role-based ethics”\(^{26}\), I hope to refute Ryan’s interpretation. I will show how the notion of “mind-dependence of morality” is quite exaggerated since it neglects the “property-dependence” aspect of morality. “Mind-dependence of morality” should not be celebrated as a perfect analysis of the relation between mind and moral principles.

1d. Against Internalism and Externalism

Gaozi argues that since our moral property of respect is invariant across the board at the instant of perceiving a natural quality of elderliness, our affective states are thus not the source of motivation to act respectfully towards the elderly. The origin of respect for the elderly (the causal factor, if it can be traced at all) can be attributed to the external quality of elderliness that is possessed by the elderly and to the way society values elderliness. Mengzi says that an elderly person is not by default the subject of righteousness due to their having one or many of the natural

\(^{26}\) A. T. Nuyen, Confucian Ethics as Role-Based Ethics, *International Philosophical Quarterly* Volume 47, Issue 3, September 2007
properties of elderliness, for instance, the grayness of their hair. He asks Gaozi whether people treat an old white horse in the same respectful way as they treat an elderly human being? There the obvious answer is no. Ryan reads Mengzi’s contrasting of the different behavioral reactions to the elderliness of an elder and the whiteness of an old horse to mean that this difference can be explained by the special relational connection we intuit between beings in our social sphere.

Mengzi is not trying to claim that there is nothing inherent in the qualities of a natural property that contribute to and enhance our experience of it. The unhealthy tongue belies the genuine taste of the savory meat. Though the meat might be excellent in taste, its property of savoriness is not sufficient to provide a full experience of its savoriness on the tongue if the tongue is not in the suitable healthy condition to cooperate. But this should not mean that the property of the savory meat failed, but rather that the tongue failed, and the property of savoriness inherent in the savory meat is independent.

Just as it is reasonable, as Mengzi would state, to think that our tongues have the capacity to experience the savoriness of meat - or to say it in a stronger way, our tongues have the experience of savoring meat already embedded in them in potentia, and are only awaiting until their time to be actualized - why should we not also acknowledge the possibility that the savory meat itself has an element within it (now existing in potentia from our point of view) whose interaction with our tongues’ taste buds, (that have already been said to have the prerequisite capacity), facilitates the experience of savoriness?
Proponents of the “mind-dependence” of morality, like our friend Ryan, might argue that a healthy tongue and the best kind of savory meat, these two alone, do not explain our experiences of savoriness; one more basic and fundamental thing is needed: Mind. A mind, which is in the standardized condition of “health,” is this essential component as indicated by their phrase “mind-dependence” of morality. I think they are partially right.

If we look at our non-moral case mentioned above we can deduce that the following prerequisite variables cannot be ignored: a standardized functional mind, meat’s property of savoriness, and healthy tongues. Subtract one of these necessary variables from the equation and the experience seems deficient. Each of the variables functions effectively only in the aid of the two others. Each carries as much weight in the equation as the other. These three necessities should not be understood as though they were the only variables required to fulfill our equation for phenomenal experience. We have assumed this number for the purpose of demonstrating their intricate and mutual dependency and I don’t think the nature of their dependency will vary if other necessary variables are discovered.

Likewise, the moral equation that can fully explain the aspects of our experience of the moral phenomena has, *ceteris paribus*, three preliminary conditions, each contributing variably or maybe even equally (but all necessarily) to the whole experience: (1) mental make-up (the mind), (2) natural properties of situations (e.g. perceiving a child drowning) and (3) affective features (moral tendencies such as
sympathy and non-moral tendencies such as enjoying savory meat\(^{27}\)). Effective moral response is dependent, not on one, but all of these necessities.

Vera Hoffmann and Albert Newen express this idea in a slightly different way when they discuss their concept of “property-dependent supervenience.”\(^{28}\) They argue that the extrinsic high-level properties (which I roughly equate to moral judgments or beliefs), such as *believing that water (=H\(_2\)O) quenches [the] thirst*, of an agent called John, “depends on John’s brain state… as well as on the chemical structure of a sample of water to which John stands in a certain causal-historical relation.”\(^{29}\) Only the relevant intrinsic natural properties of water, as Hoffmann and Newen argue, form the supervenience base\(^{30}\) for the instantiation of high-level properties. The chemical structure of substances influences what the mind believes.

The overemphasis on the “mind-dependence of morality” is captured in Ryan’s assertion that “it is because of our mind’s having certain features of certain kinds that certain forms of behavior count as right.”\(^{31}\) Ryan is committing a similar error to the one Mengzi wanted to claim against Gaozi: oversimplification of correlations. Whereas Gaozi hastily concluded that natural properties have a commanding authority over our moral judgments based on assessment of an isolated case of social demand, Ryan hastily jumps to the conclusion that Mengzi’s rejection of externalism is an affirmation of the “mind-dependence of morality.”

---

\(^{27}\) Thanks to Prof. Angle for pointing out this possibility.


\(^{29}\) Hoffmann and Newen, 313.

\(^{30}\) Since supervenience is a concept that describes the systematic dependency of relationships (Hoffman and Newen, 1), the supervenience base meant here is therefore a dependency base.

\(^{31}\) Ryan, 2008, p.24
But some might say here that it was obvious that Mengzi claimed righteousness is internal and that this is in many respects consistent with a subjective view of morality and incompatible with externalism in general. Mengzi’s claim about the latter point is credited, since he finds Gaozi’s characterization of righteousness as external to be absurd. The former point about Internalism is rather contentious. Nuyen’s article offers the best help on this issue.

But first I must make some noise in solidarity with that help by criticizing Ryan’s interpretation of the special relationship among beings in certain social spheres as grounding for the account of Subjectivism and Internalism; to quote Ryan: “The implication is that our respect for people is due to our special relationship and affection for them.” If I read Ryan correctly, he seems to mean that we do not “act out of respect” towards the old horse although its whiteness is similar to the whiteness of the gray head of an elder, simply because we do not feel a relational connection to the old horse that is a special kind of relationship. The examples below will try to show that there are times when a human-object relationship is more special than human-human relationship.

Consecrated artifacts, especially in the ancient world, commanded a respect greater than the value of life itself. In most cases the price of sacrilege was life. Sometimes human relations did not matter in African communities that practiced human sacrifice. That is why it was not uncommon for the human will to be bent toward inhuman practices that honored these consecrated artifacts. Certain human-object relations could have been stronger than human-human relations. The fact that

32 Ryan, 2008, p.24
these very unfortunate events of human sacrifices used to happen proves the point that some objects, depending on the ideal they symbolized, may have some special relationship with particular individuals and therefore weakens the claim that human relations are set and static.

There must be a better reason why we feel more respectful toward an elderly person than toward the poor old horse. One shortcoming of this argument about human sacrifice is that I still maintain the importance of a special relationship, and so it serves as a weak rebuff to Ryan’s interpretation, if it can be granted that status at all. Anyways, it is about time to call in our help from Nuyen.

Nuyen excellently explains the different conceptions of Internalism among the ancient Confucians and among contemporary moral dialecticians. Nuyen says the term “internal” in this Gaozi-Mengzi debate refers exclusively to the motivational force within the agent. He argues against internalists’ misconceptions by citing the case of King Xuan described in Mengzi’s text [1A7]:

The King was sitting in the hall. He saw someone passing below, leading an ox. The King noticed this and said, "Where is the ox going?" "The blood of the ox is to be used for consecrating a new bell." "Spare it. I cannot bear to see it shrinking with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution." "In that case, should the ceremony be abandoned?" "That is out of the question. Use a lamb instead.

And here’s is Mencius analysis of this happening [1A7]:

'Should someone say to you, "I am strong enough to lift a hundred chun but not a feather; I have eyes that can see the tip of a new down

---

33 Lau’s translation.
but not a cartload of firewood," would you accept the truth of such a statement?"
'No.'
'Why should it be different in your own case? Your bounty is sufficient to reach the animals, yet the benefits of your government fail to reach the people. That a feather is not lifted is because one fails to make the effort; that a cartload of firewood is not seen is because one fails to use one's eyes. Similarly, that the people have not been tended is because you fail to practise kindness. Hence your failure to become a true King is due to a refusal to act, not to an inability to act.' 'What is the difference in form between refusal to act and inability to act?' 'If you say to someone, "I am unable to do it," when the task is one of striding over the North Sea with Mount T'ai under your arm, then this is a genuine case of inability to act. But if you say, "I am unable to do it," when it is one of making an obeisance to your elders, then this is a case of refusal to act, not of inability. Hence your failure to become a true King is not the same in kind as striding over the North Sea with Mount T'ai under your arm," but the same as "making an obeisance to your elders."

Though King Xuan is aware of his deontological requirement to “alleviate the suffering of his people” and though he has the necessary moral capacity to act according to this evaluation, he does not respond accordingly to the moral demand.

Nuyen argues that this does not show that King Xuan is incapable of any moral act, since as Mengzi mentions, he reacts swiftly to the suffering of an ox.

Nuyen explains that the presence of “defeating conditions” in the case where King Xuan fails to respond morally to people’s suffering (for example, as enumerated in the article, overexposure to suffering which desensitizes such moral sensibilities as pity) cancels the motivation to act even though King Xuan is aware of his obligation to respond to the suffering of the people.

Nuyen is also apt to point out that the connection between moral judgment and motivational factors is not contingent or necessarily dependent on individuals’
desires, as externalists claim. Nuyen uses Evan Simpson’s work to argue for the above statement.

Instead of limiting the moral debate to align with internalists’ and externalists’ basic ideas of logical necessity and logical contingency respectively, Simpson offers an alternate avenue he calls “logical dependency.”

He says, “Without sometimes being so motivated, the agent cannot be said to understand the meaning of the concept of suffering, hence cannot believe that anyone is suffering, and insofar as such belief is part of the emotion of pity, cannot be said to be capable of feeling pity.”

The above quotation implies that our affective states are connected to our intuitive knowledge and that our emotions are intelligible to a certain level. The capacity to have a certain disposition goes hand in hand with the ability to understand the conceptual underpinnings of such a disposition. They are logically dependent on each other, though other factors (defeating conditions) might undermine the relationship.

Nuyen assures us that Mengzi was aware of these “defeating conditions.” He cites Mengzi [1A7.8] who advocates that the gentleman avoids kitchen places (slaughterhouses). Exposure to the suffering of animals will result in revulsion toward meat and meaty products, and hence the gentleman’s diet will not be supplemented by this vital nutrient. The way to overcome such kinds of “defeating conditions” is to exercise a special type of avoidance.

34 Nuyen, [p. 8]
All of the above accounts have worked to refute the internalists’ and externalists’ accounts and thus it should be easy, I hope, to expose the fallacies of the subjective-relativist theory that Ryan had attributed to Mengzi and Confucianism in general. Without explaining the notions of Internalism and Externalism, and thus putting the corresponding Mengzi texts into their appropriate contexts, these same texts could have been used as evidence to challenge our arguments against the subjective-relativist construct.

We can now put aside refutation of the “mind-dependence of morality” and invoke Xiaomei Yang’s spirit in the next phase of analyzing the relationship between absolute values and means.

Yang argued against virtues’ instrumentality. Though I find some parts of Yang’s articles quite implausible, I do find her analysis of instrumental means and constitutive means compelling. Yang’s analysis resonates with the Confucian conception of the relationship between the Way and the ultimate objective value Ren [Rvn]35.

Yang says, “An action as an instrumental means to an end is not part of the end, and actions as a constitutive means to an end are partly constitutive of the end.”36 Yang tries to explain her point about constitutive means by arguing for a subjective intrinsic good in the activity of listening to music. The means of listening to music, and here “means” does not refer to media in the conventional sense but rather as the receptive process perceiving audio-neural signals, are inseparable from the

---

35 This Confucian term Ren [Rvn] is the absolute value or aim of morality.
36 Xiaomei Yang, 2006, p.118.
experiential good achieved by the action. This example, despite the slight chance that loopholes might be found at the metaphysical level (for example, one might question the absolute experiential good derived from listening to music), at least shows an ordinary way that means are constitutive of the ends. It is hard to separate the act of listening to music from the value derived from the act.

Can this notion be traced in Confucian ethics? We will dig out the answer to this question in the following passages from the *Analects*. “The Master said, If one morning he should hear of the Way, and that evening die, it is enough,” and “The Master said, “Is Ren [Rvn] really far away? If I want Ren [Rvn], then Ren [Rvn] is already there.” In these two quotes, hearing is not just an act of listening but it is an affective and psychological response to the knowledge about the Way. But if we see means as constituents of absolute values, these phrases “is already there” and “it is enough” make sense, and are consistent with other notions in Confucianism.

Somehow it looks like a contradiction of Confucian philosophy to suppose that Rvn “is already there,” bearing in mind Confucius’ hesitation to judge any gentleman (proficient in many practical skills) as having attained Ren [Rvn]; Ren [Rvn] had some quasi-transcendental qualities as an Ultimate value and it can be inferred from Confucius’ texts that even a lifetime commitment to the pursuit of Ren [Rvn] did not guarantee its actualization.

So what then does the phrase “is already there” mean, and what is the implication of “it is enough”? These phrases can be understood to mean that Ren

---

37 Brooks, The original Analects, 1996, [4.8]
38 Brooks, [7.3].
[Rvn] and virtues are co-joined. Once an individual starts to act virtuously, Ren [Rvn]
starts to grow in them. Virtuousness is not like the process of playing soccer and Ren
[Rvn] the goal that players are striving to score. Ren [Rvn] and Virtue are rather like
the process of playing music where the better skilled an individual gets the more
profoundly they engage with the effects of music on them.

I think having the mentality that moral means and absolute moral values are
distinct will consequently lead to assuming that there is an apparent contradiction in
the above quoted phrases to the whole ideology of Confucianism. Ryan falls victim to
this mentality for his interpretation that the sages’ means of addressing moral issues
were distinct. He sees the three different approaches adopted by the three sages as
distinct from the goals that these approaches aimed at. And since he could not find
flaws in the sages’ different approaches, Ryan argued that the choice of moral
character depends on the rationality of the agent only, the “mind-dependence of
morality.” He therefore assumed that moral choices or styles of virtuous living are
subjective projects undertaken by moral agents and all that matters is whether these
projects yield the desired final product. But had he correctly acknowledged the
influences of both external (circumstantial) factors and internal (like mind) factors, he
would not have fallen into this seemingly appealing trap of assuming the
instrumentality of virtues and the subjectivity of morality.
1e. Refuting Particularism

Particularism, as defined by Simon Kirchin, holds that the valence (the ‘moral contribution’)\(^{39}\) of a moral feature (reason) is variable depending on the moral situation. The subtle difference in the meanings of particularism and subjectivism is so miniscule that we may claim that the two have much in common. The difference could be that whereas subjectivism does not clearly state whether the moral reasons for action always remain the same when a moral situation is encountered, particularism takes a firm stand, claiming that one’s reasons for action lose polarity across multiple moral situations. Inspired by Prof. Angle’s comments, the hesitancy of subjectivism leads to the proposition that the source of variance for subjectivism originates from the self while the source of variance for particularism is the multiplicity of situations. Though we have tried to refute the subjectivist view of morality by arguing against Ryan’s “mind-dependence of morality” in the above section, that is not enough to silence subjectivism. It is important that we also attack objections raised by particularists, for doing so would seal possible cracks in our argumentation, which proponents of subjectivist theories might otherwise capitalize on.

We might argue that the character of the “ways,” in the ordinary sense, or “means” that the three sages adopted, was functionally different. The three sages found themselves in different situations and the moral principles deducible from their apparent character can be said to be different. Since they were sensitive to the context

---

of their situations, they needed to apply distinct moral principles in order to respond accordingly. But do the sages’ distinct moral principles mean to imply that Confucians endorsed a holism of moral reasons? Holism as defined in Jennifer Flynn’s article is as follows, “a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another…whether a feature of a situation is morally relevant will be dependent on other features of the situation.”

Since Flynn’s “holism” gives credibility to the effects of “defeating conditions” on the character of moral reasons for actions, particularists have assumed that holism of reasons actually supports their idea of the variability of reasons for actions. We will see why particularists are mistaken in this assumption through an argument offered in Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge’s article, “What Does Holism Have to Do with Moral Particularism?” First let’s bring the particularists’ argument into sharper focus by anticipating their interpretation of the action of Upright Gung described in the Analects, and their interpretation of the tale of the incident of Shun and the Blind Man in Mengzi.

40 Flynn, 2009, [p.141]
41 “The Prince of Shv was speaking to Confucius, and said, In our county there is one Upright Gung; his father stole a sheep and the son gave evidence against him. Confucius said, The upright ones in our county are different from this; a son will screen a father, and a father will screen a son. A sort of uprightness is involved in this also.” Brooks and Brooks, 1996, [13.18].

42 T’ao Ying asked, ‘When Shun was Emperor and Kao Yao was the judge, if the Blind Man killed a man, what was to be done?’ ‘The only thing to do was to apprehend him.’ ‘In that case, would Shun not try to stop it?’ ‘How could Shun stop it? Kao Yao had authority for what he did.’ Then what would Shun have done?’ ‘Shun looked upon casting aside the Empire as no more than discarding a worn shoe. He would have secretly carried the old man on his back and fled to the edge of the Sea and lived there happily, never giving a thought to the Empire.'
Particularists might interpret Confucius’ withholding of praise for Upright Gung’s strict rule-adherence to the state rules as a sign that Confucius was aware of the variable features of moral reasons for actions. They might add that Confucius suggests a different alternative, in which the son protects instead of telling on his father, and that Confucius remarks that this alternative is morally right – thus affirming that moral principles do not enforce a general pattern of moral behavior in all moral situations, since Confucius did not expect Upright Gung to stick to the script of institutional demands. Particularists might assert that Mengzi’s enthusiasm when speculating that Shun could have discarded his empire like a worn sandal in order to save his father (who is imagined to have committed murder and is thus morally ambiguous), adds more weight to their argument. They might argue that neither Confucius nor Mengzi saw the necessity for moral accountability since they were aware that moral reasons for action in various moral situations are infinite and are not statically dichotomous.

Erin M. Cline attempts to solve the conundrum in the Upright Gung passage by suggesting that filial responsibilities outweigh civic responsibility in Confucian ethics, and that based on Zhu Xi’s interpretation, the terminology used for “stealing” in the Analects passage is not the same as ‘habitual thievery” – i.e. there must have been some extenuating circumstances that forced Upright Gung’s father to steal. “For Kongzi [Confucius]…our responsibilities to our parents and children are different from – and greater than – our responsibilities to friends, colleagues…”43 Though this is quite a plausible way of interpreting the passage, the problem with it is that it

---

divides Confucian morality into two clusters: one operating on a civic level and the other on a filial level.

I do not think Confucius ever intended to create this dichotomy among moral doctrines. I think this error of reading that filial responsibility is prioritized, sprouts from a misjudgment of why Confucius focused on filiality and filial rituals. A closer look at the Upright Gung passage will show that Confucius’s suggestion to act filial is not an emphasis on the supremacy of filial responsibilities. The last line of the verse about Upright Gung ends: “A sort of uprightness is involved in this also.” I take the this line to mean the same thing as “there is also uprightness in this action.” We should be careful to note that this statement is not the same as a statement like “This is uprightness.” Now let us compare the differences in linguistic meaning of the above two statements.

The statement “A sort of uprightness is involved in this also” implies the possibility of there being other sorts of uprightness that are compatible with each and synergistic in the generic body of uprightness. The other statement “This is uprightness” implies no such possibility unless supported by context before or after it. “A sort of…” which can be deduced from the line “A sort of…” is descriptively different from the “This is…” of the phrase “This is uprightness...” The phrase “A sort of…” is an indicator in any linguistic context of a probable distinct and alternate nature of what is being described. But the other phrase “This is” only acknowledges one existent nature of what is being described and therefore can be interpreted as

---

44 Brooks and Brooks, 1996, [13.18].
asserting a particular position within a specified context; it is no surprise that other similar statements like “This is the Law” cannot be read as suggesting a certain mode of conduct but only as having an authoritative voice.

Looking at other scholarly translations of line [13.18] we find the Waley’s translation has the phrase ‘a sort of uprightness” and Lau’s translation goes “in such behavior is straightness to be found as a matter of course.” The Lau translation is consistent with the other interpretations we have explored; from the sentence we can infer that there is a probability of straightness or uprightness to be found in other actions that respond to the same situation as the one referred to in Lau’s translation. In this light, we can confidently argue that Confucius did not categorically assert that protecting the father and ignoring institutional demands was the absolute right way.

The criticism that follows here can be that our interpretation is so inclined due to a biased tendency in our thought. Some might argue that we are over-analyzing, without any substantial base, a figure of speech and as a result miss the intended meaning of the passage. Their view might hold that a statement like “a sort of…” might have culturally meant the same as the statement “This is…” We can respond to this form of criticism with Mengzi’s passage on [7B37.1].

Confucius is reported to have preferred associating with the wild and the squeamish (timid), to not

---

45 Mengzi said, "Kongzi [said,] If I do not get to associate with those who attain the Way, then must it not be those who are wild or squeamish? Those who are wild advance and grasp. Those who are squeamish have some things which they will not do. Did Kongzi not want those who attained the Way?! He could not be sure of getting them. Hence, he thought of the next [best]."

46 Analects [5.22], [8.16], [17.14] show that the notion of the Wild meant people who, though they are eloquent and skillful, are still susceptible to passions and erratic mannerisms.
associating with anyone at all. If the wild can model themselves on a gentleman, they can learn moral cultivation. The gentleman’s influence on the wild as Confucius puts it, is like the effect of wind on grass. Confucius criticized disassociation or asceticism since morality cannot be bred in isolation. The full functions of morality are actualized in a societal context.

Mengzi assures Wan Zhang that Confucius’ preference for the wild and squeamish does not indicate that this is an unbendable choice made by Confucius but should rather be viewed as a preferred choice when the truly desired choice cannot be attained; Confucius’ desire is to associate with those who have attained the Way. In a similar manner, we should follow Mengzi’s interpretation in interpreting verse [13.18]. We can rely more on Mengzi’s capacity to understand the nuanced cultural meanings than anyone after him, since he was one of the immediate generations after Confucius. Confucius might not actually be claiming that covering up for the father is

---

47 Analects.12:19. Ji Kangdz asked Confucius about government, saying, If I kill those have not the Way in order to uphold those who have the Way, how would that be? Confucius replied, You are there to govern; what use have you for killing? If you desire the good, the people will be good. The virtue of the gentleman is the wind; the virtue of the little people is the grass. The wind on the grass will surely bend it.

48 Lau’s translation: [18:7] Tzu-lu, when travelling with [Confucius], fell behind. He met an old man, carrying a basket on a staff over his shoulder. Tzu-lu asked, ‘Have you seen my Master?’ The old man said, ’You seem neither to have toiled with your limbs nor to be able to tell one kind of grain from another. Who may your Master be?’ He planted his staff in the ground and started weeding. Tzu-lu stood, cupping one hand respectfully in the other. The old man invited Tzu-lu to stay for the night. He killed a chicken and prepared some millet for his guest to eat, and presented his two sons to him. The next day, Tzu-lu resumed his journey and reported this conversation. The Master said, ‘He must be a recluse.’ He sent Tzu-lu back to see him again. When he arrived, the old man had departed. Tzu-lu commented, ‘Not to enter public life is to ignore one's duty. Even the proper regulation of old and young cannot be set aside. How, then, can the duty between ruler and subject be set aside? This is to cause confusion in the most important of human relationships simply because one desires to keep unsullied one's character. The gentleman takes office in order to do his duty. As for putting the Way into practice, he knows all along that it is hopeless.'
an absolute moral principle or his desired way of responding to this moral conundrum but rather, as a better choice preferable to other alternatives.

I will propose another alternative that Upright Gung could have taken to address the dilemma before him, which I think is consistent with what Shun did. Upright Gung should have turned himself in in place of his father. One advantage of this alternative, besides its being compatible with filiality in Confucian ethics, is that he does not sacrifice one moral principle to fulfill another. By assuming accountability, Upright Gung in a way screens his father. The father of course will feel ashamed of his actions and he will be humiliated to see that his son is suffering due to his own (the father’s) moral mistakes.

In ancient cultures, banishment was one of the harshest penalties. Ancient Chinese culture is no exception. Banishment would be even harder to Confucians, due to their conception of the self as centralized within the social sphere. I quote from Nicholas F. Gier to reiterate this point. “The more one penetrates into one’s inner self, the more one will be capable of realizing the true nature of one’s human relatedness…in fact, he sees little significance in solitariness, unless it is totally integrated into the structure of social relations.”49 In light of this Confucian notion of the self, Shun fleeing with the Blind Man should not be interpreted as negligence of some moral principle, but rather as a self-imposed banishment. Shun, though he will suffer like Upright Gung if he turns himself in, his joy will spring from the fact that he has acted morally, and that there is immense moral good in his action; Shun and The Blind Man will have a chance to screen each other.

49 Nicholas F. Gier – Confucius, Gandhi and the Aesthetics of Virtue, 2010, [p48].
The particularists’ hope that these passages were not consistent seems baseless now. This is not our only achievement. If an understanding that moral goodness aims at promoting the flourishing of an individual self and moral righteousness as aiming to promote societal flourishing can be allowed, we can see how Confucianism attacks this view via subjectivism and particularism. We argued earlier that variance in subjectivism originates from the self. But since the notion of the self has been, in Confucianism, upgraded from the confines or limits imposed by the margins of an agents’ body to include all the awareness and identities within and forming the broader societal circumference, we can argue that moral goodness therefore shifts its focus from the misconceived individual self to the societal self. And since all selves are included in the societal self, then the function of moral righteousness becomes identical to the function of moral goodness. Moral Righteousness therefore is an espousal or integration of moral goodness and moral righteousness.

Though this Confucian concept of Moral Righteousness cannot be reduced to a single analysis, the axis around which it revolves is not hidden from our inquiry. There are two notions that are jointly under the umbrella of the concept of Moral Righteousness. (1) The notion of Self-Preservation, which also mothers the implicit notion of Appreciating Categories of Importance. (2) The notion of Sympathetic Understanding. Therefore a principle of moral righteousness has to harmonize with these notions.

Mengzi describes the implicit notion of Appreciating Categories of Importance in verse [6A12.2]. He says, “…When one's finger is inferior to other
people's, one has sense enough to resent it, but not when one's heart is inferior. This is what is called a lack of knowledge of priorities.” Knowing the categories of importance is having a concrete sense of duty, of what duty comes before another. It has been documented in the *Analects* that Confucius was once told of a fire incident that had destroyed his stables. Instead of inquiring about the amount of wealth (horses) lost in the fire, he was concerned about the condition of the people who were around at the time of the incident.50

The notion of Self-Preservation entails awareness of and cultivating one’s moral capabilities; this can only happen when one knows the value of appreciating categories of importance. Mengzi argues against compromising one’s self, 51 for doing so contributes to a loss of sense of filial duty. Preserving one’s self means to nurture the greater parts so as not to lose one’s fundamental heart by means of nurturing the great parts. But how can one do so without first appreciating the categories of importance (for instance that the greater parts needs more attention and care than other lesser parts)? Mengzi says, “The parts of the person differ in value and importance. Now consider a gardener. If he tends the common trees, while neglecting the valuable ones, then he is a bad gardener. If a man who cares about food and drink can do so without neglecting any other part of his person, then his mouth and belly are much more than just a foot or an inch of his skin.”52 Responding accordingly to

50 *Analects* [10.11]
51 Preserving one’s self is the greatest... But I have never heard of losing one’s self yet still being able to serve one’s parents... Preserving one’s self is the root of all preservation.”
52 The parts of the person differ in value and importance. Now consider a gardener. If he tends the common trees, while neglecting the valuable ones, then he is a bad gardener. If a man who cares about food and drink can do so without neglecting any other part of his person, then his mouth and belly are much more than just a foot or an inch of his skin.
moral demands entails promoting one’s greater parts. Self-preservation should not be seen as an egoistic act but rather as taking part in moral activities that promote human flourishing.

The notion of Sympathetic Understanding involves having an affective response to a moral situation. It is internalizing moral principles and harmoniously exhibiting them in moral actions. In describing a moral agent with Sympathetic Understanding, Mengzi says, “He acted out of benevolence and righteousness; he did not act out benevolence and righteousness.”\(^{53}\) Elsewhere he says, “Nothing will get one closer to benevolence than to force oneself to act out of sympathetic understanding.”\(^{54}\) Sympathetic Understanding is best understood via a theatrical analogy. Acting out benevolence will be similar to spewing out lines while acting on stage, while acting out of benevolence is like a conversation where genuine sentiments are expressed.

As Mengzi mentioned, the sages discovered what delights our hearts, and since then this discovery has stood the test of time. If individuals keep their focus on the broader values of morality then they will be able to have clarity of mind on how they should act whenever institutional and personal goals seem to oppose each other, like in the case of Gung. In the long run, the individual will realize that the tension that seemed to have existed was just an apparition. The tension is apparent since moral agents idolize the few moral insights that they have found in Internalism, Externalism or Particularism by generalizing that those are all there are without

\(^{53}\) Mengzi [4B19.2].  
\(^{54}\) Mengzi [7A4.3].
looking for more insights beyond their favorable philosophical tradition. They are people who Mencius says try to extinguish fire with a single glass of water.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{55} Mengzi said, “Benevolence will overcome what is not benevolent just as water overcomes fire. Nowadays, those who practice benevolence are like someone who tries to save a wagonload of burning firewood with a single glass of water. When the fire is not extinguished, they claim that water cannot overcome fire. This aids what is not benevolent more than anything else does. In the end, all will be lost” [6A18.1].
CHAPTER TWO: SITUATIONAL MINUTIAE, MORAL
DEVELOPMENT AND MORAL PERCEPTION

2a. Introduction

In one way, the work of this paper is an elucidation of the two tenets of moral
goodness: That is, the notion of self-cultivation and sympathetic understanding.
The aim of this chapter is to show how some features of a situation, which moral
agents might think are inconsequential, can actually influence our moral perception.
Some examples of these situational features are what we in the last chapter (Moral
Righteousness) referred to as “defeating conditions.” Eric L. Hutton uses a better
terminology, situational minutiae, which I think captures how agents tend to
downplay the consequences of these features of situations.

In this chapter, we will examine the contemporary idea of Situationism
primarily as purported by John M. Doris\textsuperscript{56}. Through criticisms of this form of
Situationism offered by Edward Slingerland, Eric Hutton and Deborah S. Mower, we
will see the extent to which Doris’ views are accurate. This process will lead us to a
new conception of Situationism, different in meaning from the one held by Doris.

In the second section of this chapter, we will introduce the notion of moral
perception. The objective will be to explore the trilogical relationship among moral
tendencies, situational minutiae and moral perception. Moral tendencies refer to our

\textsuperscript{56} John M. Doris, \textit{Lack of Character}, Cambridge Press, 2002
inborn affective abilities to experience and express sentiments like compassion and sympathy. We will distinguish between what it means for detail features of a situation (situational minutiae) to be salient and what it means for an agent to be aware of various features of a situation without these features being salient to the agent.

The combination of the effects of salient situational minutiae and the realization of moral sentiments’ potency culminate in an enriched moral perception. But we will show that a narrative of moral perception alone does not accomplish the story behind moral motivation (this is where Doris and I differ slightly in our understanding of the concept of moral perception). More has to be said through an added concept of moral aesthetics to make the virtuous individual’s consistent bridging of the gap between moral action and judgment intelligible.

2b. *An Overview and Redefinition of Situationism*

Globalism, as defined by John Doris, is a philosophical view that moral “character”\(^{57}\) exists in robust form. Doris points out two (of the three\(^{58}\)) core characteristics of moral “character.” He states that for moral “character” to qualify as existent and robust it needs to pass the test of stability and consistency. Stability of a

---

\(^{57}\) Doris uses quotation marks on moral “character” to show his incredulousness at the notion of moral character. Though we (in this paper) disagree with Doris’ stance, we will keep using the quotation marks in order to argue for our case more strongly.

\(^{58}\) These are stability, consistency and integration. The first two characteristics are relevant to the works of this chapter.
moral “character” is proved when the moral “character” is manifested repeatedly whenever an agent encounters relevant conditions that should elicit the trait.\(^5^9\)

Consistency of moral “character” is proved in very similar ways as stability of moral “character,” the only difference being that a diversity of situations that are conducive to the production of the moral “character” is required.\(^6^0\) A moral agent needs to exhibit the same response whenever presented with the same situational conditions over time to show the stability of this reaction. Proving consistency of moral “character” is more demanding for the moral agent since the situational conditions presented to him are not similar and so demands that the moral agent has to be sensitive to the peculiar elements of these situational conditions that have the potential to elicit a particular reaction.

Doris then challenges globalism by arguing that psychological findings show that people do not have these stable and consistent moral “characters.” He uses psychological research findings that showed how the presence of a dime influences people’s behavior when they met a stranger. The study claims that those people who found a dime in a telephone booth prior to meeting a stranger were more inclined to

\(^{5^9}\) I will quote (below) Eric L. Hutton for a clearer understanding of the differences between Stability and Consistency of Moral “character”. [Eric L. Hutton, “Character, Situationism, and Early Confucian Thought”, Philosophical Studies: An International Vol. 127, No. 1, Jan., 2006] (1) Consistency. Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behavior across a diversity of trait-relevant eliciting conditions that may vary widely in their conduciveness to the manifestation of the trait in question. (2) Stability. Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behaviors over iterated trials of similar trait-relevant eliciting conditions.

\(^{6^0}\) Exams test the stability of a student’s character of honesty. Exams, relationships, sports are examples of a diverse range of situations that test the consistency of honesty in students.
help the stranger. Doris interpreted these findings to mean that situational factors, like the manipulation caused by the presence of the dime (and no matter how minute these manipulated factors are), had great influence on people’s behaviors. He therefore saw these psychological findings as an empirical challenge to virtue ethics theories since they (virtue ethic theories) are based on the assumption that moral “character” is stable and consistent over time. He argues that instead of calling these behaviors moral “character,” they should rather be referred to as local traits of behavior and therefore should not count as dispositional character as assumed by virtue ethicists. Moral “character,” as Doris argues, is ethically “fragmented.”

Situationism, in Doris’ view, therefore is the counter-argument to Globalism. Since the aim of this chapter is to explain the relation between moral perceptiveness and situational minutiae, we shall not dwell that much (though we wish we could) on explaining every nuanced notion of this version of Situationism, but we shall now investigate how other Confucian-oriented thinkers have questioned the credibility of this version of Situationism.

Edward Slingerland, accustomed to the meanings of statistical data used in psychological research, argued that these local traits (that is the behavior exhibited by

---

61 For the description of this experiment, refer to Eric L. Hutton’s article (2006), p. 39.

62 As Doris notes, “the problem is not that substantial situational factors have substantial effects on what people do, but that seemingly insubstantial situational factors have substantial effects on what people do” [2002, p. 29] From Deborah S. Mower’s article, Situationism and Confucian Virtue Ethics, Ethic Theory Moral Prac, Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2011

dime-experiment participants) do not qualify as moral “character.” The behavior exhibited by participants in the dime-experiment says nothing about the nature of moral “character.” Slingerland argues that Doris’ antiglobalism argument misses what he calls “aggregation effect.” The “aggregation effect” describes (in Slingerland’s terms) “the extent to which a clear correlation between character traits and behavior… [begins]… to emerge over repeated observations over a long period of time.” 64 This means that bits and more bits of a character are revealed over time. Slingerland argues that Doris’ observation and conclusion on local traits is based on a single occurrence of behavior and therefore does not qualify as enough evidence to refute the globalist account.

To support his suspicions about Doris’ description of local traits, Slingerland mentions the pivotal role played by Mischel’s work in showing that the 0.3 correlations (between a situation or cause supposed to elicit a certain condition or effect), claimed by antiglobalists (Doris) as negligible, is in fact a quite strong predictor of behavior. 65

To begin with, it is important to see that correlation coefficients in the 0.3 range are not a unique feature of personality research…Indeed the link between consuming aspirin and warding off heart attacks and link between chemotherapy and positive outcomes in breast cancer hover around 0.02 or 0.03 (that’s an extra zero), and yet this is deemed significant enough by the medical community to make recommendation of these interventions standard practice.

Slingerland also argues that the so-called local traits can be tutored into becoming true virtues (robust moral “character”) through moral training. “Though our

64 Slingerland, [2011, p. 395].
65 Slingerland, [2011, p. 397].
virtues start out by being local, they need not remain so.” Mower expresses the same view. We’ll get to her shortly.

Eric L. Hutton, on the other hand, responds to Doris’s claim that the notion of moral “character” is more a Western preoccupation than any others. Hutton argues that Doris’ claim is misleading by showing how the Confucian philosophy upon which Chinese culture is founded has strong characterological notions. He cites *Analects* 4.5, and argues that the “urgency” demanded by the situation has no effect on the stability and coherence inherent in the practice of Rvn. He also interprets Xunzi’s idea of single-mindedness as a conception of the perseverance and robustness of the moral “character.”

---

66 Slingerland, [2011, p. 405].
67 Doris asserts that according to psychological studies, “the conception of character at issue is substantially a cultural peculiarity, one considerably more prominent in Western cultures than in East Asian ones” [Hutton, 2006].
68 Characterological notion is Hutton’s term that refers to the robustness of moral “character.”
69 The Master said, Wealth and honor: these are what everyone desires, but if he cannot do so in accordance with his principles, he will not abide in them. Poverty and lowliness: These are what everyone hates, but if he cannot do so in accordance with his principles, he will not avoid them. If the gentleman avoids Rvn, how shall he make his name? A gentleman does not for the space of a meal depart from Rvn. In direst straits he cleaves to it; in deepest distress he cleaves to it. [Analects, 4.5].
70 Hutton is specifically responding to Darley and Batson experiments in which Princeton Theological Seminary students who were made to feel hurried failed to “help a person pretending to be in distress.” [Hutton, 2006, p. 41].
71 Hutton, 2006, p. 42. He quotes Xunzi “…single-minded in pursuit of ren and yi*…”
72 As I concur with Hutton, I would like to add that the history of Confucianism and the evolution of Chinese culture are not parallel. The two have actually had many historical points where they have influenced each other. It was not until recently, as late as the mid-20th century that Confucianism was formally excluded from Chinese schools’ curricula. But its (Confucianism’s) brief absence from educational curriculum is fading away.
To further support, Hutton’s refutation of Doris’ argument that conception of character is culture-specific, I would like to argue about an African conception of robustness of character. Doris might say that this attack does not involve any of his remarks (about the Eastern world). It should be noted that East is not a very well-defined concept (although Doris does specifically compare “Western” with “East Asian,” i.e. the place where Confucianism originates – perhaps we need to be specific and ask where Africa fits into this scheme. i.e. are there human universals concepts or just culture-specific concepts or both). There is no harm in showing the incorrectness of his (John Doris) generalization about cultural-specificity of the conception of robustness of moral “character.”

An African proverb, from the Swahili, goes as follows: “Tabia ni Ngozi” (Habit is skin). This proverb explains that it is as hard to change one’s character as it would be quite impossible to change one’s skin. Though situational factors (like skin make-up) might seem to change the natural appearance and course of a habit, this does not prove the non-existence of the habit. It is easy to relapse into original habits (as is the case with rehabilitated addicts). On the surface, it might seem that situational factors really dictate the course of behavior. From a different point of view, this relapsing actually tells a lot about the persistence of habits. Unlike Doris’ conception of the weakness of character, this proverb shows that there is a cultural understanding about the tenacity of character, and hence leans more toward a conception of a robust moral “character.”
In order to respond fully to Doris, let us now turn to Deborah S. Mower. She gives a plausible argument against Doris’ conception of Situationism by pointing out a distinction between two ideas: the regularity within situations and the flexibility of the Sages’ character. The differences between the ideas of regularity and flexibility is best seen through Mower’s other idea of three stages of moral development.

2c. Stages of Moral Development

In the first stage of moral development, character is weak and easily manipulated by situational minutiae. Mower corrects Doris’ attribution of this weakness in behavioral patterns to a weakness of moral “character,” by saying that character in the first stage of moral development has not yet qualified as a virtue. Mower does not deny that situational minutiae may have power to influence people’s behavior. She rather sees this potency in situational minutiae has essential to developing robust character. Though I disagree with Mower’s interpretation of what ritual means in Confucianism, I concur with her that the purpose of Confucian emphasis on rituals is to tap into these determinative powers of situational minutiae in developing robust moral “character.”

73 A good example of those that occupy this stage are young children and morally uncultivated commoners.
74 Like Slingerland, she says “What I cannot do is to attribute ‘honesty’ to her [friend] as a virtue or global character trait: despite our loose practice and sloppy language in making mental state attribution, our ontological postulates need to be modest.” [Mower, 2011, p. 20.]
75 “In the first stage of moral development, it is certainly true that rituals provide comprehensive models for behavior and thought, and that ritual practice instills these as psychological models.” [Mower, 2011, p. 18.]
Doris argued that the observed regularity of behavior is attributable to the stability and consistency of situations, and that this regularity of behavior should not be attributed to the nature of character. 76 Mower accepts that situations themselves are highly similar (regular and consistent). If someone in the first stage of moral development appears to act consistently, it is due to the similarity of the situations that that person has encountered. In the second stage of moral development, the story is different.

Mower asserts that the difference between the person in the first and second stages of moral development is that the former is only aware of the explicit situational conditions while the latter sticks to the implicit essence of the situational conditions. As Mencius pointed out, a virtuous person would save a drowning sister-in-law while the uncultivated-morally person would blindly stick to a custom that prohibited touching in-laws 77.

A virtuous person (in the third stage of moral development) may seem to have acted irregularly whenever he or she departs from the “letter of the…” situational conditions (explicit rituals). Mower argues that a virtuous person, through deliberation, 78 accords with the essence of the situational rituals instead of blindly

76 Mower, 2011, p. 5. To cite Doris…
77 Mengzi, 2008 [4A17]
78 This point is implied also in Prof. Angle’s statement in his article “Seeing Confucian ‘Active Moral Perception’ in Light of Contemporary Psychology”, Wesleyan University, 2011: “A second theme, though, is that conscious cultivation also plays an important role, though typically at later ages (adolescence and young adulthood, in particular).” [Angle, 2011, p. 7.] Just as the development of cognitive abilities enables youths to be responsible individuals, so does deliberation or cultivation of the mind to a moral agent.
following the superficial demands of a situation. The flexibility of a sage,\textsuperscript{79} having internalized the essence of situational minutiae (thus explaining why the sage is in the third stage of moral development), is therefore not a result of the irregularity of his or her behavior but due to a consistent adherence to the \textit{essence} of the rituals. Internalizing the essences of rituals means fully grasping the meaning of moral principles and having the capacity to respond to their (moral principles’) respective demands with ease and efficacy.

Doris’ mistake, as Mower points out, is overemphasizing the effects of determinative features of a situation on moral character and generalizing that the concept of Situationism as having deleterious effects on all moral “character.” It seems like Doris did not consider the possibility of three stages of moral development. Mower asserts, “Situationism serves as a competing hypothesis if one assumes that type-level psychological models have no developmental or social role of enforcement in structuring situations.”\textsuperscript{80} In light of these stages of moral development, the psychological conception of Situationism loses credibility in the upper stages.

How can Doris possibly reply to these criticisms, from Hutton, Mower and Slingerland? Here are some of the ways I speculate he could air his objections. He

\textsuperscript{79} The differences between the virtuous person at the second stage of moral development and the sage is that the latter acts with ease while the former has to apply himself in deliberative acts through force and labor. Mower quotes Xunzi, “For the perfected person, what forcing oneself, what steeling oneself, what precariousness is there?” Mower, 2011, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{80} Mower, 2011, p. 35.
might take advantage of Ivanhoe’s statements that ethical taste and character do not develop on their own by (Doris) claiming that situational minutiae play a primal role in moral development and therefore everything is owed to them. Or he might respond that the flexibility of the sages is actually an attempt by the sages to accommodate the influence of situational minutiae and therefore moral character in this sense loses authorship of moral reactivity.

And to Slingerland’s argument, Doris might remark that whether a 0.3 correlation is weak or strong depends on what is being compared on both ends. Doris might want to stick to the doctrine that robustness of moral “character” should imply a 100 percent occurrence of a moral “character.” If moral “character” is not evident in psychological experiments, then there is more credibility in arguing for what is evident than for what is not visible.

What we can recommend to Doris is a new definition of the concept of Situationism. Doris should understand that these criticisms are not attacks to all his claims but rather a correction of them. There is a general consensus that situational minutiae have influential capacity, especially in the first stage of moral development. There are people who get stuck in these first stages of moral development their entire lives. If it happens that these people are the ones taking part in the psychological experiments, the data achieved will only be true for that particular group and possibly consistent with Doris anti-globalist argument.

The power of situational minutiae is not the whole story behind development of moral “character.” Though situational minutiae play a significant role in moral development, Doris should understand that this situational impact on moral “character” is only possible because of the groundwork already laid down by our innate moral tendencies.

As Mencius argues, “Humans all have the feeling of compassion…the feeling of disdain…the feeling of respect…the feeling of approval and disapproval…”\(^{82}\)
Without these moral tendencies, nothing would be achieved morally. What situational minutiae do are but to shape this tendencies. I will interpret Angle’s idea of “maturity of commitment”\(^{83}\) to mean the full growth of these moral tendencies. Once this maturity is reached, moral “character” attains a robust quality. Mengzi argues, “The feeling of disdain is righteousness…”\(^{84}\) The emphasis on the presence of these sentiments is clear and strong. We can infer that Confucians see innate moral tendencies as the foundation of moral growth; the vital components of moral progress. Situational minutiae play a secondary and temporal role though not in any way an unimportant one.

The new concept of Situationism should accommodate this view of the three stages of moral development. Doris’s psychological findings (if put in the right context of interpretation within moral reality) are equally essential in helping moral

\(^{82}\)Mengzi [6A67].

\(^{83}\)Prof. Stephen Angle, “Establishing a commitment is to nurture or preserve a ‘good thought.’ When one can do this always, one’s commitment has matured and one can act with sagely ease.” [Angle, 2011, p. 12.]

\(^{84}\)Mengzi [6A67]
agents understand why Confucians emphasized rituals and self-cultivation.

Situationism should not be seen as an antithesis to the globalist argument but rather as elaborating some empirical facts that the globalist account does not articulate clearly. Situationism is safe if it is therefore understood as the notion that situational minutiae have an influential capacity in the lower stages of moral development.

2d. Rituals and Moral Perception

Confucianism delves into harnessing the determinative powers of situational minutiae. Special situational minutiae, or as Confucians would refer to them, rituals, that are responsible for the cultivation of moral tendencies are given utmost attention by Confucian scholars. There are situational minutiae that have no ritual significance. For instance certain types of dressing modes can either be a matter of personal taste or economic capabilities without necessarily symbolizing allegiance to a particular form of religion or conception of morality.85 Ritualistic practices advocated by Confucians revolve around situational minutiae that have moral significance.

What might distinguish a mature Confucian agent from a layperson is the object(s) of his or her attention in the moral sphere. Morally significant features stand out to a Confucian due to two factors: first, the Confucian devotion to the Way and second, their everyday engagement in ritual practices. The former factor is a deliberative act in that a Confucian does not accidentally follow the morality of the

85 Confucius cites this example to show that some situations can change and this change might not have any moral bearing. Analects 9:3. The Master said, The hemp cap has been customary, but now silk is cheaper. I follow the majority…
Way, but does so unconstrained and without being compelled by higher authority or external force, consciously of his own volition.

Confucians maintain that the behavioral effects (more or less like skills) garnered from everyday ritualistic practice cultivate a strong moral identity that is a reflection of one’s increased moral capabilities. This in turn strengthens one’s attentive capacities toward these morally significant features. In the daily struggle to search for a moral identity across multiple situations, one develops the skill and ability to notice these morally significant features. The ability to recognize these morally significant features of situations is directly proportional to the extent to which one’s moral tendencies have been cultivated. Moral tendencies, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, are sentiments that Confucians believe to be essential in moral practices, such as sympathy.

The trilological relationship between moral tendencies, ritualistic situational minutiae and moral perception can be simplified as follows: Ritualistic situational minutiae function to nurture and bring to maturity a person’s inherent moral tendencies. Attentiveness to morally relevant features of situations is complemented by the extent to which the capacities of these moral tendencies have been cultivated. This attentiveness to morally significant situational minutiae brings about the salience of their (morally significant features of situations) relevance and also the irrelevance of the morally insignificant situational minutiae existing within the content of the situation.

---

86 Ritualistic situational minutiae means situational minutiae that have moral implications.
This attentiveness to the salience of morally significant features of situations is precisely what we refer to in this chapter as moral perception. We should remember that it includes attention to both the morally significant and the irrelevant situational minutiae. The term “attention” rightly captures the concept of moral perception in Confucianism since the term clearly shows a distant relationship between moral perception, which is a special type of attention, and the motivation to want to respond accordingly. When Confucians speak of moral perception they do not necessarily imply a concept that enshrines both perception and motivation. Moral motivation is a different concept apprehended and achieved at latter stages of moral development.

The trilogical relationship is in a way synergistic. The foundation of the institution of morality, Confucians would argue, is possibly due to the existence of moral tendencies. Confucians believe that human beings all share a basic endowment of moral tendencies, though in uncultivated forms. Even at early stages, a human being has (very limited) sensitivities to particular morally significant situational minutiae. Mengzi argues,

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, whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human. The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of
observance of the rites; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom. Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs.\textsuperscript{87}

But these limited sensitivities are not strong enough to pick out other morally significant minutiae; their scope is limited. The use of rituals activates these moral tendencies. An example of such morally significant ritualistic practices encouraged by Confucians is the three-year mourning period for deceased parents. This ritual helps to cultivate our capacity to grieve and feel sympathy for the suffering. The goal of this cultivation is to ensure that other similar situations will elicit these sentiments and therefore warrant the proper response.

A persistent devotion to ritual practices safeguards a continuous cultivation of moral tendencies. With the expression and cultivation of rituals, moral tendencies gain adequate strength, and as a result the moral agents become more attentive and focus on a wider scope of morally significant situational minutiae. An increase in sensitivity to morally significant features of situations, plus a continual devotion to rituals, together affects the agent’s attention capacity. In this way, it can be argued that a continual devotion to ritual practices increases moral sensitivities that in turn further one’s devotion to ritual practices. The trilogical relationship therefore feeds and builds on each part of the relations.

From the above paragraphs we have stated that moral perception is attentiveness to morally significant situational minutiae and we have separated this view from moral motivation. But the question remains, if moral perception deals with attentiveness to morally significant situational minutiae, where does a moral agent

\textsuperscript{87} Lau’s translation, Mengzi [2A:6]
draw his or her motivation? Can an agent be motivated to act morally without perceiving moral features in a situation? And what do we mean by attentiveness to morally significant situational minutiae? Is it simply awareness of these morally significant situational minutiae or does it include understanding as well? If we claim that it is both awareness and understanding (apprehension) of the existence of these morally significant situational minutiae, are we relapsing back to the old externalism view that we argued against in the previous chapters? What is at stake when we distinguish moral perception from moral motivation, and does this distinction hold?

In the Western philosophical world, there is a view that holds that apprehension of the salient morally significant situational minutiae naturally motivates one to act according to that apprehension. This view holds that saliency of the morally significant features overrides contradictory influences of other features in a situation, so that the agent will have specific moral expectations. Thus, moral perception, according to this view, entails having reasons for action as well as the capacity to act.

How is the Confucian conception of moral perception distinct from the above view and do Confucians stand a chance or correcting the Western view? To address the above concerns, let us explore an important article by Charles Starkey entitled “On the Categories of Moral Perception.”

---

Starkey explores different conceptions of moral perception and offers an alternate account. He identifies three broad views of moral perception and identifies their strengths and weaknesses: Normative moral perception, sympathetic and empathic moral perception, and action-guiding moral perception. Since the above accounts admit to particular faults he identifies, Starkey takes up the task of proposing a better account. He names his version of moral perception “Appraisable Moral Perception.” He then claims that his account possesses the strengths of the three original accounts of moral perception while escaping their flaws.

As we explore Starkey’s article, we will be asking ourselves whether these accounts, together with the one that Starkey offers, have anything in common with the Confucian account of moral perception. To foretell the outcome of this analysis, we will find that Starkey’s account of moral perception, appraisable moral perception, has much in common with the Confucian account, but falls short of being identical in one respect: It does not take into serious consideration the role of moral tendencies in moral perception.

Unlike Starkey, I will argue that without a minimal cultivation of moral tendencies, moral sensitivities are functionless. As a result, this lack of adequate power in our moral tendencies impedes the act of perceiving morally significant situational minutiae and consequently weakens the possibility of acting morally. Going with the same gospel of the previous chapters, this Confucian account of moral perception will discredit the claim of moral perception at lower stages of moral development. If at these stages (the first stage of moral development) an individual
(belonging in this first stage) carries out a moral act, it is purely accidental and hence
does not qualify as a moral action. It is important that we maintain a high standard
definition of moral action in order that we may avoid the deceit of semblance and
accidental moral acts, and in order that we may always be aware of our lacking moral
actions and hence not be trapped in a form of moral complacency.

Starkey begins his account by critiquing normative moral perception and
sympathetic and empathic moral perception. Normative moral perception, as Starkey
describes it, is perception governed by concepts of the rightness and wrongness of an
action. Starkey argues that in normative moral perception, an individual engages less
with moral judgments or the weighing of moral principles, but rather naturally
perceives the nature of the action before him or her. Starkey uses an example of
hoodlums harming a helpless cat, claiming that anyone can point out the wrongness
of such an action. If someone asks him or herself how he or she arrived at such a
conclusion, most people will just say that they know that such an action is wrong.
Due to lack of further analysis or justification in choices of actions carried out by
individuals, these perceptions are categorized as normative moral perceptions.
Starkey argues, “it seems more like a perception and less like a judgment or
deliberate inference that torturing the cat is wrong.” Through this normative moral
perception, people generally recognize when a moral norm has or has not been
violated.

In sympathetic and emphatic moral perception, Starkey argues that one of the
primary components is the compassionate sensitivity that is attributed to this

89 Charles Starkey, On the Category of Moral Perception. p. 79.
perception. Since Iris Murdoch is one of the main proponents of this view of moral perception, Starkey describes how Murdoch conceptualizes this form of moral perception. Compassionate sensitivity involves use of compassionate feelings and mental powers of attention. These two factors combined, influence how we see particular situations and the morally significant features within them.

Attention to morally significant features is not just a clinical act, but is comprised of a compassionate attachment to these features. Attention is “the loving gaze directed at the individual reality.” Starkey uses the famous Murdoch example of a mother-in-law’s perception of her daughter-in-law to explain how compassionate sensibility shapes moral perceptions. The mother-in-law is imagined to have an unfavorable judgment of the character of her daughter-in-law, but later changes her view upon further deliberation and reflection. In this way, the initial judgment formed by the mother-in-law lacked sensitivity to the positive aspects of her daughter-in-law’s character and was therefore flawed. But the final reconciliation between the mother-in-law’s perception and the daughter-in-law’s character illustrates the power of attending to wide aspects of individual realities. “To see someone justly and lovingly is to see her as she really is but compassionately so, and this dramatic shift in perspective is the result of moral imagination and moral effort.” Without this attention to morally significant features of situations we cannot respond compassionately to morally demanding situations.

---

90 Starkey [p. 81]
91 Starkey [p. 81]
From Starkey’s argument, one advantage that sympathetic and empathic moral perception has over normative moral perception is the expansion of the moral domain to include both our subjective moral judgments and the consequences of the judgments in relation to action. Whereas normative moral perception focuses on moral acts alone, so that an individual must act in order to fail or succeed morally – in sympathetic and emphatic moral perception, an individual can be a moral failure due to inadequate or lack of attentiveness to morally significant features of situations, without calling into consideration his or her actions.

Here is a quotation from Starkey’s article to clarify the above point, “Another way is that Murdoch's conception of moral perception focuses on relations between people and the proper governance of such relations, but part of the moral domain can include perceptions that may have no morally relevant effect on other people, such as self-indulgent behavior and situations in which one's own well-being is seriously threatened.”

Starkey argues that even if the mother-in-law’s perception might not have any harmful effect on her daughter-in-law, especially if her daughter-in-law is deceased, the mother-in-law’s perception is still worthy of moral accountability. Morality is expanded not only to the rightness or wrongness of actions, which is mainly judged through an assessment of the harm or benefit an action has on individuals, but also to the subjective judgments of the individuals.

---

92 Starkey [p. 83]
Starkey further argues that both normative moral perception and sympathetic and empathic moral perception fail to arrive at a single and constant characterization of moral perception that is evident in all morally demanding situations.

“In both of the characterizations above, moral perception is defined by the content of the perception. In the case of normative moral perception, the relevant content is concepts of moral right and wrong. With sympathetic moral perception, the relevant content is the sympathetic or empathetic quality of the perception.”

Starkey argues that (I will try to refute this point later in the following paragraphs) there are times in which individuals are required to act uncompassionately in order to help out another person in need. Therefore, to argue (Starkey’s argument) that moral perception must always be composed of compassionate sensitivity is to lose the aim of morality. In the case of normative moral perception, the concepts of rightness and wrongness are not always accessible. Moreover (Starkey proceeds), this is to expect too much of individuals who are not yet fully rational and who have high chances of succumbing to their passions and appetites.

After describing the weakness of the above moral perceptions, Starkey goes on to argue for a stronger version of moral perception, which he ultimately finds implausible. This is action-guiding moral perception. At first, Starkey declares that one advantage that this account of action-guiding moral perception has over the previous accounts of moral perception is that it does not have to rely on any specific content to qualify its account. “Such an account is not content-specific in the sense that there is no one particular content that is constitutive of moral perception. Rather,

93 Starkey [p. 84]
moral perception is defined by its relation to morally relevant action, and particularly its ability to produce such action.”

He goes ahead to define moral action or virtue as an action that promotes the flourishing of both individuals and humanity at large, while vices are defined as actions that are counter-productive to this goal. An action-guiding moral perception will guide an individual to pursue virtues and avoid vices. “The category of moral perception is defined by the role of perceptions in producing such actions.”

Starkey points out one advantage that action-guiding moral perception has over normative moral perception and sympathetic and empathic moral perception. Unlike normative moral perception, the content of which are concepts of rightness and wrongness, action-guiding moral perception is not subject to any concrete content, but is rather defined by an ideal of human flourishing. Starkey quotes Aristotle who he sees as the chief advocate for this form of perception. “This perception is not the kind with which [each of our five senses apprehends] its particular object, but the kind with which we perceive that in mathematics the triangle is the ultimate figure.” Starkey explains further that “one's proficiency in making correct choices regarding action-guiding perception is based on perception that is akin to the grasping or recognition of the conclusion of a geometrical analysis.” An individual with the appropriate action-guiding moral perception has the right moral

---

94 Starkey [p. 84]
95 Starkey [p. 84]
96 Starkey [p. 85]
97 Starkey [p. 86]
disposition just like a student who has mastered mathematics has the right mathematical concepts.

This right moral disposition, Starkey argues, determines how an individual acts in different situational contexts; for the same reason that an expert student applies the same mathematical concept to different mathematical problems. Thus, action-guiding moral perception helps individuals respond unambiguously morally to diverse moral situations using particular narrowly-framed moral codes.

Though Starkey sees action-guiding moral perception as more promising than previous accounts of moral perception, he still finds it inadequately convincing. One shortcoming of this account, Starkey points out (and this is where he abandons McDowell’s bandwagon), is its assumption that the perception of a correct reason for action trumps other various ways that an individual could act. Starkey argues that, “a perceptual state that focuses on one course of action and silences all others may result in too blunt an understanding of the complexities of the situation. So though silencing may be appropriate at times, it is not an essential feature of moral perception, let alone appropriate moral perception.”98 As I interpret Starkey’s attack on McDowell’s account, it seems that the action-guiding moral perception is focused solely on moral actions and acting, and ignores the fact that an individual may be described as morally incorrect in her or his intentions prior to acting. Furthermore, mastering a mathematical concept or having the right disposition does not guarantee appropriate execution of anticipated demands.

98 Starkey [p. 87]
Starkey argues that an individual may also be moral even if his or her actions are not “moral” per say. This case happens, for example, when an individual has good intentions but his or her actions unfortunately produce unforeseen negative consequences. “A person may have a praiseworthy perception even if no consequences result from it, just as one might have a courageous frame of mind even if no act ensues from it.”\textsuperscript{99} Due to this shortcoming in action-guiding moral perception, Starkey goes ahead to propose his account of moral perception, which he believes to possess all the advantages of the above accounts of moral perceptions and none of their shortcomings. This is his account of appraisable moral perception.

Starkey explains “appraisable” moral perceptions as “morally appraisable perceptual apprehension.”\textsuperscript{100} By this he means moral perceptions that attract either commendation or condemnation to themselves. There is no content in particular that defines this form of moral perception except this property of appraisability or assailability.

Moral perception is defined by its moral appraisability (and by extension the moral appraisability of the perceiver) rather than by a particular content within the moral perception, and that moral perception understood in this way is that class of perceptions that are morally appraisable. By “appraisable” I mean that moral perception has the property of being a commendable or assailable perception—a perception that is rightfully the object of moral approval or censure.\textsuperscript{101}

Starkey points out a few examples to illustrate his point. He argues that a manager may justifiably reprimand an employee, but if the manager does this in front of other employees and thus makes the reprimanded employee feel humiliated, he

\textsuperscript{99} Starkey [p. 88]  
\textsuperscript{100} Starkey [p. 88]  
\textsuperscript{101} Starkey [p. 91]
fails in his moral perception. With commendable moral perception, the manager will not only know the right occasion to do a just act, but also how to go about doing it. Thus fully commendable moral perception points out all relevant aspects of a situation to the moral agent, such as the presence of other employees that might make the targeted employee feel humiliated.

Starkey believes that every situation contains uniquely diverse aspects. The dynamism and heterogeneity of moral situations therefore calls for multiple perceptions and perspectives. Starkey argues that appraisable moral perception promotes this rich consideration of all aspects of a situation, unlike the content-specific natures of normative moral perception and sympathetic and empathic moral perception. He argues that in appraisable moral perception, “the content of the category is subject to change but is nonetheless stable, because it is tethered to the institution of morality, which is itself stable.”\textsuperscript{102} Thus appraisable moral perception is not tied down by a narrow conception of right or wrong attributed to a particular spacial-temporal reality.

Starkey also asserts that the advantage of appraisable moral perception to action-guiding moral perception is that subjective judgments of people can also be assailed or commendable. “This perception embodies a certain moral quality in the perceiver, and if it is part of a consistent pattern, it is constitutive of a morally relevant trait that can be attributed to the perceiver.”\textsuperscript{103} From the manager’s action in

\textsuperscript{102} Starkey [p. 95]
\textsuperscript{103} Starkey [p. 90]
the previous example, Starkey argues that we can tell both the kind of employee
being reprimanded and also the kind (in terms of character) of a manager she or he is.

Starkey argues that by taking into account various aspects of moral situations
we can see that appraisable moral perception has the compassionate sensitivity of
sympathetic and empathic moral perception without possessing its shortcoming of
being overly compassionately sensitive. “Excellence in moral perception involves a
matrix of perceptual sensitivities and skills that are indeed complex, but which are all
the more important to develop for being so.”

And the common characteristic of
these diverse perceptual sensitivities is their property of assailability or
commendability.

There are many similarities and a few important differences between
Starkey’s and Confucians’ conceptions of moral perception. We will start with the
positive elements found in both conceptions.

The properties of assailability and commendability are definitely at the core of
a Confucian understanding of what constitutes moral and immoral actions, but in
addition to these properties, another element is crucial to determining whether an
action qualifies as moral or immoral: the measure of whether the action positively
contributes to the thriving of humanity. Starkey recognizes this essentiality when he
argues that “Virtues are typically those that contribute to thriving, and vices are those
that do not. The category of moral perception is defined by the role of perceptions in
producing such actions.”

Starkey does not specifically describe what kind of
thriving he is referring to—there could be a selfish personal enhancement or a

104 Starkey [p. 90]
105 Starkey [p. 93]
collective enhancement. Confucians are clearer on what they mean by human thriving through morality than Starkey is.

In Confucianism, moral actions aim at promoting both the wellbeing of individuals and that of the greater society. Thriving is understood from a societal relational point of view. Confucians argue that rulers’ upright conduct not only affects, but also changes the status quo of their subjects. This is of course in addition to enhancing the rulers’ moral and political status. Rulers should be model gentlemen for the public so that they strive to emulate his conduct and thereby maintain harmony and order in society. There are many texts that support the idea that virtues are both contagious and function primarily to promote the collective self.

Having a collective self does not mean that the individual self is forsaken. The three sages are said to have acted radically in ways that jeopardized both their individual and societal identities. But the risk (jeopardy) does not exist (as we also noted in chapter one); it is only a preoccupation of an amateurish moral agent. Mencius argues that, termination of life is not the worse thing that can happen to a morally cultivated agent.

Mencius said, "Fish is something I desire (yu); bear's paw [a Chinese delicacy] is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake fish and select bear's paw. Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness. Life is something I desire, but there is something I desire more than life. Hence, I will not do just anything to obtain it. Death is something I hate (wu), but there is something I hate more than death. Hence, there are calamities I do not avoid. If it were the case that someone desired nothing more than life, then what [means] that could obtain life would that person not use? If it were the case that someone hated nothing more than death, then
what would that person not do that would avoid calamity? From this we can see that there are means of obtaining life that one will not employ. From this we can [also] see that there are things which would avoid calamity that one will not do. Therefore, there are things one desires more than life and there are also things one hates more than death. It is not the case that only the moral person has this heart. All humans have it. The moral person simply never loses it.  

This kind of risk in moral pursuits that an amateurish moral agent experiences results from lack of prioritizing moral values and a distorted and unbalanced conception of the self; for the mature Confucian agent, self is situated in the broader social relational context.

Though moral agency emerges through individual efforts and intentional application, the aim of such a task is not to self-enhance the seemingly individual self, nor is it to neglect this conscious awareness of the individual moral identity, like in the cases of moral sainthood in Susan Wolf’s account; rather, it is to eradicate this delusional conception of an isolated individual self and at the same time to enhance the thriving of all identities within society. “The Master said virtue is not solitary. It must have neighbors.” There is an even stronger statement that supports the above argument. “Yen Ywaen asked about Ren [Rvn]. The Master said, “To overcome the self and turn to propriety is rvn. If one day he can overcome himself and turn to rvn, the world will turn to Ren [Rvn] along with him. To be Ren [Rvn] comes from the self; does it then come from others?” The conception of the self is a hybrid of individual and societal identities.

---

106 Mengzi, [6A10:1]  
107 Analects [4:25]  
108 Analects [12:1]
The Confucian conception resonates to a great extent with that of many African communities’ conception of the self. In these communities there is a saying that “I am because We are and We are because I am.” Like Confucians, these communities believe that the combination of individual and societal identities form the fabric of the self.

The argument in the above paragraph supports the claim that moral and immoral actions are determined by the extent to which they promote or undermine overall societal thriving. In this respect, the appraisability and assailability properties are inherent in moral and immoral actions. But these are not the only properties that moral and immoral actions possess—they also determine how we relate to both the societal and the individual self. Starkey discounts the account of action-guiding moral perception since it excludes perceptions that do not necessarily have consequences to other selves within the social frame.

The main differences between Starkey and Confucians emerge over how moral perception fulfills the role of motivating individuals to respond to moral demands. Starkey argues, “The decision about how to act or feel about something is often contained within the perception itself, rather than presented by perception for subsequent evaluation and deliberation. Here, perception marks out not only what is at stake but also what to do.”\(^{109}\) Though this might sound plausible at first reading, Starkey’s account goes beyond the capacity of moral perception if examined from a Confucian point of view.

\(^{109}\) Starkey [p. 86]
In Confucianism, the concept of moral perception has been distanced from the concept of moral motivation. Through moral perception, a moral agent grasps only the morally significant features in a situation, but nothing more. To respond to moral demands as determined by the presence of these morally significant features of the given situation, depends on two other factors: the stage of an individual’s moral development and one’s ability to experience the aesthetic relation of these morally significant features, which we have called Moral Beauty.

To find support for the above claim, let us turn to some texts in Confucian literature. The Master said, “My character not being cultivated, my studies not being pursued, hearing the right and not able to follow it, being not good and unable to change it: these are my anxieties.” How I understand this term “right” is that it broadly encompasses apprehension of all morally significant features of a situation.

My interpretation of the above quotes is that there are times when perception of all morally significant features fails to motivate a person to an appropriate, or in our case an appraisable, moral response. This lack of a commendable moral response can be attributed to two factors: the “defeating conditions” of situations and the “seduction” of archaic habits. “Defeating conditions” of situations influence and magnify the impact of contradicting immoral desires. This effect, together with the previous opiate-like conditionings of previous habits, creates a relapse to the

---

110 Analects [7:3]
111 Habits that individuals have developed over a long period of time – for instance rehabilitated addicts’ previous addictive life. Seduction is in the sense of the appeal that might cause a rehabilitated addict to relapse to their former habits.
unintentional moral character even when individuals intellectually and perpetually know what is right.

Moral perception is but one essential building block in the effort toward a consistent moral response across many distinct situations. Confucians argued that this imbalance between our moral perception and the inadequacy of our moral motivation stems from our moral tendencies. Moral perception is quite unhelpful if moral tendencies are uncultivated. Confucians, being aware of this fact, emphasize a great number of ritual practices. The essence of rituals is therefore the cultivation of moral tendencies in order that moral perception may operate to its fullest. 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.”¹¹² An individual can perceive all the morally significant features in a situation—the commands of heaven—and yet be hindered by prior habits. Ritual practices break the spell of the previously conditioned life and cultivate one to aspire toward moral well-being.

When Starkey criticized sympathetic and empathic moral perception, he argued that moral action could sometimes be a non-sympathetic action. “Moral perception at times does and should involve a lack of charitable vision.”¹¹³ Confucians on the other hand argue that moral tendencies such as sympathy and empathy are essential for moral character and hence that filiality and compassion are

¹¹² Analects [2:4]
¹¹³ Starkey [p. 83]
central to moral living. Is this Confucian view reconcilable with Starkey’s criticism? Or who got what wrong?

Here is how Starkey argues his point:

Imagine, for example, the psychological abuse of a man, Nelson, toward his brother, Herbert. Nelson consistently engages in harsh criticism of his brother, belittles Herbert at any opportunity, and intentionally performs acts that will upset Herbert, such as giving away or destroying family heirlooms that mean nothing to him but which he knows Herbert cherishes. We may make efforts to understand the causes of Nelson’s behavior, including feelings of inadequacy, similar behavior by his parents in years past, and other possible causes. But here, the proper sort of moral perception involves not being compassionate, that is, not seeing Nelson or his actions in a charitable light.114

Starkey takes issue with compassionate sensitivity and argues that if moral perceptions are always compassionate sensitivities then we may fail to perceive the individual realities of situations. That compassionate sensitivity might at other times cloud our judgment.

There are two ways we can argue against Starkey’s point. One is that observing the reality of Nelson’s actions also entails observing in the truest sense the reality of Herbert’s experiences. Any response we pursue is a response to the two distinct realities—both Herbert’s suffering and Nelson’s demeaning. Moral perception encompasses both of these realities. We must possess sufficient moral sensibility that we can be both compassionately sensitive to Herbert’s case and respond accordingly. But does being compassionately sensitive to Herbert’s reality mean we have discarded a compassionate view of Nelson’s reality? Not if we see that

114 Starkey [p. 83]
a response to Herbert’s case is also a response to Nelson’s case.

The other way we could argue is that compassionate sensitivity does not involve immediate consequences of moral actions, but the overall and long-term consequences of such moral actions. If we have the intention of helping Nelson to thrive, both in the individual capacity and in the social sense, then compassion will compel us to correct his actions that are contrary to our goal of helping him thrive as a human being. We do not just see that Nelson will be upset or even be angry with us for correcting him and therefore argue that our corrections are unsympathetic, but rather we see that he will come at the very least to benefit from the corrected interaction between him and Herbert. Compassionate sensitivity can be summarized here as possessing good intentions for the thriving of both the individual and the societal self. If these arguments are acceptable, then it is clear that moral tendencies are central to the development of our moral character.

To recapitulate this long chapter, we have seen that morally significant situational minutiae (Confucian rituals) play an important role in an agent’s self-cultivation. Sympathetic understanding on the other hand means having adequate perceptive powers to know intrinsically the values of moral principles and to recognize the multiple demands of any situational context. By elucidating the Confucian concepts of rituals, moral cultivation and moral perception, we make the concept of sagehood or moral perfection a non-idealized concept. Through showing the trilogical and synergistic relation between moral tendencies, rituals and perception, we show that the third stage of moral development, which is sagehood, is
actually a non-transcendental state; a moral agent’s willingness and daily application can enable him or her to reach this stage, and therefore morality is humanity’s preoccupation and goal.
CHAPTER THREE: THE ROLE OF MORAL BEAUTY IN CONFUCIAN ETHICS

The Master said, Knowing it is not as good as loving it; loving it is not as good as taking delight in it.

Analects 6:20

3a. Introduction

Beauty, as a moral term, is used here more in the sense of a separate and distinct form of Beauty than as part of a genealogy of Beauty. If the former conception of Moral Beauty were avoided, we would not have the chance to avoid inconsistency bearing in mind Confucius and Confucians espouse the concept of Unity of Virtue. This terminology as used here will be strictly defined within the domain of morality. It does not deny the existence of other sorts of beauties in other spectrums, such as art and science. But the nature of this Moral Beauty will be explicated in due course and hopefully from the consequent formulation, it will be easier to decipher its intrinsic dissimilarities from other forms of beauties – the “inferior” kinds that exist outside the moral sphere.

The concept of Moral Beauty postulated here, which is necessarily compatible with the Confucian application of the term, is basically structurally related to Sara
Bernal’s\textsuperscript{115} conception. In her article, “Virtue and Beauty: Remarks on McGinn's Aesthetic Theory of Virtue,” Bernal refutes Colin McGinn’s theory called Aesthetic Theory of Virtue (ATV). McGinn argues that there is a connection between art and morality, that “we are inclined to mimicry, and in mimicking the things around us we translate their aesthetic properties into beauty or ugliness of soul”\textsuperscript{116} and that “aesthetic pollution has a tendency to lead to moral pollution.”\textsuperscript{117}

Bernal argues against this view (McGinn’s) by distinguishing between moral beauty and sensuous beauty.\textsuperscript{118} She then argues that “sensitivity to M [Moral] beauty involves the faculty of reason to a greater degree than does sensitivity to NM [Non-Moral] beauty, and that M beauty is unique among beauties in that its apprehension involves a certain kind of scrutiny of oneself.”\textsuperscript{119} But we will not go into depth on the arguments between Bernal and McGinn. We will only focus on what is relevant to the subject matter of this chapter.

A major agreement between Bernal’s and Confucian conceptions is that Moral Beauty occupies a qualitatively different higher realm than other kinds of beauties, which Bernal collectively called sensuous or NM (NON MORAL) beauty.


\textsuperscript{116} Bernal [p. 308]

\textsuperscript{117} Bernal [p. 308]

\textsuperscript{118} Bernal [p. 309] “But in order to do justice to our common conceptions of virtue, and to explain satisfactorily the phenomenon of aestheticism, we must distinguish the character of the pleasure associated with moral beauty from that of the pleasure associated with sensuous beauty.”

\textsuperscript{119} Bernal [p. 310]
One more thing worthy of our notice before the praise of Bernal’s article comes to an end, is her affirmation of the claim that aesthetic properties are not perceived through our sense organs such as ears or eyes. She says, “...we perceive the sounds and colors on which aesthetic properties supervene, and apprehend the aesthetic properties themselves with some ‘higher’ faculty which we can call (by way of place-holding) our aesthetic faculty.” This statement gives strength to our earlier attempt at differentiating between Moral Beauty and other sorts of beauty. The origin of Moral Beauty should be traced within the mental faculties and not outside the sensible being.

The only few but significant differences between these Confucians’ and Bernal’s conceptions of Moral Beauty lie in the functional specificities and the organic process that brings about Moral Beauty. The specific function of Moral Beauty in Confucianism is to ensure a consistent moral behavior overriding other conditions that might hamper such behavior. Moral Beauty as we will argue later supervenes over the apprehension of all possible moral requirements within a situation. This apprehension of Moral Beauty via the capacity of an agent’s moral perceptivity though, is made possible through fulfillment of another prerequisite condition: that is, cultivation of moral tendencies. The final sections of this chapter are dedicated to an investigation of the aesthetic qualities and functions of Moral Beauty.

In contrast, apprehension of moral beauty, as it is implied in Bernal’s arguments, naturally comes about through the act of moral perception. By

---

120 Bernal [p. 316]
interchangeably using apprehension of moral beauty to mean moral perception, Bernal deprives Moral Beauty of its overriding motivational element, which is central to the hypothesis of this thesis. There is a particular line that captures this sentiment of Bernal’s: “This aspect of M [Moral] beauty perception also creates a danger of self-deception...we may blind ourselves to the presence of M beauty, or underestimate its quantity, in order to spare ourselves the trouble of seeing something we ought to do…”

The phenomenology of moral beauty rather becomes an act that can be anticipated and intercepted or avoided by human intentions and desires; this also means that perception of moral beauty is an intentional act.

This is very contrary to my view that moral beauty is an overriding, intrinsic motivating factor that does not involve the intentionality of the agent experiencing it. As we shall argue later in this chapter, apprehension of moral beauty necessarily occurs once an agent reaches the highest stage of moral development. This is the stage where the agent is fully cultivated morally.

For those agents at the intermediate level of moral development, they might perceive most or all of the moral demands in a situation but nevertheless fail to respond accordingly. Lack of a proper moral response is due to the inadequacies of reactive power or affective faculty, not the agent’s intentionality. A developing moral agent may intentionally avoid situations that he or she knows are morally demanding. For instance, he or she might avoid journeying to the famine-struck desert of Turkana. But once developing agents are in this morally demanding situation (like in Turkana desert), they have no power over what they perceive. The level of their
perceptive faculties solely determines the kind of moral demands perceived in the situation, and the capacity of their affective faculties the nature of their response.

A developing moral agent, though present in this desert of Turkana, might know theoretically that the inhabitants of this place need help. The difference between this developing agent and the fully cultivated moral agent is that the former might act randomly in a charitable way without really knowing the extent to which each inhabitant wants assistance and what kind of assistance. The developing agent can be compared to a person put in an awkward position who knows they are expected to act in a certain manner but not exactly what that manner should be. But the latter agent need not transport theoretical knowledge that the people in this place are needy for him or her to respond morally. The case of King Xuan more or less represents the case of the developing agent described above; as you will remember, though he was aware of his people’s suffering, he could not respond according to the situation of his people.

To give but a simple objection to Bernal’s claim that we might intentionally blind ourselves to perceiving moral beauty, let’s investigate some of our ordinary empirical relations.

The people who seem very enthusiastic about their activities can reasonably be said to be the most motivated. Their enthusiasm, we can roughly guess, indicates the level of motivation they are experiencing. Since they seem so motivated, to label them as the most desirous of their respective ends would not be too absurd. An enthusiastic person, to whom we can safely ascribe an inherent motivation to act, can
also be referred to as a person who desires what they are motivated to do. In this way, motivation appears to have the same functions as desires do; it shows the level of enthusiasm and the direction of action. If you are motivated, we can reasonably expect that you will follow the lead of your motivation, if other things are held constant; the same expectations hold if we judge that you are most desirous of a certain end. It is almost impossible to distinguish the role of motivation and desires in an agent, but we will not get into this semantic battle. The only difference we can quickly note is that though desires and motivation show the direction of acting and level of engagement in acting (enthusiasm), the former sometimes does not guarantee action while the latter usually does. But on the point of indicating the direction of action and the level of the agent’s engagement with the action, both desires and motivation seem to play the same role.

If we take moral beauty, contrary to Bernal’s conception, to have motivational qualities, we will see that her argument that we can avoid its experience does not hold, using the same motivation and desires analysis. Let’s introduce the elusive concept of intentions. Basically, intentionality refers more to the roles of desires than motivation. Intentions, like desires, show the direction of the end the agent wants to achieve but do not guarantee actually acting to achieve this particular end. As an attempt to make a clearer distinction between desires and intentions, we can claim that Harry G. Frankfurt’s notion of “second-order desires” reflects an agent’s intentionality while the basic agent’s desires are the “first-order desires.”

---

From the above attempts to describe the functionalities of desires, intentions and motivation, we find that it is quite certain that there are some people who have intended or desired some end but have lacked motivation. But there has never been a case where someone desired and was fully motivated and did not act according to their motivation. If we intend and desire one way and act contrary to our intention and desire, this failure is due to lack of actual motivation.

Others have not intended to act in a particular way though they desired to, and since they lacked motivation to follow their respective intentions, they failed to resist their desires. Here we see that lack of motivation to do the desired thing does not mean idleness or lack of action. Though “positive motivation” (positive in the sense that it confirms actualization of desired ends) is not sufficient, this does not mean that there is no form of action carried out by the agent; that the agent is now trapped in a limbo of inaction. Having failed to surmise enough “positive motivation,” agents will nonetheless act contrary to their desired desires and intentions. If motivation is what links desires and intentions, to actions and acting, then it seems that absence of “positive motivation” means presence of a different form of “negative motivation” that is associated with the contrary actions of the agents.

We have argued before that only motivation ensures the fulfillment of the process of reaching the agent’s ends. A possible answer that can be given to this sort of “negative motivation” (motivation to do something contrary to one’s intention or desires due to lack of “positive motivation” to act according to the desired desires and intentions) is that desires and intentions have very minimal forces to move an agent
from side A (of want) to side B (of fulfillment) when other factors such as the force of opposing desires, habits or intentions are held constant or annulled. “Positive motivation” operates differently from this kind of “negative motivation,” in that contrary affective forces need not be annulled or overly minimized for it (real motivation) to accomplish its role. Motivation (“positive motivation”) therefore is the sufficient energy that an agent has to act even in a mesh of opposing desires and intentions.

Bernal’s concept of moral perception implies a connection between moral perception and moral motivation. She goes on to argue that though agents do want (intend) to live morally they might try to avoid situations (moral perceptions) that are too complicated in order to avoid resentments of failed duties. We avoid facing up to difficult moral choices because we fear failing. If moral perception is distinct as a concept from the concept of moral motivation, we do not have issues with the above assertion. But since Bernal’s concepts of moral perception and moral motivation are not distinct, the interpretation regarding moral motivation is misleading.

If we are right to argue in Confucian terms that the experience of moral beauty is a purely motivational causality and nothing else can guarantee the same consistency of behavior, then it would be quite wrong to speculate that agents can avoid situations in which they know they will be forced to act morally. After all, Bernal relies on the moral dissonance that the agent feels after failing to respond morally, to argue her case of avoiding complex situations. Why would an agent – if given a chance to know how they would respond in a situation beforehand and
knowing that they are guaranteed their response will be moral, and that they will not experience any moral dissonance – why indeed avoid this moral success that they crave?

Opting in or out of a mental state like the motivation state is not at one’s own volition. A less cultivated agent might intentionally work against his or her chances of perceiving moral demands that they are able to perceive, but this should not be read as him or her resisting the lead of their motivation. In a real sense the less cultivated agent wishes they could act morally, and their avoidance is an attempt to avoid the moral dissonance that can be attributed to perception.\textsuperscript{123}

In this respect, Bernal’s presumptive connection between moral perception and motivation is inaccurate since it does not explain why an agent (such as a drug addict) may be knowledgeable about their situation and yet fail to use the knowledge they have in building their character. These agents may sometimes learn every aspect or consequence of their situations but still find their attempts and actions are hopeless. Separating moral perception and moral motivation helps to explain why this is the case.

Another misleading aspect of equating moral perception with moral beauty as Bernal does is that moral perception is assumed to be a single process of perceiving a single moral tenet. It is misguided to assume that one moral situation contains a single moral demand. Actually, when an agent tries to objectively assess a moral situation, they are at once confronting more than one principle of morality that can be applied

\textsuperscript{123} This explains somehow why it is really hard to change some kinds of mentalities that perpetuate either stereotypical assumptions or illusions of social-political realities.
to the situation and are at once presented with multiple choices of actions. Moral perception is not a singular act of perceiving just one isolated moral demand. Moral agents find themselves trying to balance the necessities of various moral principles and judging which of the numerous principles that the situation has presented to his rationale is more demanding, demanding in the sense of which proportional force of response should be invested in each moral requirement (principle).

There are instances where acting on the concept of filiality is contrary to acting on the concept of fraternity.\textsuperscript{124} Moral perception, unlike Bernal’s conception, therefore becomes an encompassing assessment of all moral demands that impinge on the agency of an individual; it is not a perception of a single principle of morality. If this were the case, that moral situations were just embedded with a single moral demand, the call for morality would not have been so urgent or complex as it is now, since people would have less moral dilemmas to struggle with. This means that if all it took was moral knowledge for people to be moral, then most if not all would have been moral, since everyone perceives at least one or more moral requirements in any given moral situation. But the problem comes in two parts.

The first is that moral perception entails a cluster of moral demands that in most cases appear to contradict the values of other moral demands. The second is that while most moral agents can be aware of one or a few moral principles in a complex moral situation, they fail to detect the salience of other moral demands within the

\textsuperscript{124} Analects 1:2. Youdz said, 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. Filiality and fraternity are the basis of rvy, are they not?
moral situation, and hence their “moral perception” cannot really be attributed as moral perception due to its deficiency. We can get a clearer picture of the Confucian conception of moral perception from Kam-por Yu’s excellent analysis of the Confucian concept of zhongyong (sagehood). “Zhongyong is characterized not by its moderate nature, but by its inclusive nature… Zhongyong is not concerned with having a good quality to a moderate degree, but having as many good qualities as possible to the highest possible degree relative to the possibilities afforded by the particular situation.”

The synonymous use, by Bernal, of the two terms moral beauty and moral perception should thus be attributed to a conceptual flaw. Moral perception in this chapter, which echoes the Confucian conception, is therefore used in the strictest sense: It is the totality of all minute perceptions of all moral tenets contained in a moral situation and is distinct from moral beauty. The totality of moral perception does not bring about moral beauty; another condition of cultivating moral tendencies has to be fulfilled. We will discuss the prerequisite conditions for the experience of moral beauty later in this chapter.

To anticipate a possible criticism, one might ask if an agent equipped with adequate moral knowledge (for instance an agent might know all the existing moral laws out there) might fail to perceive every moral tenet or even if they don’t, why do they miss experiencing moral beauty? A very quick reply to this criticism comes in

125 Kam-por Yu, “The Handling of Multiple Values in Confucian Ethics”, Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously, Contemporary Theories and Applications, Philip J. Ivanhoe, Julia Tao, Kam-por Yu, Publication Year: 2010
the form of an analogy. Though an inexperienced player has memorized the rules of
the game, they often violate these guidelines not because of ignorance or their lofty
egoism thinking themselves above the law. They simply commit habitual mistakes
that are unintentional. They sometimes forget to apply a rule where they know it fits,
and other times they are confused about which rules are to be applied or how to apply
them in certain conditions. They are like an immature science student who knows that
F = MA but when given a problem to solve invoking the use of this rule, they get
disoriented.

It is only hoped that with time when they have played long enough, these
habits will dissipate and they will be masters of the complexity of laws. Masters now,
not because they did not know all the rules of the game in the first place, but because
their one-sided concentration on a few particular rules in a particular instance of the
game did blur the existence of other rules. Theoretical moral knowledge (from our
analogy of awareness of the rules of the game) has to be transformed through the
experience of its application in order for it to have a meaningful impact on our
perspectives and be reflected in our character.

3b. Defining Delight and Aesthetic Bliss

We have associated the phrase “delight in” in the Analects 6:20126 as a
Confucian expression of a unique moral “aesthetic bliss” (borrowing this term from

---

126 6:20. The Master said, Knowing it is not as good as loving it; loving it is not as good as
taking delight in it.
Bernal). In addition to that, we have assumed that this aesthetic bliss as a confirmation of the phenomenology of moral beauty. Other assumptions can be named but these two so far are the major ones, and it is quite reasonable to believe that by addressing them accordingly, other assumptions that might have been implied through our formulations would have been addressed as well. Now the real task lies before us.

From *Analects* 6:20, we see the use of the term “delight in it.” One possible way that we will actually pursue in addressing our assumptions is to refute the possibility that this phrase “delight in it” might refer to a type of sensuous bliss such as the taste of food or the sensation of tickling someone. We will argue that this unique moral “aesthetic bliss” does not fall under the domain that contains the above kinds of sensuous bliss.

Under this domain (of sensuous bliss), natural appetites take the reins of dominion. Colloquial use of terms such as sweetness, pleasure, and joy makes sense under this category. The extra space left in this domain is filled with various other kinds of hedonistic pursuits. The criterion for classifying these kinds of sensuousness is not really the evaluation of the necessity of the goals achieved. But some of this sensuous bliss results from taking in substances and partaking in activities that are actually necessary for the sustenance of life. Food and sex are examples.

The primary commonality of all of this sensuous bliss is that their receptivity is located in the sensory organs. According to Confucius, human beings have a natural propensity to prefer these kinds of bliss if they are not cultivated well enough
in other forms of bliss whose experience does not involve sensitization of the sensory organs. For example, the bliss that comes from grasping a previously difficult mathematical concept.

Confucius downgrades these sensuous sorts of aesthetic bliss. Juxtaposing verses 17.20\textsuperscript{127}, 17.19\textsuperscript{128} and 7.16\textsuperscript{129}, it becomes apparent that a gentleman, as Confucius described it, does not have as part of his character an inflexible and discriminating taste in the sense of favoring one flavor over another when it comes to such material goods as food. Whoever continuously indulges himself or herself in this sensuous bliss while disregarding other forms of bliss is ridiculed. The main idea that Confucius wants to put across here is that material goods are essentially good if they serve their primary function, but ignorance of this primary function leads others to be overly hedonistic.

Confucian criticism of hedonistic gratification should not be interpreted as a nudge towards asceticism. What we can learn here is that gratification of sense needs has been ranked lower than other sorts of bliss, such as artistic and moral joy. Though we have gone beyond the sensual pleasures of our natural appetites, the question of the character of moral beauty that a virtuous person experiences is yet to be answered.

\textsuperscript{127} Analects 17:20. The Master said, One who eats his fill all day long, and never uses his mind on anything, is a difficult case. Are there not such things as backgammon and chess? Would it not be better to play them?
\textsuperscript{128} Analects 17:19. “…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;…”
\textsuperscript{129} Analects 7:16. The Master said, Eating coarse food, drinking water, crooking one’s arm and pillowing upon it – happiness may be found also in these circumstances. To be unrighteous and so become wealthy and even honored, to me this is like a drifting cloud.
Analects 13.25 indicate the kind of aesthetic bliss that captivates a gentleman. It states that “if you try to please him otherwise than in accordance with the Way, he will not be pleased.” The supreme form of aesthetic bliss that enchants the gentleman’s heart is the moral kind. The overriding quality of this moral bliss is shown in verse 7.19, which is testimony to Confucius’ own character. It says, “This is the kind of man he is: In his enthusiasm he forgets to eat; in his happiness he forgets his sorrows….” If what primarily enchants the gentleman has to be in accordance with the Way, then this kind of bliss can be a moral kind. From the latter quote, we can see moral bliss overshadowing the attractions to sensuous bliss such as food, and the overriding buffer effects of sensations such as sorrow. The phenomenology of moral bliss is thereby ranked very highly (as was earlier on depicted by Confucian scale).

Another important quality of this moral bliss is that it can be excited by the activities of other moral agents. The goodness of gentlemen is contagious in that if you are a gentleman too you can experience the joy of their activities. It is the term that underlies the meaning of the three joys mentioned by Confucius. Verse 16.5 summarizes the whole message of this paragraph.

Confucius said, “What is helpful is Three Joys, and what is harmful is Three Joys. To joy in seasonal ritual and music, to joy in the goodness of the men of the Way, to joy in having many worthy friends: these are helpful. To joy in arrogant pleasures, to joy in dissipated adventures, to joy in feasting and music: these are harmful.”

We see that the joy that Confucius refers to here is not the ordinary feeling-good sensation but in origin it is a different species of joy. Ritual, the goodness of men and
worthiness of friends, these terms connote the moral aspect of this kind joy. This moral joy or bliss therefore originates from mental faculties and affective reservoirs that are responsible for an agent’s proper moral action. The cultivation of these faculties, mental and affective, is arguably the base from which this moral bliss originates. As the terms ritual, goodness and worthiness connote, the scope of this kind of joy or bliss is restricted within the moral sphere.

Though it can be analyzed in terms of the euphoric experience of music or art and science, moral joy’s transcendent state surpasses all others. This can be shown by the fact that music alone, though it has the capacity to inspire people, cannot impart its full capacity of aesthetic bliss to an agent; the agent’s level of receptivity plays a significant role in the experience of this aesthetic bliss. Confucius argues that only the mind and heart that is adept in cultivation of moral propensities can really experience all aesthetic aspects of this art. “The Master said, A man, but not Ren [Rvn], what has he to do with ritual? A man, but not Ren [Rvn], what has he to do with music?”130. The double stress in the statement emphasizes Confucius’ conviction. But what does Confucius mean by claiming that only the mind and heart that excels in moral matters can experience to the fullest level possible this aesthetic bliss that is derived from music and rituals?

One reason to support the above assertion is that a mind capable of cultivating moral propensities has already done the greatest feat possible in order to achieve this capability. Confucius says that only the person with Ren [Rvn] can enjoy music. It is

130 *Analects* [3.3]
should not be taken at face value to mean that simple folks like us cannot experience the aesthetics of music. It is only that we experience it but only adequately, not fully.

3c. Moral Beauty as Unified Symphony

Confucian moral beauty can roughly be described as complete coherence of all possible moral demands within a situation. As we have mentioned earlier, some of these moral demands call attention to self-regarding virtues, while other moral demands serve the purpose of promoting other-regarding virtues. In musical terms, Confucian Moral Beauty is defined as a unified symphony that supervenes over perceptions of the diverse network of moral principles that a situation can elicit.

This **unified symphony of moral beauty** is a qualitative form of contentment and certainty. Taking the example of the aesthetic bliss of music, let’s explain what this means.

Sometimes music enthusiasts might like a piece of music simply because the piece of music has exceeded their expectations. If a six-year-old plays a violin like a teenager, though teenagers are generally amateurish in their performances, the sound of the music will have profound effects. This is due to the extraordinariness of the skill that the six-year-old displays, and the audience will be surprised and pleased with the general performance. The combined effect of the general pleasure and transgression of our expectations leads to feelings of satisfaction with the piece of music. Or the other way around, if a fifty-year-old plays the same violin to the same
audience like an amateurish teenager, our experience of the music will fail to capture most of the “aesthetic qualities” we had perceived in the performance of the six-year-old even though the fifty-year-old produces exactly the same kind of music as the six-year-old.

Unlike these subjective experiences of music that can be influenced by external factors such as perception of the age of the performer, the unified symphony of moral beauty depends only on the capacities of the internal perceptions and the level of cultivation of moral tendencies of the moral agent – nothing more. It (the Unified Symphony of Moral Beauty) is an intersubjective experience among fully cultivated moral agents.

Since fully cultivated moral agents are expected, if put in each other’s shoes, to resonate with each other’s reactions when in a specified moral situation, we can deduce that this experience of the unified symphony of moral beauty is not unique to each one of them. Hypothetically, when one fully cultivated moral agent experiences this state, he or she will without doubt know the genuineness of this state and he or she can acknowledge qualities that constitute this state or can discredit other falsely similar experiences.

Part of being an upright Confucian is to aid others to live morally. Aiding others does not mean stepping in between them and their moral responsibilities. Confucians are not the godfathers of virtue or messianic individuals who liberate others from the yoke of moral responsibility, for acting in these ways promotes moral failure and Confucians are simply not agents of moral failure and depreciation. There
is an incident in the Analects 7:8 where Confucius says, “If they [students] are not eager, I don't expound. If they are not urgent, I don't explain. If I give out one corner and they don't come back with three corners, then I don't go on.” If Confucius rather gave readily available answers to the student he would be promoting a kind of slackness.

From this incident we see that a moral agent’s responsibility includes not promoting moral slackness in other agents. If the students were rather fully cultivated agents, they would be motivated to figure out ways of addressing issues at hand. In this case Confucius will experience motivation not to intervene and hence cause more moral damage, while our imagined fully cultivated students will experience motivation to look for their personal solutions to the issues at hand.

Both the experiences of moral beauty in Confucius and among the fully cultivated students do not fall short of the unified symphony of moral beauty for two reasons. One, Confucius does not feel moral dissonance by choosing not to intervene (he would actually feel it if he did intervene on behalf of the supposed fully cultivated students). If there had been some form of dissonance, his experience would not have qualified as a unified symphony of moral beauty.

Two, Confucius’ understanding of the importance to every individual of acting morally is no different from the supposedly fully cultivated student’s understanding of the importance of moral action. Confucius understands the importance of nurturing moral growth in other individuals while the supposedly fully
cultivated students understand the importance of each individual upholding moral expectations and responsibilities.

In this respect, since they have the same understanding of the importance of moral action, their experiences of Moral Beauty are identical and one. Hence they both (Confucius and our supposed fully cultivated students) are motivated to react morally to this situation.

3d. Attainment of the Unified Symphony of Moral Beauty and Its Character

In Analects 4:10 The Master (Confucius) 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.” As we have already tried to show, that “rightness” encompasses all possible moral principles that can be applied in a specified moral situation. Following this line of interpretation, a fully cultivated gentleman therefore perceives all possible moral demands within a situation.

Two important words are used in the above quotation that we should not overlook: These words are “regards” and “right.” The first word, “regards” connotes an act of reflection and attentiveness. Therefore it implies that the gentleman’s choice of action is not arbitrary, unlike people in the lower stages of moral development who can accomplish a moral act accidentally without meaning to. The second word, “right,” can be interpreted as a summation of all forces of all moral demands. In
Upright Gung’s case, it will be the need to be filial and fraternal since he is both indebted to his parents and society for his well-being and existence.

Confucius therefore argues that a gentleman knowingly sides, or adheres to, all the compelling forces of all moral demands he perceives within a situation. To make this case even more interesting, the gentleman’s adherence to this moral force courts no resistance at all. Confucius says the gentleman has no prohibitions, meaning that the gentleman has no flaws in his character. Moral deficiency is due to a lack of adequate powers within both our cognitive and affective states.

Just like a perfect musical harmony, a fully cultivated gentleman’s response fits nicely with the expectations of all moral requirements in the moral situation. *Analects 6:20*\(^{131}\) argues that this gentleman’s moral response is a thrilling effortless action. The fully cultivated agent delights in executing these moral demands; the process of meeting these moral requirements is intrinsically satisfying. This is unlike ordinary people who might obey a moral law for fear of breaking deontological expectations.

So far we have named a few components of the *unified symphony of moral beauty*. First it irons out all forms of resistance against adhering to the forces of moral demands in a situation. Second, due to its intersubjective nature, all fully cultivated moral agents attain this state of unified symphony of moral beauty. Third, a

\(^{131}\) The Master said, “Knowing it is not as good as loving it; loving it is not as good as taking delight in it.”
qualitative form of satisfaction accompanies its experience. Fourth, this aesthetic state is atemporal.

This last (fourth) point is supported by Analects 6:23. The Master said, “The knowing take delight in rivers; the Ren [Rvn] take delight in mountains. The knowing move; the Ren [Rvn] are still. The knowing are happy; the Ren [Rvn] live long.” The fully cultivated moral agent does not experience the unified symphony of moral beauty in fragmented episodes. At first this statement might seem farfetched. But if we really look at life, we find that it is a continuum of ever-occurring situations demanding our constant moral attention and response. It is the atemporal nature of the unified symphony of moral beauty that ensures the consistent moral responses of fully cultivated moral agents. Otherwise without this atemporal quality, full cultivation of our moral capacities is not possible, since there will be nothing to ensure its sustainability.

But does Confucius think attaining this state of unified symphony of moral beauty possible? One could mistake this account of moral beauty as a theorized possibility that could be achieved in in a world more privileged than our current one where either moral situations are less complex or human beings have extraordinary wills and capacities. But Confucius’ testimony affirms the possibility of experiencing the unified symphony of moral beauty. Analects 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.” We can
infer that the process of apprehending the unified symphony of moral beauty is almost unattainable but nonetheless possible. Confucius worked for almost seven decades and at the end of his moral growth he testifies to the unity between his moral will and affective states; this unified self creates the environment where the experience of the unified symphony of Moral Beauty is actual.

To have such a perfect moral character, where desires, understanding and will are all unified and willing to execute the moral demand, speaking from a layman’s point of view, seems like an ideal state that we finite beings can only fantasize about. But to Confucians, this perfect moral character is not meant for superhuman beings only. Anyone who strives like the horse Ji, without wavering in moral cultivation, can ascend the stages of moral development and attain this seemingly unattainable ideal character. Analects 7:30 confirms, The Master said, “Is Ren [Rvn] really far away? If I want Ren [Rvn], then Ren [Rvn] is already there.” Mencius spoke of such perfected moral character and moral response when he talks about the flood-like qi.132

The tone of Analects 2:4 above is completely opposite from what Confucius expressed in the early text of Analects 7:3. The Master said, “My character not being cultivated, my studies not being pursued, hearing the right and not able to follow it, 

132 [Mengzi said], "When the intention is unified it moves the qi. When the qi is unified it moves the intention…. [Gongsun Chou said,] "I venture to ask what is meant by floodlike qi." [Mengzi said,] "It is difficult to put into words (yan). It is a qi that is supremely great and supremely unyielding. If one cultivates it with uprightness (zhi) and does not harm it, it will fill up the space between Heaven and earth. It is a qi that unites righteousness with the Way. Without these, it starves. It is produced by accumulated righteousness. It cannot be obtained by a seizure of righteousness. If some of one's actions leave one's heart unsatisfied (bu qie), it will starve. Consequently, I say that Kao Tzu never understood (zhi) righteousness, because he regarded it as external.
being not good and unable to change it: these are my anxieties.” These texts were written in a historical order and therefore they reflect Confucius’ reflection on the progress of his moral character.\(^{133}\) *Analects* 7:3 confirms that perception of moral requirements, from the quote “hearing right and not being able to follow it,” does not alone guarantee an appropriate and consistently moral response.

One of the essential necessities that are needed to complete the power of moral perceptions is the cultivation of moral tendencies. Moral perception can only manifest its effects on the character of an agent when the agent’s passions and other affective properties have been prepared to have the capacity to acknowledge and adapt to these changes. Borrowing Joseph Rouse’s comment, which was meant for different context in class, though it can relevant in this context as well, “the process of preparing affective properties is not about reorienting these affective properties but empowering them with an ability or tool to capitalize on their morally relevant capacities.”\(^{134}\) I will break down this claim below.

Without wishing to go into the argument of what human nature is like, I will argue that Confucius interestingly did not belabor the debate about human nature like his two successors, Mencius and Xunzi. While Mencius had a positive view of human nature, Xunzi concluded that human nature is bad, meaning that human beings are naturally inclined to do wrong. My interpretation of why Confucius was not so much interested in this topic of the nature of human nature is that focusing on the debate on

\(^{133}\) Brooks translation compiled these Confucian texts (2:4 and 7:3) in chronological order. Book 7 of the *Analects* was written during the Dzyngzd Transformation period, which was before the period of the Hundred School when Book 2 was written.

\(^{134}\) Joseph Rouse, Philosophy of Science Class, Spring Semester 2012
human nature would have acted as a red-herring that would distract focus from the urgent moral concerns of the time. On the other hand, if the debate leaned more to the side of Xunzi (that human nature is bad) it would probably have implied elimination of the negative affective properties, and in case we side with Mencius’s view (that humans are by nature good) ignoring the usefulness of negative affective properties in the ordinary world.

A good example that Confucius gives that illustrates how negative sentiments like shame and guilt can have a moral function is found in *Analects* 2:3. The Master said, “Lead them with government and regulate them by punishments, and the people will evade them with no sense of shame. Lead them with virtue and regulate them by ritual, and they will acquire a sense of shame and moreover, they will be orderly.” Confucius encourages rulers to invest in activities that sensitize people’s sense of shame and guilt instead of formulating forms of punishment; the latter method, in Confucius’ view, is less effective in ensuring the orderly behavior of ordinary people.

Confucius is more likely to argue that all our affective properties have a significant bearing on our morality. And if each of our affective properties can have moral significance, then none of them can conclusively be said to be good or bad or neutral\textsuperscript{135} to our moral course. Confucius would argue that what we need is a skill or tool to enable us to gauge the relevance of each of the affective properties in various situations instead of trying to reorient these affective properties to conform to

\textsuperscript{135} Gaozi argued about the neutrality of human nature. Gaozi said, ‘*Human nature is like whirling water. Give it an outlet in the east and it will flow east; give it an outlet in the west and it will flow west. Human nature does not show any preference for either good or bad just as water does not show any preference for either east or west.*'
particular moral aims. The ability or tool that a moral agent needs should act like a talented conductor who can bring out the right concerted effort from both our cognitive abilities and all our affective properties, without undermining either the cognitive or affective properties.

With such a tool (the expertise/knowledge) the expert conductor (fully cultivated agent) can successfully orchestrate an apt moral response, guaranteed. This tool, which makes the beautiful performance of the orchestra possible, can, in moral terms, be interpreted metaphorically as the experience of the unified symphony of moral beauty. The tool in the Confucian moral context is the cultivation of both affective and mental faculties. The process of acquiring this tool leads one close to the experience of the unified symphony of moral beauty. To have one’s affective and mental faculties fully cultivated, is to continuously experience the unified symphony of moral beauty. With the unified symphony of moral beauty, the fully cultivated agent can successfully and effectively produce a consistent right moral response.

How then does the unified symphony of moral beauty supervene over perceptions of moral requirements in a situation? We have already seen that two prerequisite conditions need to be fulfilled; that is apt moral perceptivity and cultivation of moral tendencies. And we have noted that moral perception, moral tendencies and morally significant rituals have a synergistic relationship with each other. Progress in practicing of the latter (morally significant rituals) leads to development of the two former factors, which further nourishes progress in the latter factor. With appropriate capacity of moral perceptiveness and with fully cultivated
moral tendencies, does the \textit{unified symphony of Moral Beauty} just happen to occur due to a necessity inherent in the presence of the above two factors (moral perceptiveness and cultivated moral tendencies)?

Engagement is a necessary condition for the experience of high levels of aesthetic bliss. Our level of attentiveness to the art also determines the level of engagement with art. An incident was reported where a famous and accomplished saxophonist went to play on the street. Only a few people actually stopped to listen or noticed the high quality of the music being produced. Some perhaps assumed that since the saxophonist was playing on the street, he must be either a beggar or an amateur or both. It is not surprising that most people tend to associate talent and professionalism with class and sophisticated lifestyle but not with under-privileged people like beggars. The few who noticed the quality of the music were those whose ability to attend to particular phenomena even in bustling streets was higher than the tendency to be misguided by misleading impressions.

Similarly, going back to our question of the supervenience of the \textit{unified symphony of Moral Beauty}, engagement with our virtues is a prerequisite condition. Like the artist example, the fully cultivated moral agent has to assume the perspective of a creator of virtue and not a spectator or servant of virtue. Engagement is not only an internal relation between the agent and him or her self.

There is no virtue that benefits only the agent involved. The elimination of dichotomies of personal and societal gives this form of engagement a relational aspect. Just as there is no harmony on one string, but only sound out of context, so
there cannot be an experience of the *unified symphony of Moral Beauty* as an isolated existence and in a single act of virtue.

A mature Confucian agent does not forsake public life for asceticism or private life since it is in public life that his or her morality comes to life. In *Analects* 4:25 The Master said, “Virtue is not solitary; it must have neighbors.” Furthermore, acting for personal well-being is often an intuitive response rather than a moral one. Even in a specified situation, moral considerations ought to encompass an appropriate response to all moral demands; each moral demand is not given an equal amount of attention and response but one that is proportional to its magnitude and need.

Confucius understood the effectiveness of beauty to move any being. In *Analects* 9.18 The Master said, “I have never seen anyone who loves virtue the way he loves beauty.” Any ordinary beauty has the power to attract our attention and initiate a bond with us. If beauty has these powers, it is reasonable to expect more from the extraordinary beauty of virtue – since virtuous activities are superior to non-virtuous activities. The reason we do not love virtue more than other, non-virtuous activities is because its beauty is not easily accessible to the uncultivated mind and heart.
The reason why moral agents can only act morally on few occasions and not all occasions even when knowledge (though shallow) of the importance of acting morally is ever accessible to them, is that knowledge itself (of the importance of moral living) is not sufficient to guarantee a consistent approach to moral demands. It is shallow indeed.

Even among those few people who act morally out of knowledge of the importance of moral living, only a smaller number of them would wish that these moral expectations existed in their lives in the first place. This group sees moral living as a burden. These are the group that Confucius says can be made to act morally by capitalizing on their negative sentiments like shame and guilt. *Analects* 8:9 says this about this group of people, The Master said, “The people can be made to follow it; they cannot be made to understand it.” Where shame and guilty are involved, this group of people will meet moral requirements but they tend to commit and get away with immoral actions where none of these sentiments are involved and when no one is there to watch and judge their actions.

Besides this morally ambivalent group, the other group of people can actually act out their duties and meet social expectations willingly. This willingness indicates their love for these moral requirements since they have a better understanding of their
importance to moral life than the previous group. This is the group of people that Confucius says act out of love in *Analects* 6:20.

But as we know, love for virtues alone does not guarantee continuous moral living. Unlike the previous group that complained about these moral expectations, this group rants over their failure to meet these moral expectations. Their love for moral living makes them resent their inability to live upright all the time. It is this group that Mencius is encouraging to force themselves to act out benevolence, since that way is much better than just giving in to the flaws in their moral character and letting themselves be victims of their own resentment and self hatred.

This is the group that falls prey to distracting situational minutiae or as we mentioned in earlier chapters, “defeating conditions.” Forcing themselves to act morally, and always taking part in morally significant rituals will help them develop their abilities and hence overcome the seductive inertia of old immoral habits.

 Acting morally with delight is superior, since it depicts the highest level of moral cultivation and symbolizes a complete union with morality. Just as the portrait of a highly artistic individual speaks of the expertise of the artist, so does the delight of a morally cultivated agent. The expertise of a highly artistic person helps the artist know a highly beautiful piece of art and hence the artist has a higher probability of forming an attachment with the piece of art than can the dilettante. Likewise, we should expect the highly developed moral tendencies and perceptivity of the moral agent to be able to form a bond with virtues. This bond both expresses the level of
appreciation of moral living and consistency of the moral character in the fully cultivated moral agent.

**Thesis’ Relevance to the contemporary debate on moral principles and moral motivation, and public life**

One of the questions that inspired me to embark on this thesis-journey is the question about the nature of moral principles: whether they are hypothetical or categorical imperatives. Having seen the character of agents at different stages of moral development, we can argue that there are partial truths in both views that hold that moral principles are hypothetical and categorical imperatives. Mencius warns us of assuming these that partial truths are the whole truths. He says:

‘Yang Tzu chooses egoism. Even if he could benefit the Empire by pulling out one hair he would not do it. Mo Tzu advocates love without discrimination. If by shaving his head and showing his heels he could benefit the Empire, he would do it. Tzu-mo holds on to the middle, half way between the two extremes. Holding on to the middle is closer to being right, but to do this without the proper measure is no different from holding to one extreme. The reason for disliking those who hold to one extreme is that they cripple the Way. One thing is singled out to the neglect of a hundred others.’\(^{136}\)

Depending on who is examining the nature of these moral principles, one’s experience in a moral situation will affect how they judge these moral principles. It is reasonable that agents a lower level of moral development argue that moral principles are hypothetical imperatives given their encounters with, capabilities in, and

\(^{136}\) Mencius [7A:26]
testimonies about moral situations. The Confucian model of Moral Beauty explains why this is the case for these agents at lower levels of moral development.

The Confucian model of Moral Beauty corrects proponents of the view that moral principles are categorical imperatives. Proponents of this view mainly emphasize that rationality is key to consistent moral behavior; that if we were rational beings we would understand the values of moral principles and the intricacies of moral situations and we would be able to respond accordingly. The Confucian model of Moral Beauty shows that there is more than meets the eyes of these proponents. We cannot single out or emphasize on our mental faculties while forgetting our affective faculties. Otherwise, we might be doomed rational beings who act irrationally due to a lack of appropriate moral tendencies.

I am not claiming that the Confucian model of Moral Beauty can iron out all the discrepancies in this moral principles-moral motivation debate (even though I wish this was the case). It is characteristic of any philosophical inquiry to meet resistance and many times sound criticisms. But all in all, the most important thing is that the search for answers in this debate keeps going on.

Confucianism and in particular our Confucian model of Moral Beauty, sheds new light of approaching this debate (as evident in the above paragraphs). It brings a renewed form of livery to the already prolonged tussle and promises salvation from the boredom of overdependence on western thoughts in addressing the subject.

137 Boredom is not used here in the literal sense. What I am trying to refer to the likelihood of thinkers from a similar cultural background arguing using similar analogies. The global philosophical platform diversifies the kind of analogies used in this debate. Variety of analogies
matter of this debate. This statement should not imply that there is something wrong with western extraordinary thinkers but it should initiate, clarify and emphasize the need for this debate to be brought to a global platform where every perspective is encouraged to contribute to the debate; after all, it the whole humanity that in urgent need for successful completion of this debate.

Since Confucianism stems from ancient time, there is a lesson that contemporary ethicists can learn: the relevance of these classical philosophies in our world today. We need, as contemporary ethicists, to stop in our tracks and revisit these classical philosophical materials since they might be very useful in helping us, just like how our Confucian model of Moral Beauty has, restructuring the scope of our focus and reforming our tactics in this debate.

The final and brief comment will concern this thesis’ relevance to public life; we should bear in mind Confucians are active political members of society.

An understanding of the Confucian concept of Moral Beauty can give new insights to legislators or public policymakers on how they can formulate policies that govern social behavior and progress. The Confucian model of Moral Beauty shows that each individual has capabilities that are determined by their stage of moral development. With this in mind, policymakers can formulate policies that are intelligible to a specific group of people and that support their moral growth. The policymakers can capitalize on the moral sentiments that Confucians have argued as the fundamental pillars of moral living when formulating various policies. Instead of cited in an argument helps both to clarify the argument and provides different avenues (perspectives) of approaching the argument.
creating policies that only inhibit an action, they can also create other policies that help the development of such character inhibitors.


Mencius, Translated by D. C. Lau, Copyright Penguin Books, 1970


Nicholas F. Gier – Confucius, Gandhi and the Aesthetics of Virtue, 2010, [p48].


Phillip J. Ivanhoe, *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*
Prof. Stephen Angle, “Establishing a commitment is to nurture or preserve a ‘good thought.’ When one can do this always, one’s commitment has matured and one can act with sagely ease.” [Angle, 2011, p. 12.]


Joseph Rouse, Philosophy of Science Class, Spring Semester 2012


Kam-por Yu, “The Handling of Multiple Values in Confucian Ethics”, Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously, Contemporary Theories and Applications, Philip J. Ivanhoe, Julia Tao, Kam-por Yu, Publication Year: 2010