The Primacy of Practice and the Centrality of Outlook

Kwong-loi Shun

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Abstract

Chinese ethical traditions are characterized by a mode of ethical reflection that exhibits two related features – the primacy of practice and the centrality of outlook. The former concerns how this mode of reflection is driven primarily by a concern to make a direct ethical difference to our lives, rather than to understand our ethical lives as an object of study. The latter concerns how, on this mode of reflection, a main ethical task has to do with the development of certain ethical outlooks. These are shared features of three main traditions of thought in China – Confucianism, Daoism (as exemplified in the *Zhuangzi*), and Chan (or Zen) Buddhism (as exemplified in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*) – though the discussion of the paper will focus on Confucianism. After elaborating on these two features and how they stand in contrast to certain common strands in contemporary moral philosophizing, the paper concludes with a discussion of some implications of this mode of reflection for the contemporary teaching and learning of ethics.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I present a mode of ethical reflection that characterizes certain Asian traditions, in particular Confucianism, and that differs from certain common strands in contemporary philosophical discussions. It is characterized by two features – the **primacy of practice** and the **centrality of outlook.** These are shared features of three main traditions of thought in China – Confucianism, Daoism (as exemplified in the *Zhuangzi*), and Chan (or Zen) Buddhism (as exemplified in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*) – but I will focus on Confucianism in my discussion.[1]

Highlighting this mode of reflection not only helps our understanding of Chinese thought, but is also relevant to contemporary philosophical inquiry and teaching. Some contemporary philosophers have voiced apparently similar dissatisfaction with the current direction of moral philosophizing (e.g., McDowell 1989, Murdoch 1970, Oakeshott 1989), but my main concern is not criticism. I view this mode of ethical reflection as not replacing, but filling a gap in, contemporary philosophical discussions.

In sections 2 and 3, I focus on the **primacy of practice** – i.e., this mode of reflection is driven primarily by a concern to make a direct ethical difference to our lives, rather than to understand our ethical lives as an object of study. In sections 4 and 5, I focus on the **centrality of outlook** – i.e., on this mode of reflection, the cultivation of certain ethical outlooks plays a central role. In section 6, I conclude with a discussion of some implications of this mode of reflection.

2. The Primacy of Practice

Consider the following incident that occurred two decades ago. For many years, I had taught a course on ethical theories with fairly standard content – consequentialism, Kantian and then Aristotelian ethics. I had not come across any instance of plagiarism until, in one semester, I encountered three such instances. I asked the students the obvious questions. If they are interested in learning from the course, why plagiarize? And if they are not interested in learning from the course, why enroll in the first place? I got exactly the same answer from all three. They actually had no independent interest in the course. But, in the preceding year, they had plagiarized in some other courses. They were found guilty of academic dishonesty by the Office of Student Conduct, and part of the disciplinary action was to require them to take this course.

Many of us would find something amusing in this incident. To the extent we do, it has to do with an obvious mismatch of expectations, a mismatch between what the Office of Student Conduct expects from a course on ethical theories, and what many of us, as professors who teach the subject, expect.

As professors, we see our role primarily as **teachers of reflective ethics**, of certain reflective views on the ethical lives of humans. We do talk to our students about the importance of academic honesty, but professors of other subjects do the same. As professors, we see our primary role as teachers of certain subject matters, whatever that might be. Teaching academic honesty is not our primary role, but something we do in the course of performing our primary duties. The fact that we teach reflective ethics does not put us in a better position to perform this other role, compared to professors of physics or history.

By contrast, the Office of Student Conduct assumed that, by virtue of the subject we teach, we play a special role in the ethical improvement of students. They assumed that our primary role is to teach students to be ethical, in a way that makes a direct ethical difference to their lives. Instead of **teachers of reflective ethics,** they saw our role as **ethical teachers.**

These two kinds of activities need not be totally exclusive. In **teaching reflective ethics,** our focus is primarily on teaching an **understanding** of our ethical lives, where such understanding takes on a more removed form, like the posture of an observer. But such understanding is not totally unrelated to practice. In principle at least, through teaching this kind of understanding, we can also enable the student to put that understanding to practice. In the contemporary philosophical context, there is, after all, a sub-branch of ethics labeled “applied ethics”.

Conversely, in **ethical teaching**, though our focus is on the direct ethical improvement of students, we also teach them to be reflective. We encounter from time to time challenging exigent situations addressing which requires some minimal degree of reflectivity. And to better equip themselves for this form of teaching, the teachers may also engage in general reflections on ethical issues that they personally encounter or have been brought to them by students and associates. On the basis of these reflections, they make general observations about the human condition and about our ethical lives, which they then communicate to their students to better equip the latter for their own ethical improvement. The activity of ethical teaching cannot be totally devoid of some degree of reflectivity, and we may refer to that activity as **reflective ethical teaching.**

While these two kinds of activities are not totally exclusive, they are clearly different in focus. In **teaching reflective ethics,** our focus is on teaching a more removed kind of understanding of the subject matter, in a way not that different from the way a professor teaches epistemology or metaphysics, physics or history. By contrast, in **reflective ethical teaching,** our focus is more immediately on the ethical improvement of students, and this often involves working with them individually, helping them find ways of addressing ethical challenges they actually confront. While we still seek to facilitate their understanding of the issues at hand, there is also an intelligible sense in which we would say they do not **really** understand if their supposed understanding does not inform their practice. This notion of understanding is practical and experiential in character, a point to which we will return.

What I just presented portrays a fundamental difference between the activities of most Confucian thinkers and those of most contemporary professional philosophers who teach ethics. The Confucians are deeply practical in orientation, and seek actively to put into practice the ethical ideal they advocate, through direct political involvement and teaching. Most major Confucian thinkers, including Confucius (6^{th}-5^{th} century B.C.), Mencius (4^{th} century B.C.), Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529), are politically active and attract gatherings of students. Students and associates come to them for ethical advice, and they advise them individually or in small groups. Their teachings evolved on the basis of reflecting on ethical issues that they, their students and associates, actually encounter. Except for Zhu Xi who writes more extensively, their ideas are conveyed mostly through their sayings and dialogues as recorded by students. They are **reflective ethical teachers** and, aside from their active political involvement which is unique to the Confucians, this focus on practice is shared by Daoism and Chan Buddhism.

The two kinds of activities result in two different kinds of learning communities. One is primarily focused on **understanding** our ethical lives as an object of study. Its members engage in collective intellectual endeavors to seek better understanding, and their focus when teaching students is to facilitate such understanding. Their reflective views are shared through mechanisms familiar to us, such as journals and conferences. There might be the hope that this understanding will also inform the lives of its members, but whether this happens is incidental to the activities that take place within this primarily **intellectual community**.[2]

The other kind of community is primarily focused on **practice**. Its members are devoted to personally living up to certain shared ethical ideals, and to putting it to practice in the public realm, through ethical guidance of students and associates and, for the Confucians, active political involvement. While they also reflect on ethical issues that arise from practice, they are interested in sharing such reflective views only to the extent that it contributes to practice. Some (such as Wang Yangming and certain Chan Buddhist masters) regard the communication of reflective views as largely irrelevant, or even a hindrance because such views divert attention away from actual practice and might generate a fixation on ethical improvement that obstructs its progress. Others (such as Zhu Xi) see teaching such reflective views as conducive to the student's ethical improvement. In any instance, it is agreed that it is ethical practice, rather than the formulation of reflective ethical views, that carries primary significance. This is not primarily an intellectual community, but a **community of practice**.

To elaborate on the characteristics of the mode of ethical reflection that characterizes this kind of community, I will distinguish between three aspects of ethical reflection – **what** the nature of the ethical life is, **why** humans should so live, and **how** humans can live ethically. I will speak mostly of the Confucian perspective, but will also refer occasionally to Daoism and Chan Buddhism.

3. An Alternative Mode of Ethical Reflection

On the question **what**, Confucian thinkers address the question in relation to ethical challenges arising in concrete situations that they, their students and associates, actually encounter. These are largely familiar situations, such as wrongful injury of oneself, or hardships and losses. Their practical recommendations are often directed to countering certain common human tendencies. For example, in responding to wrongful injury of oneself, one should not regard the injury as a personal challenge and should not focus on countering the supposed challenge; instead, one should focus attention on the situation as an ethically problematic situation and on responding to it in an ethically appropriate manner (see Shun 2015a). In responding to hardships and losses, one should not feel resentful nor be overwhelmed by one's sense of frustration, and should instead stand apart from the situation and from one's emotional responses to it, in a way that enables a more proactive and balanced response (see Shun forthcoming a). Responding appropriately to such situations often involves managing one's own psychology to overcome tendencies that incline one otherwise; other examples include the need to overcome one's tendency to be prideful, in the different forms that such tendency takes. This leads to the question **how**, to which we will return.

Although the Confucians do on occasion confront unusual and challenging ethical dilemmas, such as a conflict between family and state, these are rare and not the norm, and are to be dealt with in context and with discretion. Their main concern is with the familiar ethical challenges

that arise on a day-to-day basis, instead of preoccupying themselves with such quandaries. Nor do they ponder on hypothetical situations that are described in abstraction from the complex concrete details that surround ethical challenges that humans actually confront; for them, doing so has little practical relevance.

In contemporary philosophical discussions, consideration of such hypothetical situations is often viewed as a way of clarifying our thinking in relation to a certain area of life, often with the goal of abstracting some general ethical consideration that can guide our ethical decisions in situations in which that consideration comes into play. Ethical considerations of this kind can then provide the basis for a more systematic and unifying account of our ethical life, so that the appropriate way to address specific situations can be derived from these more basic considerations. The Confucians show little interest in seeking some unifying account of this nature. Properly responding to ethical situations that we encounter involves cultivating a sensitivity to the complexities of such situations, and exercising good judgement of a kind that cannot be easily generalized to other situations. There is no reason to believe that there can be a unifying account that has some set of ethical considerations as its basis.

This does not mean that they do not make generalizations. We mentioned earlier some general observations they would make about the way to respond to wrongful injury or personal hardships. Another example is the ideal of one body, which involves one's responding to situations involving harm to others in a way comparable in nature to one's response to situations involving harm to oneself (see Shun forthcoming b). Yet another example is the ideal of no self, which characterizes the sage as someone who does not draw a distinction of significance between oneself and others. Being prideful, viewing wrongful injury of oneself as a personal challenge, or being insufficiently sensitive to situations involving harm to others, all involve one's assigning some special significance to oneself that 'separates' oneself from others (see Shun 2018). But these general observations are not about some basic ethical considerations from which specific ethical responses can be derived. Instead, they are abbreviated ways of referring to some common threads running through the specific responses.

Turning to the question **why**, Confucian thinkers also show no interest in seeking some foundational grounding for our ethical lives. That is, they do not engage in the search for some set of considerations that have a hold on any supposedly 'rational agent' independently of any pre-existing ethical agreement, and that one can appeal to as a basis for critiquing an entire social practice or for grounding a whole way of life for humans. Their interest in the question **why** is primarily in response to an actual practical need, whether uncertainties about certain aspects of existing practices that have come into question, or doubts among one's associates, or disagreements with others including competing schools of thought. When inquiry into the **why** question no longer serves a practical purpose – the uncertainty has been addressed or there is no realistic hope of resolving a disagreement – such inquiry comes to a stop.

The way they address the **why** question can be characterized in terms of the notion of **ethical appeal**, a process very different from the kind usually associated with the idea of ethical justification in contemporary philosophical discussions. Ethical appeal has to do with making an ethical proposal attractive to the audience by reference to considerations that constitute common ground between both parties. It need not, and rarely does, take the form of some linear and structured process by which one is led step by step to some conclusion. Instead, the considerations invoked are varied. One might invoke a certain understanding of the human condition that one shares with the audience, to shared life experiences or aspirations, and even to certain interests that engage the audience but not shared by oneself.[3] One might highlight what one sees as unacceptable consequences of adopting or preaching an opposing view, or how those proposing an opposing view do not actually practice it.[4] One might engage the audience in exercises of imagination, such as imagining how the audience herself might respond to certain situations, in the hope that the audience can then resonate with what one has proposed.[5] And one might cite the example of historical or legendary figures who have supposedly exemplified what one proposes and whom the audience agrees to be exemplary figures.[6] The kind of considerations invoked vary and depend on the issue at hand; ultimately, the goal is to make a practical difference by bringing about the desired change in the audience.

As we just mentioned, the kind of ethical challenges that mature adults more often confront are less a matter of **what** to do, but a matter of **how** we manage our psychology in a way that enables us to respond appropriately, not just in action, but also in thoughts and sentiments, in motivations, and in the way we direct our attention. It is to the question **how** that Confucian thinkers devote most of their attention.

Sometimes, it can be a matter my being unable to do, or unable to do with the appropriate focus and dedication, what I already realize I should. I might be tempted to act otherwise, or lack the endurance to persist in what takes time to accomplish. Sometimes, it can be a matter of being subject to psychological forces that I realize, at least implicitly, are skewing my response. I feel an urge to respond with some demeaning comment to an insult, but catch myself, take pause, and refrain. Or I find myself influenced by my personal like or dislike of someone in performing some official duty, as when grading a paper, and seek ways to bracket my personal feelings so as to make a judicious judgment. Or, when giving a professional presentation, I catch myself starting to say things that are not intellectually relevant but are geared toward impressing the audience, and have to restrain myself. Sometimes, even when everything in my outward response is in order, I might still be subject to thoughts and sentiments that I recognize as problematic. Though the past offence has been addressed, and though I now behave entirely appropriately toward someone who has insulted me in the past, the lurking ill feeling in me reveals itself in subtle signs such as the pleasure I felt when I heard about some tragedy that has befallen the latter's family.

These are the kind of ethical challenges that we most often confront, and the question is **how** we manage our own psychology to enable the proper response. Addressing such challenges is not a

matter of developing our intellect, but a matter of **psychological inner management**, viz. techniques of managing our own psychology. There are a variety of such techniques. We can invoke imageries in the way we view a situation. If I am prone to be inattentive and dismissive when interacting with a junior colleague, simply because of her junior standing, I can try to view her as if she is a rising star in the profession. If I find myself overly casual at a ceremony for commemorating the deceased, I can put myself in such a frame of mind that it is as if the deceased were present. If I find myself insufficiently sensitive to some occurrence, I can invoke certain images or memories – images of what a starving child looks like if I am untouched by news of children dying of famine, or memories of how a friend had cared for me when I was sick if I am unmoved by news of her death.

Another technique is to actively redirect our attention in certain ways. If I become overly angry because I take an offence too personally, I can try to redirect attention away from how I have been personally slighted and toward the situation as a whole – what are the circumstances in which it transpired and what would be an appropriate response setting aside my personal grievance. We can also try to shift to a different way of viewing a situation. If I am distressed by my recent poor performance at a presentation, I can think to how an occasional poor performance is to be expected even from the best of philosophers. Confucians texts are filled with descriptions of such techniques, usually set in the context of concrete examples. Examples include how we should make efforts to keep ourselves alert and watchful, catching problematic influences on our psychology and correcting them as soon as they arise. One technique, often referred to as "sitting in meditation", is to practice gathering one's thoughts, calming one's mind, sharpening its awareness, and focusing one's attention, in preparation for actually engaging in specific tasks or interacting with others. This kind of preparatory exercises are not unfamiliar to us – we often set aside some quiet time to gather our thoughts and calm our minds before an important presentation, and when preparing for some demanding project, we would clear away other tasks beforehand so that our mind will not be distracted.

Sometimes, one might be under the grip of certain psychological forces so that one is unable to engage in these exercises on one's own, in which case external help is needed. A student devastated by her failure to be admitted to medical school is unable to get her mind off this traumatic setback, is paralyzed and has lost interest in any activity, and is engaged in self-doubting which further reinforces her distress and paralysis. Parents or teachers might try to steer her to a different perspective by, for example, inviting her to shift attention to her other talents and how these might lead to an equally fulfilling career, or to think about how her present setback would appear quite insignificant looking back in another twenty years. They might invite her to think about historical figures who, after some serious setback, went on to great accomplishments, or to think of this setback in other terms, like the inevitable fall that a child experiences when learning to walk. As we advance in age and experience, we become more self-sufficient in this regard, but might still need help from time to time from someone more

experienced, just as the students of the Confucian or Chan Buddhist masters often go to their masters for advice.

For the Confucians, reflections on these questions are primarily practical in character. For example, in situations in which one is moved to deviate from what one recognizes as proper, their reflections concern how, in practical terms, one can overcome the psychological forces at work, and do not take the form of a theoretical question about how "weakness of the will" is possible. As another example, Wang Yangming's students sometimes bring to the master questions about how they can deal with the obstructing effects of their overly fixated preoccupation with being ethical. Wang would give practical advice on how one can steer a path between being insufficiently attentive to one's ethical progress and being overly pre-occupied and stringent. This is different from the theoretical discussions in contemporary philosophy about "ethical self-indulgence", such as a question about whether there is a "self-centeredness objection" to the kind of ethical theory that emphasizes the cultivation of virtues.

Ultimately, on this mode of ethical reflection, the primary ethical task is to become the kind of person who would respond appropriately to the situations one confronts without the need to further manage one's psychology when the occasion arises. The question **how** also concerns how one can become such a kind of person, or how to cultivate the relevant **ethical outlooks**.

4. The Centrality of Outlook

On this mode of ethical reflection, the emphasis on the practical also comes with an emphasis on understanding the operations of our psychology in concrete terms, rather than in terms of some abstract conception that does not fit in with their actual complexities. This results in a way of conceptualizing our relation to our environment quite different from the way it is often understood in contemporary philosophical discussions. There are two aspects of this conception – the way we relate to specific situations of ethical significance that we encounter, and the nature of our more enduring relation to the human community and to the world at large.

To start, let us consider the way we experience and respond to what we encounter on a day-to-day basis. For convenience, I will refer to this as the way we *respond*, or just our *responses*, with the understanding that our responses also include how we experience what we encounter. Two kinds of locutions are commonly used in the English language to describe our responses. One presents them as directed to some *object*. For example, we are angry at someone, and we have sympathy for or empathize with someone. The other presents them as directed to some occurrence, happening, or state of affairs. For example, we also speak of our being angry at what someone has done or at what is going on. Though less frequently, we speak of our having sympathy for or emphasizing with someone's condition, and use other locutions such as our being touched or pained by what is happening to that person.

I will say of the second kind of locutions that they present our responses as being directed to *situations*, where the word "situation" is understood broadly to include occurrences and happenings, someone's being in a certain condition, someone's doing something, or just any state of affairs. Although the first kind of locutions is common, it appears that the responses they describe are still primarily responses to situations rather than to objects as such. When I am angry at someone, my response is not to him as such, but to his doing certain things. When I have sympathy for someone, my response is not to her as such, but to her being in a certain condition.[7]

When describing such responses, we often invoke a distinction between the mind and the heart. For example, it touches my **heart** to see TV images of starving children obviously in pain, and I engage in some deliberation in my **mind** to figure out how to help. Correspondingly, in contemporary philosophical discussions, we often distinguish between the cognitive and the affective, assigning judgements and beliefs to the former, feelings and desires to the latter. A third category, the volitional, is invoked to encompass psychological operations that have to do with our exercising our 'will' to do something.

This distinction between mind and heart is an incidental feature of the English language absent from certain non-European languages. In Chinese and some East Asian languages, there is just one single term referring to that which exhibits all the psychological functions just described.[8] This observation about languages aside, it seems more plausible to conceptualize that which exhibits all these psychological functions as one single faculty; after all, it is the person as a whole that interacts with its environment and whose psychology operates in these ways. From this point on, while I will follow the conventions of the English language in speaking sometimes of the mind and sometime of the heart, this way of speaking does not assume that our psychological operations pertain to two different faculties. They all pertain to one single faculty, which we may refer to as the "heart/mind" if needed.

It is this single faculty that experiences and responds to the situations we encounter. Sometimes, a response can be easily separable into distinct elements that fit into the usual categories of the cognitive, affective, and volitional. For example, I go to the supermarket to purchase some item. I judge that this is the item I want, I decide to purchase it, and I feel pleased that it costs less than I expected. I could have made that same judgement without deciding to purchase the item, and could have decided to purchase it without feeling pleased about the price. But more often, especially in situations with ethical significance, our response is a complex package that is not easily separable into distinct elements in this manner.

Imagine that we are presented with a photo of our parent, invited to stick a needle into the eye, and promised some handsome reward if we do so.[9] Many of us would find abhorrent the prospect of so acting, and feel that doing so would be committing some form of injury to our parent. We can say that we judge that the action is injurious to, or appears injurious to, our parent, that we feel a certain way about so acting, and that we decide, at least implicitly, that we would not so act. But the supposed judgement about injury is not something that could have obtained, in the form it actually does, without our feeling that way about the action and without our being repelled by the prospect of so acting. Nor could we describe the way we feel about and are

repelled by the action, in the actual form that the feeling and sense of repulsion take, other than in terms of our viewing the proposed action as injurious, or as if injurious, to our parent. These different elements of our response are inextricably intertwined and, for most of us, there is something ethically deficient in someone who does not share such a response, at least initial response, when presented with a similar situation.

Our responses to situations of ethical significance often take this form. Consider the earlier examples that involve an "as if" mentality.[10] When commemorating a deceased parent at the side of her grave, our thoughts, sentiments, and demeanor should be such that it is as if the deceased parent were present. And I can try to counter my prideful tendency when interacting with a junior colleague by viewing her as if she is a rising star. In these examples, my way of experiencing and responding to the situation is a complex package with intertwined elements that could not be separated into distinct elements that can individually obtain, in the same form they actually do, without the others.

The point can also be illustrated with examples involving the shifting of perspective.[11] Consider the student who has been totally devastated by her setback. Whatever parents or teachers might say to her, and however much she might agree, even agreeing that this particular setback does not have the towering significance that she **sees** it as having, her sense of devastation would not go away until she comes to have a shift in perspective that involves her coming to **see** her present setback in a different light. Such a change can only be described in terms of a whole package with intertwined elements; although it can be described as involving certain changes in her judgements, sentiments, and motivations, the relevant change in one element cannot come about, in the form it does, without corresponding changes in the other elements.

Against the background of a presumption of a clear distinction between the cognitive, affective, and volitional, this alternative way of conceptualizing our responses to situations might appear a deviation from standard expectations that needs to be argued for.[12] But there is no reason why we should endorse that presumption, which is itself specific to certain philosophical traditions. From this other perspective, the default is to view our way of experiencing and responding to situations in terms of a complex package with different, often intertwined, elements. While we can, in certain situations such as the supermarket example, distinguish between elements of our responses that fall into the usual philosophical categories, this is not the norm. More often, especially in situations of ethical significance, our responses take the form of complex packages that cannot be appropriately described in such terms.

For such situations, a natural way of describing the responses is in perceptual terms, as when we described the student as coming to **see** her setback in a different light. To cite another example, consider someone with a deep-seated bias against members of a minority group. Even if the person comes to be sincerely convinced that he should treat them as equals, the bias lingers and subtly manifests itself in various ways, such as a pattern of avoiding sitting next to members of that group in public transportation, without his consciously choosing to do so. That he does, in some purely cognitive sense, believe that he should treat them as equals can be seen from his embarrassment or self-blame when that pattern is brought to his attention, and from his making genuine efforts at change. But, despite that belief, he does not really **view** these individuals as

equals until the deeply entrenched bias has been truly rooted out, which again involves a fundamental shift in the way he **views** the minority group.

That it is natural to describe such responses in perceptual terms is likely due to certain parallels with visual perception. For example, when we talk about "seeing" in a visual context, we might be referring to what is visually presented, what is salient among what is visually presented, and what is visually presented under certain modes of conceptualization. As I walk through a plaza, there are things that I "see" without noticing (but can recall afterward if asked) and things that I "see" in the sense of consciously attending to them, as well as certain modes of conceptualization that shape what I "see" in either sense (e.g., "I see a couple engaged in a heated argument"). Similarly, when my heart/mind experiences and responds to a situation, there are things that it is aware of without noticing and things that it consciously attends to, as well as certain modes of conceptualization that shape the way things come to its awareness. And just as we talk about "looking" in the visual context in the sense of focusing visual attention, and "looking for" with the added element of searching, our heart/mind can also focus attention on certain aspects of a situation as well as focus attention with an element of searching.[13] In the example of the student, her attention is focused on her setback even though there are other aspects of the situation that she is aware of (e.g., that her academic record prepares her for other graduate programs), and what she focuses attention on is viewed under certain modes of conceptualization (e.g., that this setback dooms her future). All these different elements – what one is aware of, what one focuses attention on, how one conceptualizes what one focuses attention on, and so forth – are interconnected parts of one's overall view of the situation, as in the case of visual perception.

That our responses to situations may appropriately be described in perceptual terms has sometimes been noted in the contemporary philosophical literature, though with a different focus, such as an emphasis on how the way one "perceives" a situation can fully account for one's action. Some describe how "clarity of vision" in the way one experiences a situation can result in one's seeing only one course of action, so that the operation of the will is like "obedience" (Murdoch 1970: 38-39, 68). Others highlight the notion of salience, understood in terms of "seeing something as a reason for acting which silences all others" (McDowell 1989: 103). In such situations, the more deliberative mode of action is no longer applicable, and the cognitive can no longer be separated from the volitional since one's way of seeing the situation cannot be separated from the way one is moved (McDowell 1989: 103).

That ethical progress is to a significant extent a matter of limiting one's "live options" in acting, and that one may progress to the point when only one option is open to view in certain kinds of situations, is an indisputable fact of our ethical life. My focus, though, is not on this phenomenon, nor on downplaying the ethical significance of a more deliberative mode of action. While the former mode of action describes many familiar situations, the latter, more deliberative, mode of action is not just relevant to unusual situations or challenging dilemmas. There are fairly normal circumstances in which one sees clearly the need for action (e.g., upon witnessing an act of cruelty) but is not sure what to do (e.g., directly intervene or call police). And after deciding what to do or even if one sees clearly what to do without deliberation (e.g., that one should directly intervene), one might still be unsure how best to execute it. In this way, the need for deliberation also pervades many ethically significant situations we encounter on a day-to-day

basis. My focus is not on downplaying its significance, but on highlighting the ethical significance of a way of experiencing and responding to situations that takes the form of the complex package described earlier, one that might lead straightforwardly to action or might just set the framework for further deliberation.

A main task in ethical development is to become the kind of person who reliably views situations in ethically desirable ways. I will refer to as an **outlook** of the person that which accounts for her pattern of responses in a certain area of life, such as those involving personal injury. While the term "outlook" is neutral with regard to the nature of the responses, an **ethical outlook** is a relatively enduring state of the heart/mind by virtue of which one experiences and responds to situations of a certain kind consistently in an ethically desirable manner. To the extent that we describe these responses in perceptual terms, the outlook is not to be identified with a pattern of perception nor with a "perceptual capacity".[14] Instead, the term "outlook" makes the point that this state of the heart/mind can itself be described in perceptual terms, as a more enduring way of **viewing** things that accounts for the pattern or makes possible the capacity.

Consider again the example of discriminative bias. One can come to have sincere beliefs about the equality of all humans while the entrenched bias persists. While someone with the appropriate ethical outlook can be described as having such a belief, that belief has to permeate the whole person in a way that precludes the kind of subtle bias described earlier. One's coming to have the relevant ethical outlook involves not just a corresponding adjustment in beliefs, but a whole reorientation of oneself, including one's thoughts and sentiments, the way one directs attention, the way one is moved, etc., all of these being intertwined with each other.

A reorientation of this kind is familiar to us in many areas of life. It is the goal of certain educational practices such as taking young children to live for some time in a developing country or, in a more formal context, the establishment of study abroad programs. The exposure provides the student with a more experiential understanding of what she has learnt at home or in the classroom, such as what it is like to live a life of poverty or to be part of a different culture. The goal is to instill a kind of understanding that engages her more deeply and pervasively, informing her thoughts, sentiments, motivations, and so forth.[15]

In this way, an ethical outlook is itself a complex package having to do with the way one views things in a certain area of life. It need not refer to some enduring state of the heart/mind that one can actually attain and continue to maintain in one's life time. Instead, it has to do with a direction of transformation that we should aspire to, a direction along which we can progress but without implying some kind of endpoint. And although we can speak of different ethical outlooks in relation to different areas of life, these different outlooks are often connected – e.g., someone who views personal hardships with relative equanimity is also less likely to view wrongful injury of oneself as a personal challenge. Thus, the different ethical outlooks can be regarded as different aspects of a single ethical outlook; they identify different aspects of a single state of the heart/mind that accounts for different patterns in the way one experiences and responds to situations. For the Confucians, the main ethical task is to develop and cultivate this overarching ethical outlook, which they characterize in terms of a state of 'no self' (see Shun 2018).

5. The Idea of Enlightenment

There are different ways to facilitate development of ethical outlooks. Sometimes, this is not something that one consciously works toward, but just come with certain life experiences, like the kind of childhood educational experiences described earlier. And the influencing factor could be the kind of influences one is exposed to on a day-to-day basis, such as the kind of people one associates with, the kind of political dynamics one witnesses on TV, and so forth.

Sometimes, one might seek to develop certain outlooks through self-conscious efforts to directly manage the operations of one's own psychology. In section 3, we described a variety of ways in which this can happen. It can involve, for example, invoking certain imageries in one's mind, actively redirecting one's attention in certain ways, or making deliberate effort to shift to a different perspective.

Sometimes, there can be an interplay between more passive and more active processes. For example, one can follow, in a more passive way, guidance from friends or teachers and, in that context, makes active psychological efforts to follow the advice. This is often the relation between the Confucian or Chan Buddhist master and his students. Alternatively, one can make active efforts to expose oneself to experiences of certain kinds to allow oneself to be influenced, in a more passive manner, by the experiences. For example, one can seek to overcome one's prejudicial sentiments by deliberating associating more closely with members of a minority group. Another example is the life of Siddhartha as portrayed in Herman Hesse's novel of the same name. Siddhartha actively sought liberation from the self by joining the ascetics, then the order of the Buddha, fell back to a worldly life, till he became enlightened by the side of a river under the subtle influence of a fisherman.

I just used the word "enlightened" to make a specific point. In the end, despite all his active seeking, the state Siddhartha sought had to "come to" him, something he could hope for but not deliberately bring about. This point is true in general of the development of an ethical outlook – whatever path one follows, success is never guaranteed. Even when one makes conscious efforts to directly manage the operations of one's own psychology, perhaps under external guidance, one might still not come to see things in the desired manner. And when the change does come, one experiences it as a transition to clear awareness, with things "lighting up", an experience conveyed in the three Chinese traditions using terms with the connotation of "awakening" or "illumination".[16] That kind of shift in vision is well portrayed in western art and literature, as in Tolstoy's portrayal of Ivan Ilyich's shift in perspective toward his own death at the final moment, or Valjean's transformation as portrayed in the musical *Les Miserable*. Obviously, the shift in vision need not occur in a dramatic fashion. But even when it happens gradually, it is still experienced as a shift in vision that comes to one and that one would, on looking back, describe in terms of how one has "come to see things clearly".

One can try to describe what that "enlightened" state is like, whether as an observer or as someone in that state, and such a description can be communicated in words, even recorded in texts as a teaching. But a person does not come to be in that state through endorsing what has been communicated. As in the example of discriminative bias, one can sincerely endorse what

has been communicated but still not see things in the relevant way. Linguistic communication at best inspires one to work in a certain direction, but the actual shift in vision is never guaranteed and is something that comes to one when it does come. This accounts for the emphasis in all three Chinese traditions on the limitation of linguistic communication, and also explains why presenting these traditions primarily as "metaphysical" views or as theoretical accounts of certain kinds misses their fundamental insights. For all three traditions, the primary purpose of linguistic communication is to steer the audience toward the desired ethical outlook through the corresponding shift in vision, rather than to convince them to endorse certain metaphysical views or theoretical accounts. Something that looks like systematic accounts of the cosmos and the human condition do emerge in the context of intellectual debates within or across traditions; Zhu Xi, for example, writes extensively to present some such account. But even Zhu acknowledges that these accounts are of "secondary importance". The truly ethical person need not have a reflective conception of such accounts and, even if they do, it is not by virtue of endorsing such accounts that they are ethical.

6. Concluding Comments

In this paper, we considered a mode of ethical reflection that focuses on practice, on making an actual difference to the way we respond to the ethical challenges that we confront on a day-to-day basis. These responses often take the form of a complex package akin to a form of perception. Ideally we should become the kind of person who can so respond without the need to further manage our psychology. This involves our developing certain ethical outlooks, which are again akin to a form of perception, having to do with the way we view the human community, the world, and our place in the human community and the world. Compared to certain common strands in contemporary philosophical discussions, this mode of reflection approaches the questions **what** and **why** differently, demonstrating little interest in seeking a systematic unifying account of our ethical life, or some set of foundational considerations that can convince and motivate any human being with some supposedly 'rational' capacity to be ethical. If there were such considerations, the idea of ethical outlook would no longer have a central role. The ethical ideal would then be to become the kind of person who can grasp and be moved by such a set of considerations. And if grasping such considerations suffices to move one to be ethical, the question **how** would no longer be prominent. By contrast, on this mode of ethical reflection, how to manage one's psychology to properly respond to a situation and how to develop the proper kind of ethical outlooks are the central ethical tasks.

Highlighting this mode of ethical reflection is crucial to a proper understanding of Asian ethical traditions. It helps counter the tendency to frame ideas from such traditions in terms of contemporary philosophical agendas and conceptions. To properly understand such a tradition, we need to start from within, mastering the language and the historical context, and engaging in close textual studies. Only after having done so do we move outward from the tradition to relate its ideas to contemporary philosophical discussions of related phenomena, taking care to avoid imposing contemporary philosophical agendas and conceptions on these ideas (see Shun 2016a).

But the relevance of this alternative mode of ethical reflection goes beyond our understanding of Asian traditions. We ourselves, in our contemporary context, also have reason to engage in this mode of reflection to the extent that our reflectivity is practical in character – not primarily to understand the ethical lives of humans as an object of study from an observer's perspective, but primarily to live better lives ourselves and to help others do the same. At the same time, our engaging in this mode of reflection does not render irrelevant the kind of ethical reflection that is currently more pervasive in contemporary moral philosophizing. While the former focuses on practice and is suited for the familiar ethical challenges that we regularly confront, the latter, which involves our stepping back to reflect on ethical issues from a more removed perspective, would be needed to cope with more radical challenges, such as drastic reconsideration of existing practices or unusual challenges posed by new technology. My proposal is not that the latter is irrelevant, only that it needs to be supplemented by the former.[17]

Although we presented the contrast between the two modes of ethical reflection in terms of contrasting focuses on practice and on understanding, this does not mean that the former downplays the importance of understanding, only that it conceptualizes understanding differently. The kind of ethical reflection more common in contemporary philosophizing seeks to understand our ethical lives as an object of study, approaching it from an observer perspective as in other kinds of academic inquiry. The search for this kind of **intellectual understanding** often emphasizes qualities such as conceptual clarity, analytic rigor, reasoning understood in terms of evidence and argumentation, and so forth. The alternative mode of ethical reflection still values such qualities – after all, we do not want our reflection to be vague and confused in a way that does not contribute to practice. But it engages in such exercises as conceptual analysis or argumentation only to the extent that they have a practical relevance. There is no presumption that we do not really understand a certain phenomenon unless we can spell out its nature in very articulate terms; we engage in articulation only when it serves a practical purpose.

Instead, the understanding it seeks is guided by the practical goal of ethical progress. We understand an ethical proposal better not through more fine-grained analysis of concepts or more argumentative details, but through personally resonating with it and being moved to live accordingly. To the extent that we do not live up to that proposal, or do so only reluctantly, our understanding is still shallow. There is genuine understanding only if we can resonate with it, personally experience its validity, and shape our whole person accordingly.[18] The kind of understanding involved is **experiential understanding**.

Experiential understanding can still involve a deeply reflective view of the ethical life. Having such a reflective view need not involve one's being directly motivated by it, and so there is no theoretical conflict between one's having such a reflective view and the motivations one should ideally have in living the ethical life (see Shun 1996, 2015b). The Confucians are concerned not with such a theoretical conflict, but with the potential for practical conflict. In having such a reflective view, one should not be preoccupied with it in such a way that it misdirects one's attention, away from the things that should ideally be the objects of one's ethical concern. Later Confucian thinkers such as Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming differ in the extent to which they see a potential practical conflict, resulting in differing willingness to engage in elaborate and reflective

discourse on the ethical life. Whichever position one takes, there is agreement that, even if having a more articulate reflective view of the ethical life need not lead to a misdirection of attention, having such a reflective view is not part of what it is to live that way of life.

Finally, let us consider the implications of this discussion for contemporary teaching and learning. Much of what transpires in the present-day philosophy curriculum is the teaching and learning of reflective ethics, involving our reflecting on the ethical lives of humans from a more removed perspective. While this kind of reflectivity is important for certain practical contexts, such as formulating social policies or critiquing problematic social practices, it needs supplementation by a different kind of reflectivity that focuses on practice and that pertains to the familiar ethical challenges that we encounter on a daily basis. The latter characterizes reflective ethical teaching and learning, an activity quite different from what is commonly found in the present day classroom.

For this kind of teaching to be effective, we need to relate what we teach to the actual ethical experiences of students, including not just their personal experiences, but experiences of others they learn about through association, through literature and film, or through the concrete human situations recorded in history or depicted in current affairs. We invite the students to see if what they are now learning resonates with their actual experiences, whether it is something they are inspired to practice in their actual lives, and whether they continue to resonate with what they have learnt as they practice it. What we teach, and what we hope they can learn, is experiential understanding. While we do invite students to read and reflect on written materials that embody certain ethical insights, we also teach them to read beyond the words to get at these insights, personally experience and practice them to ensure that they do indeed resonate with their own experiences. In doing so, we do not ask them to evaluate ideas critically in the way that is often done in the philosophy curriculum, but the learning is neither passive nor mechanical. As the Confucian thinkers emphasize, the students should not agree with what they have read, even if the materials are supposed to record the past insights of the sages, unless they can grasp and resonate with such insights. The students should engage in “doubting” – that is, raise doubts if one cannot resonate with what has been read, asking whether one might have misunderstood the texts and missed the real insights, or whether what has been recorded are indeed not genuine ethical insights. One raises doubts not for the sake of constantly stepping back and challenging what has been conveyed, but in order to ensure that what have been recorded are genuine ethical insights that one can benefit from.

This mode of reflective ethical teaching and learning also has implications for higher education as such. It emphasizes the development of certain ethical outlooks, which concern the way one views the human community, the world, and one’s place in the human community and the world. To help the student develop such outlooks, we need to help them build a broad perspective through teaching them history, literature, and a whole range of humanistic and scientific subject matters. We teach them how to think about these subject matters in a way that enables them to truly digest what they have learnt and make it part of themselves, and also how to connect what they have learnt into a broader perspective on humans and on the world. These two dimensions of higher education have been emphasized by John Henry Newman as essential to what he

describes as the "growth of the mind", a main goal of university education. Newman does not discuss their ethical relevance, but the Confucians would embed them in a learning process that has two other dimensions with explicit ethical relevance. One comes early on, having to do with inspiring the student who has just reached adulthood to form lofty aspirations as to how she can contribute to the betterment of the human community and the world. The other builds on the other three dimensions, and has to do with incorporating the broad world view that one has learnt into one's whole person and one's aspirations, so that it informs one's ethical cultivation of oneself as well as one's endeavors in the service of humankind. This, from the Confucian perspective, would be the ultimate goal of what we now refer to as higher education.[19]

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[1] These two features have been noted by contemporary Chinese scholars, who describe Chinese traditions as a "learning for living" (*sheng mng de xue wen*) that emphasizes the "spiritual state of the heart/mind" (*xin ling jing jie*).

[2] This relates to the common observation that professors of ethics are not necessarily more ethical compared to professors of other subjects.

[3] As exemplified in Mencius' dialogues with rulers, which often invoke considerations that move a ruler but not a general audience (e.g., gaining allegiance of the people).

[4] A strategy often used by Mozi (5th century B.C.), who opposes Confucian teachings.

[5] A strategy often used by Mencius.

[6] Such as the legendary sage kings often cited by the Confucians.

[7] That our responses are directed primarily to situations is conveyed in the pre-modern Chinese language in terms of how humans are "affected by" (*gan*) and "respond to" (*ying*) "affairs" (*shi*) that they encounter.

[8] *Xin* in Chinese, *kokoro* in Japanese.

[9] I owe this example to some writing by Peter Winch, but can no longer trace the source.

[10] Early Chinese texts, such as the *Odes* (an ancient collection of poems) and the *Analects* of Confucius, are filled with examples of the "as if" (*ru*) mentality.

[11] The shifting of perspective is highlighted in the *Zhuangzi* as a route to self-transformation.

[12] Such as the way McDowell (1989) argues against the presumption of a distinction between the cognitive and the volitional.

[13] These operations of the heart/mind are highlighted in Confucian moral psychology. Indeed, in traditional Chinese thought, the heart/mind is itself viewed as an organ like the sense organs; what distinguishes it from the latter is its distinctive modes of operation, rather than its being a "mental" entity as distinct from a "physical" entity.

[14] Unlike McDowell who identifies virtue with a sensitivity which is "a sort of perceptual capacity" (McDowell 1989: 87-89).

[15] All three Chinese traditions emphasize an experiential form of understanding that is akin to perception, presenting the highest form of *zhi*, the term often translated as "understanding" or "knowledge", as a matter of *ming*, a term with the connotation of illumination and clarity of sight.

[16] *Jue* and *wu* (often translated as "awakening") as well as *ming* (often translated as "bright" or "clear").

[17] Oakeshott (1989) makes a similar point about the complementary nature of the two forms of moral life he distinguishes.

[18] A point emphasized by all Confucians, and particularly highlighted by Zhu Xi in the context of discussing the way to read the classics.

[19] See Shun (2016b) which also contains references to Newman's ideas on higher education.