Ethical Self-Commitment and Ethical Self-Indulgence

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss a phenomenon highlighted in Confucian thought that I refer to as 'ethical self-commitment.' The purpose is to present a certain perspective on our ethical life that is distinctive of the Confucian ethical tradition, explore its implications, and draw out some of its features that might have a contemporary intelligibility and appeal. In addition, I will consider the question whether ethical self-commitment might evolve into a problematic form of ethical self-indulgence. The notion of ethical self-commitment is not intended to correspond to any specific attribute highlighted in Confucian thought. Instead, I use the notion to refer to a phenomenon that is related to the Confucian understanding of the ethical attribute *yi* 義 (propriety) as well as other attributes such as *cheng* 誠 (wholeness), *xu* 虛 (vacuity) and *jing* 靜 (stillness).[1]

In section 2, I present the historical background to the Confucian understanding of *yi*, and introduce one aspect of the notion of ethical self-commitment against this background. My discussion in this section draws on the textual studies I have conducted elsewhere.[2] In section 3, I give a more systematic account of this aspect of ethical self-commitment, relating it to phenomena highlighted in contemporary discussions of the notion of self-respect. In section 4, I consider how this aspect of self-commitment leads to a detached posture of the mind that I refer to as 'reflective equanimity.' In section 5, I introduce another aspect of the notion of ethical self-commitment that has to do with a phenomenon that I refer to as 'purity of the mind' and that is related to the Confucian understanding of *cheng*, *xu* and *jing*. The discussion of *cheng*, *xu* and *jing* again draws on textual studies I have conducted elsewhere, while my discussion of reflective equanimity and of purity in sections 4

[1] In referring to these as "ethical attributes," I am deliberately avoiding the use of the word "virtue" as the latter is often used as a translation of *de* 德, a character that is not used to refer to some of these attributes, and to the extent that it is used to refer to some of the other attributes such as *yi*, this happens at a point later in the history of Chinese thought than the period I am focusing on.

[2] Shun (1997).

and 5 draws on a series of earlier papers.[3]

In section 6, I introduce the notion of ethical self-indulgence, and consider the potential for ethical self-indulgence in relation to a reflective concern with one's own ethical qualities, a reflective concern that I refer to as 'ethical self-regard.' In this section, I draw on contemporary discussions of the phenomenon of 'moral self-indulgence' and of an objection to ethical views that focus on the notion of virtue, to the effect that these views are too self-centered. In section 7, I consider the potential for ethical self-indulgence specifically in relation to ethical self-commitment. Finally, in section 8, I conclude with some general observations about the Confucian position.

2. The Confucian Understanding of *Yi*

In early Confucian thought, *yi* 義 (propriety) is often mentioned along with two other attributes, *ren* 仁 (humaneness) and *li* 禮 (observance of the rites).[4] *Ren*, as one attribute among others, has to do primarily with one's concern for the interests and well-being of others. Such a concern is sometimes presented in later Confucian thought in terms of one's forming one body with others, in the sense that one is attentive and sensitive to others' well-being in the way that one is attentive and sensitive to what happens to parts of one's own body.

Li is used to refer to rules of conduct governing ceremonial behavior in recurring social contexts as well as behavior appropriate to one's social position. As an attribute of a person, it refers to a general disposition to follow such rules, with special emphasis on the attitude behind such behavior. This attitude is described in a number of ways, but what is common to these descriptions is a general attitude that involves one's focusing on and having a serious regard for others in a way that would have been appropriate to someone of higher status than oneself.[5] At the same time, one avoids having oneself at the forefront of one's thinking when interacting with others – for example, one does not unnecessarily display oneself nor seek attention and admiration.

As for *yi*, its earlier meaning had to do with a sense of honor and an absence of

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[3] I provided the textual studies in Shun (2006), Shun (2008), and *Zhu Xi and Later Confucian Thought*. I discussed the phenomena of reflective equanimity and purity in a series of three papers: "Purity, Moral Trials and Equanimity," "On Anger: An Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology," and "On Reflective Equanimity: A Confucian Perspective."

[4] See my "Early Confucian Moral Psychology" (forthcoming) for a more detailed discussion of these three attributes and their differences.

[5] This attitude toward others is conveyed by the term *jing* 敬 as well as terms such as *gong* 恭, *jie* 戒, and *shen* 慎. It is a form of serious regard in that it involves focus of attention, dedication, attentiveness to one's manners and demeanor, caution, and being on guard against things going wrong in the way one interacts with others.

disgrace; it was a matter of not allowing oneself to be subject to disgraceful treatment. One's attitude toward disgrace (*ru* 辱), is referred to as *chi* 恥. *Chi* focuses on disgrace as something beneath oneself that lowers one's standing. Though often translated as "shame," *chi* differs from contemporary Western notions of shame in important respects. It can be directed toward something contemplated as well as something that has already come about. It is associated not with the thought of being seen or the urge to hide oneself, but with the thought of being tainted and the urge to cleanse oneself of what is tainting.[6] *Chi* is linked to a resolution to either remedy the disgraceful situation if it has already obtained, or to distance oneself from or pre-empt a potentially disgraceful situation if it has not yet come about.[7]

In early China, what is regarded as disgraceful is often treatment that is insulting (*wu* 侮) by public standards, such as being beaten in public, being stared in the eyes, or being treated in violation of certain accepted protocols of conduct that include *li*. Correspondingly, *chi* is associated with not just a sense of being tainted by a disgraceful situation, but also anger at the offending party and thoughts of vengeance. Early Confucians, however, advocate a transformation in what one regards as disgraceful – it should not be a matter of how others view or treat us, but a matter of our own ethical conduct. The proper object of *chi* is the ethical shortcoming in one's conduct, and *chi* is no longer linked to thoughts of vengeance. Instead, it has more to do with the resolve to distance oneself from certain situations that can be ethically tainting on oneself and to correct such situations should they arise.[8]

On the Confucian view, *yi* has to do with a resolve to distance oneself from disgraceful situations where disgrace is understood in ethical terms. It is a firm commitment to certain ethical standards, of such a kind that it can override personal interests of the most pressing kind, including one's own life. The Confucians do not deny that other conditions of life are important, but for them there is nothing more important than following the ethical path, and any other pursuit in life should be subject to the constraints of the ethical. Furthermore, it is fully within one's control to live up to the ethical standards to which one is committed, and this commitment to the ethical is independent of external influence. Someone so committed will not be led to deviate from the ethical by external influences, and this commitment itself is also

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[6] One example from *Mengzi* 2A:9, the context of which clearly relates to *chi*, is one's sitting on charcoal while wearing court clothes.

[7] For further elaboration on *chi*, see Shun (1997), pp. 58-63.

[8] In a discussion of moral taint, Marina Oshana describes it as a fundamental disfigurement of the moral psyche and a compromise of the moral personality (p. 356). The Confucian notion of *chi* need not be associated with an ethical shortcoming that goes as deep as this, though the shortcoming is not superficial as would be suggested by the term "stain." For example, the object of *chi* can be an ethically problematic action of oneself. This shortcoming betrays flaws in one's character and so is not superficial, but such flaws can be remedied through one's own efforts and so need not constitute a major and fundamental disfigurement.

something that no external force can deprive one of.

Mencius sometimes contrasts *ren* and *yi* by saying that *ren* has to do with the human heart while *yi* has to do with the human path.[9] His point is that, while *ren* has to do with one's affective concern for others, *yi* has to do with the propriety of one's conduct. *Yi* also differs from both *ren* and *li* in another way. Unlike *ren* and *li*, *yi* involves an element of reflectivity in that it presupposes one's having a conception of certain ethical standards to which one's way of life should conform. Furthermore, one is motivated by that conception, and is firmly committed not to allow oneself to fall below such standards. For now, I will use the notion of ethical self-commitment to refer to such a commitment. Later, I will broaden the notion to include a commitment not just to acting in conformity with certain ethical standards but also to shaping one's whole person in accordance with a reflective conception of the ethical.

3. Ethical Self-Commitment and Self-Respect

The notion of ethical self-commitment relates to certain phenomena highlighted in contemporary discussions of self-respect. Without focusing too much on the different usages of the term "self-respect," it would nevertheless be useful to consider the phenomena with which its use has been associated and to situate the notion of ethical self-commitment in relation to them.

One phenomenon has to do with a favorable view of oneself by virtue of certain positive qualities one has, just as one might form a favorable view of another person based on certain positive qualities that the other person has. The phenomenon is often discussed in relation to self-esteem, though it might also provide one sense in which we may speak of self-respect – just as one can esteem or respect another person for certain qualities that the other person has, one can also esteem or respect oneself for having such qualities.[10]

Another phenomenon has to do with an ideal conception of the kind of life one lives, and a commitment not to fall below the standards that define such a way of life.[11] This phenomenon may take on different forms depending on the nature of the relevant standards. These standards might focus on what is due to oneself, and the commitment involved is a commitment not to allow oneself to be treated in violation of such standards. Or they might focus on the ethical standards that govern one's way

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[9] *Mengzi* 6A:11.

[10] Gabriele Taylor speaks of self-esteem in this sense and relates self-esteem to the notion of being proud of something – one's favorable view of oneself for having a certain quality that one views positively is associated with one's feeling proud of having that quality (pp. 77-78).

[11] Gabriele Taylor understands self-respect in this manner, taking it to refer to a sense of one's own values (p. 131). She also relates self-respect to pride, in the sense of having one's pride (pp. 77-80).

of life, and a commitment to not fall below such standards in one's qualities and in the way one conducts oneself.

In either of these two forms, this second phenomenon differs from the first. For example, the first phenomenon can take on an excessive form because of an overly positive assessment of one's own qualities. The second phenomenon, however, is not in itself a response to an assessment of one's own qualities, and so cannot be excessive or unwarranted in this manner.[12] The first phenomenon need not, though it might, accompany the second. One might be committed to certain standards without necessarily having a favorable view of oneself by virtue of being so committed, though one might as a matter of fact have such a favorable view. That is, the second phenomenon can provide grounds for the first, but does not necessarily entail it.

That one's commitment to not fall short of certain standards might take on these two different forms is noted by various authors.[13] The early Confucian transformation of the understanding of *yi* might be regarded as a shift from a focus on one form to a focus on the other. According to the early Confucians, disgrace should be understood not in terms of the way one is treated, but in terms of our living up to certain ethical standards in our own conduct. Thus, ethical self-commitment of the kind highlighted in the Confucian understanding of *yi* is akin to the latter form that the second phenomenon takes.[14]

To elaborate further on the notion, ethical self-commitment involves in an essential way certain evaluative judgments. These judgments are not a matter of a positive view of oneself by virtue of certain qualities in oneself that one positively apprises, but a matter of subscription to certain ethical standards that one commits to upholding. Ethical self-commitment is not just a matter of evaluative judgments but also involves one's motivations in an essential way—it moves one to do or refrain from doing certain things.[15]

Now, one might be committed to abiding by certain standards because one regards the relevant standards as standards that everyone should observe, and act on the basis of such a judgment. This would be true, for example, of conscientiousness. But in ethical self-commitment, one also regards oneself as related to such standards

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[12] David Sachs notes that, while we can understand the observation that someone has too much self-esteem, it would be odd to speak of someone as having too much self-respect (pp. 347-348).

[13] See, for example, Colin Bird's distinction between what he calls entitlement-self-respect and standards-self-respect (p. 20), and Robin S. Dillon's distinction between what she calls R-self-respect and E-self-respect (pp. 126-127).

[14] Colin Bird makes a similar point in relation to the Stoic position, which he presents as subscribing to what he calls standards-self-respect rather than entitlement-self-respect. He also considers and rejects arguments to the effect that the Stoic position reflects a kind of 'slave morality,' namely, it advocates a kind of sublimated resentment that slaves feel toward their oppressors (pp. 21-26).

[15] Elizabeth Telfer makes a similar point of self-respect, noting that self-respect has a motivational, or conative, aspect (pp. 114-115).

in a special way—one regards falling below such standards as something unworthy of oneself and would respond in a way different from one's response to others' falling below similar standards.[16] Though the early Confucians transformed the understanding of *yi* to focus on one's own ethical conduct instead of the way one is treated by others, *yi* is still associated with a view of what is honorable or disgraceful, albeit understood in ethical rather than social terms.

The notion of ethical self-commitment, understood in this manner, might also characterize other ethical traditions besides the Confucian tradition. However, the way it is viewed by the Confucians takes on a distinctive form. We saw earlier that, for them, a failure to live up to the relevant standards is associated with *chi*, which differs from the notion of shame. In addition, they relate ethical self-commitment to a range of phenomena that have to do with ways in which someone so committed can transcend the external circumstances of life and thereby attain what I will refer to as a state of 'reflective equanimity.'

4. Ethical Self-Commitment and Reflective Equanimity

This sense of transcendence stems from the two features of the Confucian view of ethical self-commitment mentioned earlier. This commitment is entirely within one's control and independent of external influence, and someone so committed regards upholding the relevant standards as of greater significance than any other kinds of pursuit or other external conditions of life.

Such a person maintains an independence from the way she is viewed by others. While she might desire appreciation by others and is sensitive to others' opinions as indicators of her own qualities, she will stand firm on the standards to which she is committed even if not appreciated by others. Even when looked down upon for external factors such as social status, she is little affected as she can take comfort in the realization that she has lived up to the standards to which she is committed.[17]

This sense of transcendence also extends to the way she is treated by others. The Confucians do not deny that how we are viewed or treated by others does matter. Confucius did lament the lack of appreciation by others, and certain kinds of treatment can of course be humiliating and hurtful even to the Confucians. The

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[16] The difference in the two kinds of response is conveyed by the difference between the terms *chi* 恥 and *wu* 惡 in classical Chinese, where the latter can be used of others' as well as one's own ethical shortcoming while the former can only be used of one's own ethical shortcoming – see Shun (1997), pp. 58-60. Elizabeth Telfer also notes that, in self-respect, my relation to the standards to which I am committed is not merely that of a commitment to standards that apply to all; instead, I regard myself as dishonored or degraded if I fall short of such standards. For this reason, she further adds that the conative aspect of self-respect is an "egoistically-tinged motive" (pp. 115-116).

[17] A similar point is made by Colin Bird in relation to the Stoic view of self-respect (p. 19).

Confucian position is that, even though these things do matter, they pale in significance compared to our own ethical qualities. When we do not fare well in relation to the former, at least the latter is something we can fall back on and take consolation in.

This sense of transcendence also extends to other external circumstances of life. When presented with adverse circumstances that are either literally not within one's control or can only be altered through unethical means that one would not adopt, the person may still be affected—she may feel sorrow at the death of a beloved one, be disappointed by the lack of appreciation by others, or lament the ethical corruption of the times. But she would not be psychologically disturbed—she would not be bitter or resentful, would not devote energy to complaining about the outcome, and would not dwell on thoughts about how things could have been different nor seek to alter things by improper means. Instead, she would take contentment in the ethical in that she is immersed in the ethical and flows along with it with a sense of ease and without anxiety.[18]

To elaborate, the truly ethical person cannot be harmed by others or by external circumstances in a way that is of deepest significance to her.[19] She does attach importance to various pursuits and conditions of life other than the ethical, and so she can be affected if things do not go well. She can be frustrated if she fails in her endeavors, can feel sorrow upon the loss of a loved one, and can feel hurt at the way she has been treated by others. In these various ways, she can still be harmed. However, she is aware that what is of greatest significance, namely, following the ethical path, is something entirely within her control and cannot be affected by external influences. Thus, she cannot be harmed in the way that is of the deepest significance to her, namely, deviating from the ethical. Such harm can only be self-inflicted, as the only person who can ultimately lead her to deviate from the ethical is she herself

In these different but connected ways, ethical self-commitment enables one to transcend the external circumstances of life. This discussion also suggests that the mind of the truly ethical person operates on two levels. On the one hand, she does care about various conditions of life, and would take appropriate action to pursue what she does care about, as well as respond to the outcomes in a way that engages her emotions and feelings. This describes the first level of operation of the mind,

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[18] See my discussion of the phenomena of acceptance and of contentment, conveyed through the Confucian understanding of *ming* 命 and *le* 樂, in "On Reflective Equanimity: A Confucian Perspective."

[19] Elizabeth Telfer makes a similar point about how someone with self-respect has a sense of being one's own master and being in control of the situation, and cannot be overcome by adverse circumstances (p. 117).

which comprises the more immediate responses to one's environment, responses that change with the way one relates to the environment. On the other hand, even if the outcomes go against her wishes and she responds with disappointment, frustration, pain, or sorrow, she would at the same time take on a posture that enables her to stand apart from such responses. Having done what she could within the bounds of the ethical, she would not dwell on the outcomes in a way that leads to anxiety, fear, or uncertainty. Instead, she would stay content in the awareness that what is of greatest significance to her, namely following the ethical path, remains intact. This describes the second level of operation of the mind, which involves a more detached posture toward one's environment.

For convenience, I will refer to this posture of the mind as a state of 'equanimity' or, to be more exact, a state of 'reflective equanimity.' The notion of equanimity is often associated with connotations such as calmness of mind, maintaining one's balance in the face of trying circumstances, and being unperturbed. The posture of mind we just considered involves such qualities. At the same time, it also involves a certain reflective stance, namely, one's awareness and affirmation of the fact that one is flowing along with the ethical. Unlike the more immediate responses to one's environment, this posture is a more enduring state that is grounded in this reflective stance, and it involves a certain outlook, posture, or orientation in life, having to do with the way one views and relates to the world. Thus, this posture may be referred to as a state of reflective equanimity in that it is grounded in such a reflective stance.[20]

5. Ethical Self-Commitment and Purity of the Mind

We introduced the notion of ethical self-commitment in connection with the Confucian understanding of the ethical attribute *yi*, which focuses primarily on the ethical propriety of human conduct. But, for the Confucians, what one should devote oneself to is not just the propriety of conduct, but also shaping all aspects of one's person, including the most subtle thoughts and motivations, in an ethical direction. While *yi* is used more typically in relation to human conduct, the Confucians use other terms to convey this idea of a complete ethical orientation of one's whole person.

One such term is *cheng* 誠, which refers to the complete ethical orientation of the whole person, including both her psychological activities and the way she conducts herself, as well as the congruence between the two. Another pair of terms *xu* 虛 and *jing* 靜 emphasize the absence of any psychological elements that might detract from this orientation. *Xu* emphasizes the absence of such detracting elements,

[20] For further elaboration, see my "On Reflective Equanimity: A Confucian Perspective."

while *jing* emphasizes the absence of the disturbing effects on the mind due to these detracting elements.[21]

I will refer to as the 'purity of the mind' both the complete ethical orientation of the person and the absence of detracting elements and their disturbing effects.[22] This use of the term "purity" draws on its two connotations – that of entirety as in the locution "this is pure orange juice," and that of the absence of contaminating elements as in the locution "this air is pure." Thus, though the term *yi* is not used to refer to a commitment to such a complete ethical orientation, the Confucians do advocate such a commitment and much of what we said about *yi* also applies to this broader commitment. For example, the Confucians believe that everyone is capable of shaping oneself in this direction, and one's doing so is of greater significance than other external conditions of life.

For this reason, I will from now on use the notion of ethical self-commitment more broadly to refer to a commitment to one's living up to a certain reflective conception of the ethical that includes not just one's conduct but also all aspects of the mind's activities, including its most subtle thoughts and motivations.[23] For the Confucians, one needs to be constantly self-reflective and self-vigilant to attain this state. One should be watchful over not just one's actions but also the subtle activities of the mind, including its minute thoughts and subtle feelings that are not externally conspicuous, and be prepared to take corrective steps if needed. At the same time, one should always be focused, alert, and in full control of one's mental attention, so that one is not vulnerable to distractions. This state of purity and the different kinds of exercise involved in managing the mind's activities are particularly highlighted in later Confucian thought.[24]

While it might appear that this kind of reflectivity and vigilance are at work primarily in the process of self-cultivation, they should still be implicitly at work even in the state of purity. Having gone through a life-time of moral learning and cultivation, the truly ethical person might now be able to respond appropriately to the situations she confronts without effort. But even so, this reflectivity and vigilance is still at work in that her mind is still implicitly monitoring her responses to her environment, would intervene if anything goes wrong or is about to go wrong, and would need to engage in more active and deliberate reflections if she confronts unfamiliar and challenging situations. So, the mind of the truly ethical person again operates on two levels. On the one hand, there are the immediate responses to one's

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[21] See Shun (2006), Shun (2008), and my *Zhu Xi and Later Confucian Thought* for the analysis of the relevant terms.

[22] See Shun (2010) for a discussion of the phenomenon of purity.

[23] Pauline Chazan also relates a fundamental ethical commitment to the ideas of integrity and of wholeness (p. 57).

[24] See Shun (2010) for a more detailed discussion of these different kinds of exercise.

environment, including not just actions but also the various aspects of the operations of the mind. On the other hand, the mind is constantly, if only implicitly, monitoring these first level responses to ensure that they are ethically appropriate, and is ready to intervene if needed. This second level operation of the mind ensures that all its responses are in conformity to the ethical, thereby ensuring purity of the mind.[25]

In the previous section, we also considered a two-tiered picture of the mind, where the mind's second level operation involves the posture of reflectivity equanimity. To distinguish between these two aspects of the operation of the mind at the second level, I will refer to them as the 'directive' aspect and the 'detached' aspect. The 'directive' aspect involves the mind's being constantly watchful over its first level responses to ensure that they are properly directed. The 'detached' aspect refers to the posture of the mind that enables the person to stand apart from his immediate responses to the environment even if things go against her wishes and even if she responds with disappointment, frustration, pain, or sorrow.

Although we have spoken of two different levels on which the mind operates, this is just a metaphorical way of describing different but still inter-connected dimensions of the mind's operations. The 'directive' aspect of the second level of operation is clearly connected to the first level of operation, but even the 'detached' posture of the mind is so connected. This posture enables one to stay anchored and unperturbed by one's immediate environment and one's immediate responses to that environment. But the fact that one stays unperturbed at this second level also helps to ensure that the first level responses are appropriate and properly reflect what one regards as important. It does so not by directly intervening in the mind's activities, but by keeping the mind free from disturbing influences that might have otherwise affected its first level responses.

The 'directive' and 'detached' aspects of the mind's operations are both grounded in a reflective conception of the ethical. This raises the question whether the involvement of this reflective conception might lead to a problematic redirection of one's thoughts and attention. In performing a directive function, would this reflective conception be playing a motivational role in one's responses to the environment that detracts from the value of such responses? For example, would a helping action come to be motivated by this reflective conception rather than by a direct concern for the well-being of the recipient? And suppose that I fail to help in the way I wish to, and respond with frustration and sorrow at the suffering that I failed to relieve. The detached posture of the mind involves my not being disturbed by these first level responses, taking comfort in the fact that I have done what is ethically appropriate. But does my adopting this posture mean that I am putting more weight on my having

[25] For further elaboration, see Shun (2010).

done what is ethically appropriate than on the well-being of the intended recipient of the helping action?

Such potential misdirection of ethical attention has often been labeled 'moral self-indulgence,' and has been highlighted in an objection to ethical views that focus on the notion of virtue, to the effect that such ethical views are too 'self-centered.' I will from now on refer to as 'ethical self-indulgence' a problematic redirection of one's attention toward oneself in an ethical context. [26] Before considering ethical self-indulgence in relation specifically to ethical self-commitment, I will first consider it as a potential problem for ethical views that emphasize a reflective concern with one's own ethical qualities, a concern that I will refer to as 'ethical self-regard.'

6. Ethical Self-Regard and Ethical Self-Indulgence

I will use the term "self-regard" to refer to any kind of concern with oneself, that is, any state of mind in which one's attention, thoughts, and motivations are directed to something related to oneself. This is the sense in which we refer to a desire whose object has to do with something related to oneself as a self-regarding desire. As for "ethical self-regard," it refers to any kind of concern that is directed to the ethical qualities of oneself, where the ethical has to do with a conception of how humans should live. For example, a concern with one's having qualities that embody this ethical conception is a form of ethical self-regard, and so is a concern that one acts in a particular situation in a manner consistent with such a conception. Ethical self-commitment, as we have introduced the notion, is one form of ethical self-regard.

Corresponding to self-regard, we may use "self-centeredness" to refer to the evolvement of self-regard into forms that place an inappropriate focus on oneself. Similarly, corresponding to the notion of ethical self-regard, we may use "ethical self-indulgence" to refer to the evolvement of ethical self-regard into forms that place an inappropriate focus on oneself. Just as ethical self-regard is a form of self-regard, ethical self-indulgence is a form of self-centeredness. Later Confucians ascribe ethical failure to self-centeredness, for which they have a specific term, *si* 私. We will not be concerned with self-centeredness as such, but only with ethical self-indulgence.

Ethical self-regard involves a reflective conception of certain qualities as ethically desirable, and one's being motivated in a way that is guided by that

[26] I have used the term “ethical self-indulgence” instead of “moral self-indulgence” as the phenomenon I am discussing is broader than that usually associated with the latter term. For example, the concern with ethical self-indulgence might also arise in relation to the Daoist position, which is not usually described as a moral view. See Shun (1996) for a discussion of this broader phenomenon, which might arise for any reflective ethical view.

conception. It is a kind of reflexive concern—it presupposes one's having an ideal conception of the qualities of oneself and of one's actions, one's applying that conception to oneself, and one's being motivated by that conception.[27] Such a reflexive concern is not problematic as such, but becomes problematic when it evolves into a form that involves a misdirection of one's thoughts, attention, and concern, in a way that places an undue focus on oneself.

Such problematic evolvement can take different forms. For example, one may come to care more about one's having the relevant ethical qualities than caring about the things that one would care about by virtue of having such qualities. That is, one's image of oneself as having such qualities is more important in one's thoughts than the things that would be regarded as important by someone with such qualities.[28] When this happens, the second-order motivation to have these qualities in oneself comes to displace the first order motivations that are part of the qualities with which that second order motivation is concerned. Such displacement can manifest itself in different ways. One might be thinking too often about how good one is or should be, ignoring pressing other-regarding needs as a result of this over-concern with self-improvement. Or one might be viewing oneself as being in ethical competition with others, and be filled with anxieties about one's ethical shortcomings.

Alternatively, the problematic evolvement may take the form of one's attention being too other-directed, but in a way that is still focused on oneself – one is too concerned about the ethical assessment of oneself by others. In this case, what is at work is not one's having an image of oneself as having certain qualities, but one's having an image of oneself as being seen by others as having certain qualities. In any of these forms, the problematic evolvement of ethical self-regard involves a shift of one's thoughts and attention, even though the object of one's attention might by itself appear not different from that in the unproblematic cases of a concern with one's own self-improvement.[29] This is a misdirection not just of attention but genuinely of concern, as it affects one's feelings such as what one takes pleasure in, as well as what actually gets done; in this way, it can undermine the very quality with which one is concerned.[30]

In the literature, certain lines of thought have been put forward showing how ethical self-regard might lead to such a misdirection of attention. While ethical self-regard could potentially evolve in this manner, there appears no reason to believe that it will necessarily so evolve. That is, while ethical self indulgence might turn out

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[27] See Bernard Williams (1981), p. 46.
[28] See Bernard Williams (1981), p. 45.
[29] See Edmund L. Pincoff, pp. 112-114, and Robert M. Adams, p. 103, for some examples of the different ways in which one's thoughts and attention might be misdirected.
[30] See Bernard Williams (1981), p. 47.

to be a practical problem in certain contexts, there appears no general theoretical reason to believe that it will be a problem for any reflective concern with one's own ethical qualities.

One line of thought notes that the terms we use to describe ethically desirable qualities do not typically occur in the deliberation of the person with such qualities. These 'virtue terms' are more typically third person descriptions of someone with the qualities. A reflective concern with cultivating such qualities in oneself, framed in these terms, would show that one is concerned primarily with these third person descriptions of oneself, and hence with how others view oneself.[31]

Without denying that someone concerned with these qualities might, as a matter fact, become more concerned with how she is viewed by others, there is no reason to believe that such a concern must evolve in this manner. Even if the terms describing these qualities are typically used as third person descriptions, one's concern with the qualities describable in such terms need not be a concern with one's being describable by others in a certain way. Instead, it could be a concern with one's becoming like the kind of person that one would *oneself* describe in that way. That is, the third person description is a description of others by oneself, rather than of oneself by others. And in being so concerned, the primary object of one's concern need not be the description as such, but could still be one's having certain qualities which, as it happens, can be described in this way.[32]

Other attempts to link a reflective concern with one's own ethical qualities to ethical self-indulgence can be found in recent discussions surrounding the idea of 'virtue ethics.' For example, some have made the point that, in an ethical view that focuses on the virtues, such a reflective concern could displace a concern for the well-being or for the ethical qualities of others. Various responses to this line of thought can be found in the literature, and I will not rehearse the details here.[33] The basic point is that there is no general theoretical reason why such a reflective concern must evolve in this problematic manner. And, within Confucian thought, the emphasis on the cultivation of various ethical attributes is actually coupled with the view that the truly ethical person is someone who is also concerned for the well-being as well as ethical qualities of others.[34]

Certain other attempts to link a reflective concern with one's own ethical qualities to ethical self-indulgence invoke additional assumptions. For example, some have highlighted the potential for ethical self-indulgence if the concern for the well-being or the ethical qualities of others is viewed as somehow instrumental to the

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[31] See Bernard Williams (1985), pp. 10-11.

[32] See Shun (2001), pp. 239-240.

[33] See, for example, David Solomon, pp. 434-436.

[34] See Huang Yong for a discussion of the Confucian position.

concern with one's own ethical qualities.[35] Admittedly, there can be additional assumptions invoked that would give reason to believe that a reflective concern with one's own ethical qualities will lead inevitably to ethical self-indulgence. But this is a problem not for the reflective concern as such; it is a problem only for ethical views that endorse these additional assumptions. There is no reason why the reflective concern must itself be coupled with such assumptions, such as the assumption that the good of others is instrumental to one's own good.[36]

7. Ethical Self-Commitment and Ethical Self-Indulgence

Let us turn now to ethical self-commitment, one aspect of which is built into the Confucian understanding of *yi*. The potential for ethical self-indulgence arises for *yi* in a way that it does not for other ethical attributes such as *ren* and *li*. A person of *ren* or *li* will have appropriate concern or regard for others, but not necessarily a reflective concern for her own ethical qualities. By contrast, *yi* as such already embodies a reflective conception of certain ethical standards that one should not fall short of. Furthermore, the perspective of the *yi* person is not just that these are standards that everyone should abide by and hence that she should also abide by them. Rather, there is an added element to her perspective that relates her own honor or disgrace to these standards, and it is this element that makes *yi* particularly vulnerable to the charge of ethical self-indulgence.

The same potential worry applies to the broader notion of ethical self-commitment. Ethical self-commitment involves a reflective conception of the ethical and a commitment to live up to that conception. The ethical person would be responding in various ways to the environment, while that reflective conception would at the same time be at work on another level in the two respects described earlier, the 'directive' and the 'detached.' The potential worry is that the operation of this reflective conception might affect the first level responses in a way that leads to a problematic redirection of one's thoughts and attention.

This worry can be described in terms of a potential tension in combining two points of view. From 'inside' the perspective of the ethical person, one's attention is on what someone with the ethically desirable qualities would regard as important. But having a reflective conception of these qualities as ethically desirable involves an 'outside' perspective from which the attention is on these qualities themselves. The concern is that taking up this outside point of view would alienate one from the inside

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[35] See, for example, Thomas Hurka, pp. 246-249.

[36] See Huang Yong, pp. 684-688, for a response to Hurka. See also Christopher Toner, pp. 603-604, 612-613, for a discussion of views that regard the good of others as derived from one's own good and those that do not subscribe to this derivation relation.

point of view by virtue of which one is an ethical person.[37] Furthermore, if this reflective conception plays some kind of motivational role in one's psychology, it seems that one's thoughts about one's own qualities would become part of one's motives, and this smacks of a form of ethical self-indulgence.[38]

One response to this worry is to take the position that a reflective conception of the ethical is just a philosophers' conception and need not be part of the viewpoint of the ethical person.[39] However, to the extent that we do have a reflective conception of the ethical, it seems odd to insist that the ethical person should be precluded from having such a conception. Presumably, even the ethical person would at times reflect on the kind of life to lead and would have some such conception, albeit in a minimal form.[40] And it seems that the ethical person should have such a conception for at least two reasons. First, it seems desirable that people not just live the ethical life, but also regard that way of life as desirable, and actually live that way of life because of such an understanding. And second, it seems that having such a conception can actually strengthen one's commitment to that way of life, provide a back up should one's ethical dispositions weaken, and enable one to cope with new and unfamiliar circumstances of life on the basis of such a conception.[41]

But once we acknowledge that the ethical person could, and maybe should, have such a reflective conception, that conception would presumably be playing some motivational role – there would be no point in having such a reflective conception if it makes no difference to the way one lives. The key to addressing the worry about ethical self-indulgence is to distinguish between two kinds of motivational role. Drawing on a distinction I made in previous publications, a certain consideration will be playing a *directly motivating role* in case one acts because one expects one's action to bring about a desirable effect relative to that consideration, and is prepared to adjust one's action so as to bring about or maximize such effect. By contrast, it will be playing a *constraining role* if, when one acts, one is prepared to avoid courses of action that have an undesirable effect relative to that consideration or to adjust one's action to minimize such effect. For example, financial considerations will be playing a directly motivating role in a helping action if one helps with the goal of financial gain, but only a constraining role if one helps in a way that avoids excessive financial cost

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[37] See Bernard Williams (1985), pp. 50-52.

[38] In Williams (1981), p. 49, Bernard Williams makes the suggestion that to construe integrity as a motive smacks of moral self-indulgence because this is to represent it in one's thoughts in an objectionably reflexive way, having to do with thoughts about oneself and one's own character. Some might make a similar point in relation to motivation by a reflective conception of the ethically desirable qualities.

[39] See, for example, Rosalind Hursthouse, pp. 136-139.

[40] See Christopher Toner, pp. 600-601.

[41] See Shun (1996), pp. 92-93.

or minimizes such cost.

Even when a consideration plays a constraining role, it will make a difference to a person's thoughts and feelings in acting. For example, if financial considerations play a constraining role with regard to a helping action, one may have thoughts about the cost of helping and may be relieved at finding a more affordable way of helping. These aspects of a helping action are not problematic as such. But if financial considerations play a directly motivating role, they will affect the person's thoughts and feelings in a more fundamental way. They will become her main guiding thoughts in helping and will also become the main measure of success. What she will take pleasure in is financial gain as such, not just being able to help in an affordable manner. As a result, not only will the recipient of the helping action feel that his being helped is instrumental to her financial gain, but her attention will be redirected in a way that may lead her to miss certain features of the situation, resulting in her failing to help in a way that she otherwise could.

Thus, it is only when other considerations play a directly motivating role, rather than a constraining role, that the potential for a misdirection of thoughts and attention arises. Accordingly, there is no genuine tension between the 'inside' and the 'outside' points of view if the reflective conception of the ethical plays only a constraining role in the psychology of the ethical person. The potential for ethical self-indulgence arises only if the reflective conception plays a directly motivating role, but nothing in what we have said so far requires it to play that role.[42]

Consider the 'directive' aspect of the mind's operations. It involves the mind's endorsing a reflective conception of the ethical, and its being ready to intervene on the basis of that conception if anything goes wrong or is about to go wrong. This aspect of the mind's operation requires the reflective conception to play only a constraining, not directly motivating, role. A constraining role does imply that one would refrain from doing anything that deviates from that conception in the course of helping. But this is just to say that one would not act unethically in order to help, which is exactly what we would expect of the truly ethical person. When the person helps, she will be helping out of a genuine concern for the well-being of the recipient, not in order to live up to that reflective conception. And when she succeeds in helping, she will take pleasure primarily in the recipient's having been helped, not in her having been able to act ethically.

Consider now the 'detached' posture of the mind that enables the truly ethical person to remain undisturbed despite the adverse circumstances of life. Suppose the ethically appropriate thing for her to do is to help someone in need, and though she attempts to do so, she fails to provide relief due to external hindrances. While feeling

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[42] See Shun (1996), pp.94-99.

frustration and sorrow, she will not feel disturbed, taking comfort in the fact that she has done what is ethically appropriate. Would this posture show that she is putting more weight on her having acted ethically than on the well-being of others?

Now, in a sense, she does regard her following the ethical path as more important than the external conditions of life, including the well-being of others. But this is true only in the sense that she would not act unethically even if by doing so she can accomplish her goals including relieving the suffering of others. This constraining role of the reflective conception does not lead to a problematic redirection of her emotional engagement with the situation. Just as her awareness that she has acted ethically does not detract from the pleasure she feels at the recipient's having been helped when her helping action succeeds, it does not detract from her frustration and sorrow when her helping action fails. Her detached posture implies only that she stays anchored in her awareness that she has followed the ethical path and is not vulnerable to uncertainty, temptation to act unethically, or anxiety about how things could have been different. It does not mean that her frustration and sorrow are any less real or are replaced by some other kind of emotional response. They are still her dominant emotional responses, though without the disturbing effects just described.

To summarize, as long as the reflective conception of the ethical plays only a constraining role, this will not lead to an objectionable form of ethical self-indulgence. There might be moments when the ethical person would engage in conscious self-reflection, consciously thinking about her living up to this reflective conception. But this happens typically outside the immediate contexts of action and will not displace the thoughts and feelings that typically characterize the ethical person when she does act.[43]

8. Concluding Remarks

We started our discussion of ethical self-commitment by considering the Confucian understanding of the attribute *yi*. *Yi* differs from other ethical attributes such as *ren* and *li* in that it presupposes a reflective conception of the ethical standards to which the *yi* person is committed. Because of this difference, to describe a person as acting out of *yi* might smack of an objectionable redirection of the person's thoughts and attention in certain contexts. A person acting out of *ren* would be helping out of genuine concern for the well-being of the other party, while a person acting out of *li* would be treating someone in certain ways out of serious regard for the other party. For the person to act out of *yi* in these contexts, it seems, would be for her to act out of a concern that she herself lives up to certain standards in her actions, and this

[43] See Robin S. Dillon, p. 132.

would constitute an objectionable redirection of her thoughts and attention. The focus, it seems, is too much on herself – she would be acting out of a concern that she acts in a way that is worthy of herself.[44]

There is genuine substance to this worry. To describe someone as acting out of *yi* suggests that the action is motivated by *yi* in the sense that it plays what we have referred to as a 'directly motivating role.' In the kind of contexts just described, this does constitute a problematic redirection of the person's thoughts and attention.[45.] But this is not a problem for the Confucian advocacy of *yi*, as the Confucian position is not committed to the view that, ideally, the ethical person should act out of *yi* in this sense. Instead, the ethical person whose motivations are appropriately structured would be acting out of the relevant kind of other-regarding concerns as appropriate to the situation. *Yi*, as a commitment to the relevant ethical standards, would be playing only what we have referred to as a 'constraining role,' a role that is compatible with the action's being directly motivated by, and only by, the relevant other-regarding concerns. The person's attention would focus solely on the other party, without any conscious thoughts about her own qualities or honor, even though the commitment to the relevant standards is in the background, ready to intervene should she be tempted to deviate from such standards.

A similar point applies to ethical self-commitment as a broader notion that includes a commitment to ensuring that all aspects of one's own person, including one's subtle thoughts and motivations as well as actions, conform to the reflective ethical conception that one endorses. Just as *yi* might play a more active role when someone less than ethical is tempted to act inappropriately, ethical self-commitment in this broader sense also plays an active role when someone still falls short of that reflective conception. The person may have conscious and deliberate thoughts about how she can reshape herself in the ethical direction. This happens in the process of self-cultivation, and we often find in Confucian texts, especially in later Confucian thought, records of conversations between a master and his students in this connection. But just as *yi* plays only a constraining role in relation to the actions of the truly ethical person, ethical self-commitment in the broader sense plays only a constraining role in relation to the psychology of the truly ethical person. This role will not lead to a misdirection of her thoughts and attention, and so there is no general theoretical

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[44] Elizabeth Telfer describes a commitment to one's own worthy behavior as an "egoistically tinged motive" (p. 116), and further notes that self-respect is too egoistic to be an appropriate basis for other-regarding conduct (p. 121).

[45] Compare Bernard Williams' point about how it could be inappropriate to construe integrity as a motive; see Williams (1981), p. 49.

reason to believe that idealizing ethical self-commitment will render an ethical view vulnerable to the charge of ethical self-indulgence.

But this does not mean that ethical self-indulgence is not a genuine practical concern for such ethical views, in the sense that there is a practical risk of ethical self-commitment evolving in a problematic direction for certain individuals. On one interpretation, Mencius urges people not to be over-eager and not to be overly focused on their becoming ethical, in a way that ends up being detrimental to their own ethical development.[46] And Wang Yangming also makes the point that the truly good person would not be consciously aiming at doing good; to have such conscious aims would itself detract from genuine goodness.[47] Thus, though ethical self-indulgence is not a general theoretical worry for the Confucian position, the Confucians are very much sensitive to the practical dangers of a misdirection of attention resulting from one's overly focusing on one's own ethical qualities.

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[46] This is one interpretation of a certain part of *Mencius* 2A:2; see Shun (1997), pp. 154-156.

[47] This is one interpretation of the first sentence of Wang Yangming's Four Sentence Teaching, recorded in *Chuanxilu*, no. 315, pp. 359-360, and this interpretation fits in with ideas in other passages. For a more detailed discussion, see Shun (2011), pp. 107-108.

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