

## On Reflective Equanimity – A Confucian Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

For the past few decades, Joel Kupperman has dedicated himself to the study of Asian and comparative philosophy, along with work in other mainstream areas of inquiry in western philosophical thought. One such area is ethics, and in this connection, Kupperman has paid special attention to the role of character in our reflections on the ethical life. For him, such reflections can benefit in important ways by being comparative, in the sense of thinking across different traditions of ethical thought, both east and west. In a recent paper titled “Why Ethical Philosophy Needs to Be Comparative”, he elaborates on this position by arguing that a broader view that results from this comparative work can help us better appreciate the importance of the transformation of character to our ethical life.<sup>2</sup> The paper is rich, touching on several ethical traditions, including Judo-Christian and Greek, Indian and Chinese. In my paper, I will take as my starting point some of his comments on the Confucian tradition, or more specifically, on the *Analects* of Confucius.

Kupperman correctly points out that Confucius’ central ethical concern is “with how a sort-of-good person could be transformed into a deeply (and reliably) good person,” a task that he describes as the “self-conscious development of the self.”<sup>3</sup> The kind of “deeply good person” that Confucius has in mind is described in different ways in the *Analects*, and I am interested in a certain kind of description that, on the surface, might seem puzzling. Kupperman cites Confucius’ remark that such a person is “easy of mind”; conversely, someone without the relevant qualities “cannot remain long in straitened circumstances, nor can he remain long in easy circumstances.”<sup>4</sup> The *Analects* contains

several other similar descriptions of the good person, such as how the good person is free from anxiety.<sup>5</sup> This raises an intriguing question. Such qualities as ease of mind, remaining long in easy circumstances, and being free from anxiety seem removed from the kind of ethical considerations that are usually highlighted in contemporary philosophizing; in what way, then, are they part of an ethical ideal?

Kupperman himself hints at an answer to this question immediately after citing the two passages. According to him, the answer has to do with the fact that, whether in adversity or when things are going well, the good person “has the internal values to hold on to.”<sup>6</sup> This is the answer I want to explore further in my paper. That is, I will show how, for Confucius and his followers, the kind of qualities we just considered are an inextricable part of the ethical ideal they espouse because these qualities are grounded in a complete orientation to the ethical standards that the Confucians uphold. While my discussion is in essence an elaboration on Kupperman’s view, I will go beyond his discussion by drawing on both early and later Confucian thought to extract a more elaborate account of these qualities and of how they are grounded in a complete orientation to the ethical.

For convenience, I will use the term “equanimity” to refer to the cluster of qualities that we just considered. The notion of equanimity is often associated with connotations such as calmness of the mind, maintaining one’s balance in the face of trying circumstances, and being unperturbed. For example, the Webster’s Online Dictionary defines equanimity as “steadiness of mind under stress; evenness of mind; that calm temper or firmness of mind which is not easily elated or depressed; patience; calmness; composure.” What I will do in my paper is to spell out the details of a state of mind with qualities that are akin to those just cited and that are highlighted in Confucian thought. At this stage of the discussion, I am merely using “equanimity” as a convenient but vague label to identify the state of mind that will be our subject of discussion. After presenting the Confucian view, I will describe the nature of this state of mind more systematically, and will at that point introduce the term “reflective equanimity” to refer to such a state of mind. The qualification “reflective” highlights the point that such a state of

mind is, for the Confucians, grounded in a certain kind of reflective stance.

For the Confucians, that reflective stance is related to an idea central to Confucian thought which, again for convenience, I will refer to as “the primacy of the ethical”. I will elaborate on this idea in a way that abstracts from the more substantive elements specific to Confucian ethical thought, and so the primacy of the ethical is an idea that can be shared by other ethical traditions with substantively different ethical ideals. As a result, my elaboration on this idea and on the state of reflectivity equanimity that follows from it has a broader relevance that goes beyond the Confucian ethical tradition.

In my discussion, I will be elaborating on Confucian ideas in a way that I believe will engage and appeal to contemporary readers. In doing so, I am assuming that the ethical concerns and experiences that underlie the ideas of the Confucian thinkers are shared to a significant degree by us nowadays. Undoubtedly, we will need to undertake a certain degree of abstraction, setting aside more specific Confucian ideas that are no longer fully intelligible or appealing to us, to extract ideas that reflect these common concerns and experiences. But my assumption is that there is still a substantive body of ideas of interest to us nowadays even after this process of abstraction.

Obviously we will need to engage in close textual analysis in order to approximate the ideas recorded in the relevant texts that reflect the ethical concerns and experiences of the Confucian thinkers. I will not be engaged in such analysis in this paper; instead, I will draw on the results of the textual analysis that I have already undertaken in other publications.<sup>7</sup> Using as my starting point the outcomes of these past textual studies, I will seek to relate ideas from the relevant texts to our own contemporary ethical experiences, elaborating on them in a way that makes them both intelligible and appealing to us. In doing so, I will go beyond the actual ideas that can be traced to the texts through textual analysis. Although I will refer to the account I present as a Confucian account, I do not intend it to be a faithful representation of ideas in the relevant texts in all their fine details. Instead, it is a Confucian account in the sense that it is based on certain core Confucian ideas that can be extracted from the texts, and that the

way I spell out the details of the account fits in with various other ideas that can also be traced to the Confucian texts. Here, in speaking of how the account might ‘fit in’ with ideas in the texts, I mean only that it provides a way of making sense of these ideas, not that it provides the only way of elaborating on these ideas.<sup>8</sup>

In section 2, I will describe an idea, which I have referred to as “the primacy of the ethical”, from Confucian thought that I will take as my starting point. With this discussion as background, I will elaborate on the different aspects of the state of mind, which at this point I have referred to as “equanimity”, that follow from this idea, drawing on both early and later Confucian thought for this purpose. Sections 3 and 4 focus mostly on ideas already highlighted in early Confucian thought, and section 5 focuses mostly on ideas highlighted in later Confucian thought. But this distinction reflects only a difference in emphasis, as the ideas presented in these three sections are intimately related to each other. In the course of presenting the Confucian view on the subject, I will introduce the notion “reflective equanimity” more formally to refer to the state of mind under consideration. Finally, in section 6, I conclude with some general remarks on the Confucian view of reflective equanimity, and raise a potential problem for the Confucian view calling for further inquiry that I plan to undertake in another paper.

## 2. The Primacy of the Ethical

By the primacy of the ethical, I have in mind a Confucian view that has four components. First, the Confucians share a substantive account of an ethical ideal that concerns not just observable behavior but also various activities of the mind, including emotions and feelings, as well as the minute thoughts and other subtle activities of the mind.<sup>9</sup> There are inevitably differences among Confucian thinkers on specific elements of the ethical ideal they espouse, such as the extent to which they allow deviation from established ritual practices, but they do share sufficient common elements for us to speak of a Confucian ethical ideal in a substantive sense.

Second, Confucian thinkers share the belief that everyone is capable of attaining

this ethical ideal. Many, including Mencius and later Confucians such as Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming who proclaim themselves Mencians, hold the view that everyone is capable of attaining the ideal through one's own effort. Some, such as Xunzi and to a greater extent Dong Zhongshu, believe that while everyone is so capable, they might need to depend on external guidance to actually succeed. In any instance, there is at least one important trend in Confucian thought that holds the view that everyone can attain the ideal through one's own effort, though the process of so cultivating oneself might take time and effort. I will be focusing primarily on this trend in Confucian thought.

Third, all Confucian thinkers hold the view that following the ethical path is of greater significance by comparison to any other kinds of pursuit or to the external conditions of life. They do not deny that other things are important, such as life and death, or the well being of beloved ones, but they believe that there is nothing more important than following the ethical path, and consequently that any other pursuits in life should be subject to the constraints of the ethical. This is reflected in the way they understand *yi* 義, a term that has the earlier meaning of a sense of self-regard, or a refusal to subject oneself to disgrace. From early on, the Confucian thinkers transformed the understanding of *yi* by insisting that what is truly disgraceful is not the way one is viewed or treated, but for one to fall below certain ethical standards whether in action or in one's thoughts and feelings.<sup>10</sup> One should conform to such ethical standards under all circumstances, and *yi* as an ethical attribute refers to a firm commitment to such standards.

Fourth, not only do the Confucians believe that upholding such ethical standards is of the utmost significance, but it is also part of the ethical ideal they espouse that one should attain a state of mind that is fully shaped in the direction of the ethical. That is, ideally, not only should one be aware of the importance of the ethical and be firmly committed to it, but all aspects of the mind's activities should be shaped in accordance with it. This complete ethical orientation of the mind they refer to as *cheng* 誠 (being real, being whole), a term also explained in terms of oneness, that is, the absence of any discrepancy within the mind.<sup>11</sup>

By primacy of the ethical, I refer to a reflective view that incorporates the above four elements. Specifically, it (1) works with a substantive account of an ethical ideal that has to do with not just behavior but also with various activities of one's mind, (2) regards it as fully within one's control to attain the ethical ideal, (3) regards the ethical as of greater significance than other pursuits or conditions of life though the latter may also be of significance, and (4) advocates a transformation of one's whole person so that one is completely oriented toward the ethical. This view, as I will try to show in the rest of this paper, results in an ethical ideal that includes the kind of qualities that I have referred to as "equanimity".

To give a quick summary of the overall argument, let us consider the state of mind of someone who has attained a complete orientation toward the ethical. The primacy of the ethical does not deny the significance that one may attach to other pursuits and conditions of life, and so this person would still be engaged in various kinds of pursuits and be affected by various conditions of life, whether favorable or unfavorable. He may be frustrated, feel sorrow or joy, and be subject to all kinds of emotional responses. Given his complete orientation to the ethical, he would not seek to alter adverse conditions of life by unethical means, however trying the circumstances. And being aware that he is abiding by the ethical, which for him is of greater significance than any other condition of life, he would, despite the adverse circumstances of life, take contentment in the fact that he is abiding by the ethical and would stay unperturbed by his more immediate responses. What we have is a picture of the mind operating at two levels: it is actively engaged in all kinds of pursuits and is emotionally affected by various conditions of life at one level, while it stays unperturbed and calm at another. Equanimity describes the posture of the mind at the second level, on which one keeps a distance from one's more immediate responses to situations one confronts, and maintains a balanced perspective while staying emotionally calm. In sections 3 and 4, I will elaborate more on this posture of the mind, and in section 5, I will discuss the relation between the two levels on which the mind operates.

### 3. Invulnerability and Contentment

One implication of the primacy of the ethical is that someone who has attained the ethical transformation it advocates will be invulnerable in two senses. He will be firmly committed to the ethical and will not be led to deviate from it by external influences. This firmness of commitment is conveyed in the *Mencius* in terms of the idea of the ‘unmoved mind’ – as long as the mind realizes that it is holding on to the ethical, it will not be subject to fear or uncertainty as a result of external influences.<sup>12</sup> This firmness of commitment is beautifully conveyed in another passage in the *Mencius*:

“He cannot be led into excesses when wealthy and honored or deflected from his purpose when poor and obscure, nor can he be made to bow before superior force. This is what I would call a great person.”<sup>13</sup>

Not only is the person not vulnerable to the potentially distortive influences of external circumstances because of this firm commitment to the ethical, but this firm commitment itself is also something that no external force can deprive one of. It is a matter of one’s setting one’s mind on the ethical, and what one sets one’s mind on is something entirely within one’s control and not subject to external influences unless one allows it to. This point Confucius conveys by saying that:

“While an army can be deprived of its commander, even the commonly clad person cannot be deprived of that on which he has set his mind.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, one sense in which the person is invulnerable is that, once he has set his mind on the ethical, he cannot be led to deviate from the ethical nor be deprived of this firm commitment to the ethical by any external influence.

Another sense in which he is invulnerable is that he cannot be harmed by others in a way that is of the deepest significance to him. He does attach importance to various pursuits and conditions of life other than the ethical, and so he can be affected if things do not go well. He can be frustrated if he fails in his endeavors, can feel sorrow upon the

loss of a beloved one, and can feel hurt at the way he has been treated by others. In these various ways, he can still be harmed. However, he is aware that what is of greatest significance, namely, following the ethical path, is something entirely within his control and cannot be affected by external influences. Thus, he cannot be harmed in the way that is of the deepest significance to him, namely, deviating from the ethical. Such harm can only be self-inflicted, as the only person who can lead him to deviate from the ethical is he himself. This sense of invulnerability is related to the idea that a good person cannot be harmed, at least in the way that truly matters, an idea found in other traditions that share the structural feature of what I have called the primacy of the ethical.<sup>15</sup> It also follows from the primacy of the ethical that it is worse to do than to suffer wrong – it is the person who commits wrong doing who has been harmed in the sense that truly matters.<sup>16</sup> This explains how someone who has suffered wrong at the hands of those who have been manipulated could have pity on the latter – although they have done wrong to oneself, they themselves, in having been manipulated to do wrong, are the ones who have been harmed the most.

So far, we have focused on a firm commitment to the ethical that grounds the two senses of invulnerability just described. But what the Confucians advocate is not just such a firm commitment, but a total reshaping of oneself in the ethical direction. As mentioned earlier, this complete orientation toward the ethical is conveyed through the notion *cheng* 誠 (being real, being whole), and it involves not just a reshaping of one's way of life, but also one's thoughts and feelings, including the subtle and minute activities of the mind, in an ethical direction. The state of *cheng* is often related to *le* 樂, both by Mencius and by later Confucians under his influence.<sup>17</sup>

The character *le* is often used in the *Analects* to describe the ethically accomplished person. In *Analects* 6.11, Confucius comments on his favorite student Yan Hui:

“The Master said, ‘How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water – others would find unbearable their anxiety, but Hui would not let



this affect his *le*. How admirable Hui is!”<sup>18</sup>

Confucius also refers to his own *le*, and remarks how his *le* in moral learning leaves no room for anxiety; the reference to the absence of anxiety occurs in other passages in the text.<sup>19</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, what *le* in these contexts refers to is not a state of emotional exhilaration or excitement, but a state of moving along at ease with the flow of things, calmly and without obstruction, in the way in which one immerses oneself in and dances to the rhythm of elegant music.<sup>20</sup> The character *le* is the same as the character *yue* which refers to music, and in *Mencius* 4A:27, Mencius draws a connection between *le* and music:

“When *le* arises how can one stop it? And when one cannot stop it, then one begins to dance with one’s feet and wave one’s arms without knowing it.”<sup>21</sup>

This understanding of *le* is stated explicitly by Zhu Xi, who explains *le* in terms of one’s flowing along with things contentedly, with ease and without effort. Commenting on *Analects* 6.11, Zhu says:

“Master Cheng said, ‘The mind of Yan Hui ... is at ease and contented, and it is in a state of *le* wherever he is. It is not that he regards the Way as worthy of *le* and have *le* as a result.’”<sup>22</sup>

And commenting on *Mencius* 4A:27, Zhu says:

“To say that *le* arises is to say that one is flowing along at ease and without the need for effort.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, for the Confucians, *le* in the ethical context is a state in which one is immersed in the ethical, flowing along with it at ease and without anxiety. To reflect this understanding of *le*, I will translate *le* as “contentment” when *le* is used in such a context.

Note that what I have described is the Confucians' understanding of an ideal state of mind that they refer to as *le*. My point is not that the character *le* is generally used in this sense in the classical Chinese language, only that it is used in this sense when used in Confucian texts to refer to an idealized state of mind.<sup>24</sup> The early Chinese do have a conception of states of mind that are more like emotional exhilaration or excitement, akin to the connotations of the English words “joy” and “delight”. *Le* is sometimes used outside of the Confucian context to refer to such a state, though there are other terms, such as *xi* 喜, that are more commonly used for such purposes. There are important differences between such a state and the state of mind idealized by the Confucians. The former is a more immediate response to one's environment, such as a response to one's obtaining what one desires, and it can come and go as the way one relates to one's environment changes. It is a state more closely linked up with the way one feels, and is not necessarily grounded in some reflective outlook on life. The latter, the state of mind idealized by the Confucians, is by contrast grounded in a reflective stance, namely, one's awareness that one is flowing along with the ethical and one's affirmation of such an orientation. As such, it is a more enduring state by comparison to the former. While it involves one's feeling a certain way, it is not primarily a matter of feelings as it also involves the reflective stance just described. Even the way it feels is different – rather than moments of exhilaration that come and go, it involves a more enduring sense of calm and stability, as well as a sense that things are under one's control, a point highlighted in our earlier discussion of the idea of invulnerability.

As highlighted in some of the passages cited earlier, contentment (*le* 樂) is contrasted with anxiety, where “anxiety” is a translation of the character *you* 憂. Now, even a Confucian can have worries, as when one is worried about the health of an ailing parent. There are other terms that are more typically used to refer to such a state of worry, such as *ju* 懼, though the character *you* can also be used for such purposes. But when the Confucians use *you* by contrast to *le*, where *le* refers to an idealized state, they are using *you* in the sense of a disturbed or unsettled state of mind, a state in which one dwells on one's worries in a way that one loses control of oneself and is led along by one's emotions. For the Confucians, *le* as an idealized state of mind is compatible with worries

of the former kind, which are directed to specific aspects of one's environment, but not with anxiety of the latter kind. One's awareness that one is flowing along with the ethical, along with one's affirmation of such an orientation, anchors oneself so that one does not lose control of oneself to one's more immediate responses to the environment.

This discussion of contentment (*le*) and anxiety (*you*) suggests the picture of the mind working on two levels. At the level of immediate responses to specific situations in one's environment, one will exhibit emotional responses of all kinds, including joy and worry, such responses changing with the way one relates to one's environment. At another level, one's state of mind exhibits a stability, characterized by contentment and an absence of anxiety, which is grounded in the kind of reflective stance described earlier. We will return to this two-tiered picture of the mind in section 5 below. For now, let us consider another related quality also highlighted in early Confucian thought.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Acceptance

The idea of invulnerability described above provides a sense in which the truly good person transcends the adverse circumstances of life – the latter cannot lead him to deviate from the ethical, and cannot harm him in the sense that truly matters. The idea of contentment complements the idea of invulnerability by describing how the good person flows along, contentedly and at ease, with the ethical. In addition to these two ideas, there is another idea that concerns how the good person relates to the adverse circumstances of life, not just in the sense of being unaffected by them, but in the sense of willingly accepting them. This posture is conveyed by the early Confucians through the use of the term *ming* 命.<sup>26</sup> Acceptance is a posture directed to adverse circumstances of life that are either literally not within one's control, or can only be altered through unethical means that one would not adopt. One is still affected by these adverse circumstances – one feels sorrow at the death of a beloved one, is disappointed by the lack of appreciation by others, or laments the ethical corruption of the times. But one would not be bitter and resentful, and would not devote energy to complaining about the outcome. One might think about what has happened to learn from it and to find a way of responding to it, but one would

not dwell on thoughts about how things could have been different nor seek to alter things by improper means. Furthermore, one would redirect one's energy in a positive direction, as when Confucius turned to teaching after realizing the inevitable futility of his political endeavors. Realizing that the desired political transformation was not possible during his life time, he turned to teaching his students in preparation for change in a future generation.

To better understand the Confucian notion of acceptance, let us contrast it with other ways of viewing the external conditions of life that it should not be identified with. The posture of acceptance is not based on a general belief about how things could not be otherwise, and in that sense is not a fatalistic attitude. Instead, it is a posture taken up in response to particular situations that are of significance and that go contrary to one's wishes. The posture is not one of resignation in the sense of losing hope and seeing all action as pointless, as when a prisoner of war resigns to his imprisonment. Nor is it a matter of inertia in the sense of unreflectively flowing along with the circumstances, as in the case of a slave unreflectively going along with the fact that he was born enslaved. In these other instances, the posture involved is one of subordination to the environment.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the posture of acceptance that the Confucians advocate enables one to transcend the environment in a certain sense. While being aware of the unavoidability of what has transpired and while being emotionally affected by it, one at the same time distances oneself from it in that one does not fixate on what has happened and is not overwhelmed by one's emotional responses. One does not lose control of one's life; instead, one redirects one's energy to other pursuits in areas in which one can make a difference. That acceptance involves this kind of independence from external circumstances shows its linkage to the idea of invulnerability described earlier, the latter also having to do with one's transcending the influences of external circumstances. The two differ in that, though both have to do with the way one relates to the adverse conditions of life, the idea of invulnerability focuses more on one's not being influenced by them, while the idea of acceptance focuses more on how one transcends such conditions by actively redirecting one's energy.

Acceptance is also different from another way of viewing certain events in one's life that is sometimes conveyed through the notion of fate.<sup>28</sup> For example, an accomplished philosopher might say that it was fate that, when he was in his late teens, he read an inspiring work that turned him to the path of philosophy. In so using the word "fate", he is assigning to a certain event in his life a special purpose – the event plays a pivotal role in steering his life in a certain direction. The posture of acceptance differs in that it is directed specifically to an adverse condition of life, and is not a matter of assigning a special purpose to that condition. Instead, the posture involves one's viewing that unfavorable condition of life in a broader context, so that whatever pain or frustration one feels is mitigated, not by assigning that condition a special purpose, but by seeing that it pales in significance compared to one's commitment to the ethical.

Acceptance relates to the primacy of the ethical in that, by seeing how other pursuits and the external conditions of life pale in significance by comparison to the ethical, one relaxes the importance that one attaches to them and can transcend them in the sense just described. The relation between the two is particularly highlighted when we consider adverse conditions of life that one could have literally avoided though only through unethical means. Consider, for example, a Confucian official in a politically corrupt environment who could have defended himself against political attacks only by employing political vehicles, such as the deliberate manipulation of perception, that he finds ethically objectionable. The official would refrain from adopting such means and would instead accept the political damage that he could have otherwise prevented. He would accept the outcome in the same way he would accept other adverse conditions of life that he literally could not have prevented – he would not fixate on or be overwhelmed by what happened, and would redirect energy to seeking other vehicles of change. What makes this case different is that the outcome is not literally unavoidable, though it is viewed as unavoidable. The official regards the political harm as something that he 'cannot' avoid, where the 'cannot' derives from his character rather than just from the circumstances. Being experienced in politics, he knows the kind of political maneuvers that could have helped prevent the outcome, and so in a sense he has the needed political skill. Yet, by virtue of the kind of person he is, he cannot bring himself to so act; here, the

inability is an inability of the heart rather than a lack of skill.

This kind of ‘practical impossibility’ is a converse of the notion of ‘practical necessity’ that has been well explored in the literature. Such phenomena have to do primarily with the limiting of options, where certain options are precluded not literally, but by virtue of one’s character.<sup>29</sup> What is special about the Confucian view is that the way in which such options are precluded involves repulsion of a certain kind. Now, one maybe pained and as a result repelled by the thought of harm happening to another whom one cares about. This sense of repulsion is related more to the ethical attribute *ren* 仁 (humaneness, benevolence), and is conveyed through the notion *bu ren* 不忍, a term meaning one’s being unable to bear the thought of harm occurring to others.<sup>30</sup> The sense of repulsion under consideration, however, is more closely related to the ethical attribute *yi* 義 (righteousness, sense of duty). It has to do with the insistence on upholding certain ethical standards, and the sense that one’s acting otherwise is below oneself and is tainting on oneself. This attitude toward acting below one’s ethical standards is conveyed through the term *chi* 恥, which involves a sense of disdain toward what one regards as below oneself.<sup>31</sup> From the perspective of the Confucian official, the alternative to what he ‘cannot’ avoid is viewed as something deeply repelling and much worse than the political damage that he accepts.

Thus, acceptance is a posture directed toward adverse conditions of life that one regards as something that one cannot avoid, where the ‘cannot’ is construed broadly to include constraints coming from the external circumstances or from one’s own character.<sup>32</sup> Acceptance, along with the sense of invulnerability and of contentment discussed in the previous section, depict a posture of the mind that exhibits the characteristics usually associated with the notion of equanimity – being emotionally calm and not perturbed, and maintaining a balanced perspective despite the trying circumstances of life. For this reason, I have introduced the term “equanimity” to refer to this state of mind at the beginning of the paper. However, as should be clear by this stage of the discussion, the state of mind we are discussing in relation to Confucian thought also has certain characteristics not adequately conveyed by the ordinary use of the term

“equanimity”. The state of mind we are considering is not a matter of one’s immediate responses to one’s environment, and is not something that comes and goes as the way one relates to one’s environment changes. One does feel a certain way by virtue of being in that state of mind – there is a sense of calm, of being at rest and at peace, of not moving around or being agitated, and of being in control of oneself and not being a captive of one’s environment. At the same time, the state of mind also involves a certain reflective stance, namely, one’s awareness and affirmation of the fact that one is flowing along with the ethical. It 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 not just with one’s feeling a certain way, but also with the way one views and relates to the world. To highlight the point that it is grounded in a reflective stance, I will from now on use the term “reflective equanimity” to refer to such a state of mind.

##### 5. Detachment in Engagement

Our discussion in the previous two sections shows that the state of mind of someone who has fully transformed himself in an ethical direction can be viewed as operating at two levels. On the one hand, he does care about various conditions of life, and would take appropriate action to pursue what he does care about, as well as respond to the outcomes in a way that engages his emotions and feelings. As mentioned in the earlier discussion of contentment (*le*) and anxiety (*you*), he may exhibit emotions of all kinds, including joy and worry, as part of his immediate responses to his environment. On the other hand, even if the outcomes go against his wishes and he responds with disappointment, frustration, pain, or sorrow, he would at the same time take on a posture that enables him to stand apart from such responses. Having done what he could within the bounds of the ethical, he would accept the outcomes in the sense described in the previous section, and would not dwell on them in a way that leads to anxiety, fear, or uncertainty. Instead, he would stay contented in the awareness that what is of greatest significance to him, namely following the ethical path, remains intact. For convenience, I will use the term “engagement” (as opposed to “disengagement”) to describe the first order responses of the mind to situations it confronts, and the term “detachment” (as

opposed to “attachment”) to describe the mind’s second order posture which involves a distancing of the mind from its first order responses. These two aspects of the operations of the mind may thus be described as “detachment in engagement”.

This picture of the mind as having two aspects of operation, which is already implicit in the early Confucian ideas that we discussed in the previous two sections, is particularly highlighted in later Confucian thought. For example, Wang Yangming puts it in terms of a distinction between the operation of the emotions and the way we relate to these emotions:

“The seven emotions follow their natural courses of operation. ... But we should not be attached to them...”<sup>33</sup>

That is, we should respond emotionally to the conditions of life in ways appropriate to them, and yet at the same time we should stand apart from such responses and maintain a more removed posture. This picture of the mind is often presented in terms of the metaphor of a clear mirror or still water. For example, Wang remarks that the mind

“is like a clear mirror ... It reflects things as they come, without retaining any residue. This is what is meant by the saying that ‘the sage’s emotions follow the ten thousand affairs and he has no emotion of his own.’”<sup>34</sup>

Like a clear mirror or still water which reflects accurately without itself being affected by the reflections, the mind should also respond appropriately to what it encounters but should itself stay unaffected by such responses.

This picture of the mind has also been presented in relation to specific emotions such as anger or sorrow. For example, Zhu Xi notes how

“(The sages) are angry when they should, and (their anger) hits the mark. But when the affair is over, (their anger) dissipates and there is no residue.”<sup>35</sup>



Wang Yangming also notes how, ideally:

“Although we are angry, our minds are broad and stay unperturbed.”<sup>36</sup>

The idea is again that, while anger is an appropriate response to a situation that one finds problematic, one should at the same time keep a distance from such response and not be personally involved, so that once the problematic situation has been addressed, the anger dissipates.<sup>37</sup>

Let us consider sorrow as another example. Wang Yangming was once asked how contentment (*le*) can be compatible with sorrow, such as one’s sorrow upon the death of a parent. His response is that:

“There is contentment only if the son has cried bitterly. If not, there will not be contentment. Contentment means that despite crying, one’s mind is at peace.”<sup>38</sup>

The point is that crying bitterly out of sorrow is an appropriate response to the death of a parent, and there will not be contentment unless one has responded appropriately. Again, we see a distinction between the first order response of sorrow, and the second order posture of contentment which is based on the awareness that one has responded appropriately to the situation.

Thus, the engaged responses of the mind reflect the fact that we do care about various things in life; there can be genuine pain at what has transpired, even if we realize that it is the ethically appropriate thing to let it transpire. So, on one level, we are vulnerable to genuine injury and pain, and are subject to all kinds of emotional responses. At the same time, the detached posture of the mind reflects the fact that, on another level, we stay anchored and unperturbed despite the first order responses. That we remain detached in this sense does not mean that we do not really care about the things to which we respond emotionally; it means only that there is something of greater significance to

us, and our awareness that what is of greatest significance stays intact enables us to stay unperturbed by these first order responses.

Although we have spoken of two different levels on which the mind operates, this is just a metaphorical way of describing two inter-connected aspects of the mind's operations. The 'detached' posture of the mind refers to that aspect of the mind having to do with a posture grounded in a reflective awareness that one is abiding by the ethical and a reflective affirmation of this way of life. This reflective stance enables one to stay anchored and unperturbed by one's immediate environment and one's responses to that environment. The 'engaged' responses of the mind refer to one's responses to specific situations in one's immediate environment, which take into account other things that one also cares about in life. But such 'engaged' responses are themselves affected by the 'detached' posture, as what this 'detached' posture does is to ensure that one's 'engaged' responses properly reflect what we regard as important. This point is also illustrated by the metaphor of the clear mirror or still water – the clear mirror or still water still reflects, and what its clarity or stillness does is to ensure that the reflections are accurate to what has been presented. Thus, while the detachment of the mind means that it maintains a distance from its more immediate responses to the environment, the detached mind is not just serving as a mere spectator to such responses.<sup>39</sup> To speak of the mind as operating at two levels is just a metaphorical way of describing two interacting aspects of the operations of the mind – the direct responses to situations one confronts, and the more reflective posture one takes toward one's responses, a posture rooted in a commitment to the ethical.<sup>40</sup> These two aspects of its operations are part of a unified mind, and the reference to two levels of operation is not intended to suggest a segregation in the mind's operations.<sup>41</sup>

## 6. On Reflective Equanimity

Earlier, I characterized the primacy of the ethical as a reflective ethical view with four elements: it works with a substantive account of the ethical, regards it as fully within one's control to attain the ethical ideal, regards the ethical as more important than other

conditions of life that are also of significance, and advocates a total transformation of oneself so that one is completely oriented in the ethical direction. The discussion of the previous three sections describes the state of mind of a person who endorses such a view and who has transformed himself accordingly. “Reflective equanimity” refers to the more ‘detached’ posture of the mind described in these three sections, and in this sense the Confucian view of reflective equanimity follows from the primacy of the ethical.

Note that, in ordinary usage, the word “equanimity” can be used to describe the way one calmly responds to a specific situation. For example, one may be said to exhibit equanimity in one’s calmly responding to a deliberately insulting remark. What I have been focusing on is not specific responses of this kind; instead, my focus is on an enduring state of mind that is grounded in a reflective stance. For this reason, I have deliberately introduced the notion reflective equanimity to refer to such a state of mind. Furthermore, for the Confucians, reflective equanimity is based not just on a reflective awareness and affirmation of the significance of the ethical, but a total reshaping of oneself to embody this awareness and affirmation. As a result, one would follow the ethical without effort even at the expense of things of deep personal significance to oneself. Such a transformation involves a fundamental reshaping of one’s outlook on life as well as one’s whole mode of being, including not just thoughts, feelings and actions, but also one’s demeanor and posture. In this sense, the Confucian ideal of reflective equanimity may be described as a spiritual ideal, if the spiritual is understood in a way that is divorced from pietistic and devotional practices.

Ideals of reflective equanimity are not specific to the Confucian tradition. As we have shown, the Confucian view of reflective equanimity is grounded in the idea of the primacy of the ethical. But the four elements in terms of which we characterized the primacy of the ethical do not include a specification of what the ethical ideal is substantively like, and so they could also be shared by other ethical traditions with very different substantive accounts of the ethical ideal. Thus, our discussion of the Confucian view of reflective equanimity has a broader relevance that goes beyond Confucian thought, extending to other ethical traditions that also subscribe to the primacy of the

ethical.

Furthermore, there can be other reflective ethical views that ground reflective equanimity in other ways. For example, an ethical tradition might hold the view that, while we do regard things as of significance in our day-to-day activities, at a more reflective level, we should realize that such apparent significance is just a product of the perspective that we happen to have adopted, whether through upbringing or other means. While we continue to be emotionally affected at the level of first order responses, this realization enables us to relax the importance we attach to various conditions of life, so that we stay unperturbed at another level. Such a view is like the Confucian view in advocating a reflective awareness, and an embodiment of that awareness, that leads to a relaxation of the importance we attach to various conditions of life. It differs from the Confucian view in that the reflective awareness it advocates does not involve a substantive account of the ethical, though it itself can be described as an ethical view in that it also espouses a view of how humans should live.<sup>42</sup>

As another example, an ethical tradition might hold the view that, while we do regard things as of significance in our day-to-day activities, everything pales in significance compared to our devotion to some deity. While we would still be emotionally affected by the adverse circumstances of life, we can at the same time take consolation and contentment in the realization that we have lived fully in the service of that deity. This view is structurally similar to the Confucian view in that it acknowledges the genuine significance of the other conditions of life while at the same time regarding them of lesser significance compared to something that has primacy in the sense that we described earlier. It differs from the Confucian view in that what takes primacy has to do ultimately with devotion to some deity, rather than to the ethical as such.<sup>43</sup>

To conclude, let us consider a potential worry about the Confucian view that I hope to investigate further in another paper. Reflective equanimity is a posture toward adverse conditions of life that is grounded in the awareness that these other conditions of life pale in significance compared to the importance of following the ethical path. But

what if these conditions themselves involve the frustration of the objects of one's ethical endeavors – would there not be something objectionable in a posture that regards these endeavors themselves as more important than their objects? If the object of one's ethical endeavors concerns the well-being of others, the potential worry is that, in taking consolation in the fact that one has done what is ethically appropriate despite the failure of one's endeavors, one is putting more weight on one's own ethical qualities than on the well-being of others. And if the object of one's ethical endeavors is the ethical transformation of a corrupt environment, the objection takes on a particularly disturbing form – it seems that one is putting more weight on one's own ethical qualities than on the ethical qualities of others. In either instance, it appears that the Confucian view is open to the potential charge of a form of moral self-indulgence. This charge would not arise if we share an optimistic belief, found in some Confucian classics such as the *Zhongyong*, to the effect that the ethical transformation of oneself will inevitably lead to the ethical transformation of as well as a nourishing effect on others. This optimistic belief, while potentially appealing when we are considering the transformative and nourishing effect of a virtuous ruler of a small state, does not seem realistic as a general observation about humans. We are thus left with a potential worry about the Confucian view on grounds of moral self-indulgence, a subject that I hope to address in another paper.

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<sup>2</sup> Kupperman (2010).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 194.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198. Kupperman cites *Analects* 7.37: "The gentleman is easy of mind" (君子坦蕩蕩), and *Analects* 4.2: "One who is not benevolent cannot remain long in straitened circumstance, nor can he remain long in easy circumstances" (不仁者不可以久處約 不可以長處樂). For citations from the *Analects*, I have followed the numbering of passages in Yang (1980), and my translation of passages from the *Analects* follows, with occasional modification, Lau (1992).

<sup>5</sup> *Analects* 9.29; cf. 7.19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> The textual analysis has been undertaken in my *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (1997) and *Zhu Xi and Later Confucian Thought* (manuscript under revision).

<sup>8</sup> See Shun (2009) for a discussion of my overall methodological approach in the study of Confucian and comparative ethics.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout my paper, I use the word "mind" as a translation of the Chinese character *xin* 心. The character *xin* refers to the organ of the heart, which the Chinese traditionally regard as the site of what we would now call cognitive and affective functions.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the Confucian understanding of *yi*, see my "On Anger: An Experimental Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology" (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of *cheng*, see Shun (2008).

<sup>12</sup> *Mencius* 2A:2; for a discussion of the idea of the unmoved mind (*bu dong xin* 不動心), see Shun (1997),

pp. 72-76. For citations from the *Mencius*, I have followed the numbering of passages in Yang (1984), substituting book numbers 1A – 7B for 1 – 14. My translation of passages from the *Mencius* follows, with occasional modification, Lau (2003).

<sup>13</sup> *Mencius* 3B:2: 富貴不能淫 貧賤不能移 威武不能屈 此之謂大丈夫。

<sup>14</sup> *Analects* 9.26: 三軍可奪帥也 匹夫不可奪志也。The character which I have translated as “that on which he has set his mind” is *zhi* 志; for a discussion of *zhi*, see Shun (1997), pp. 66-68, 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> See Griswold (2007), pp. 11-13, for a discussion of similar ideas in relation to Socrates and the Stoics.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of similar ideas, see Winch (1972).

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., *Mencius* 7A:4.

<sup>18</sup> *Analects* 6.11: 賢哉回也 一簞食 一瓢飲 在陋巷 人不堪其憂 回也不改其樂 賢哉回也

<sup>19</sup> *Analects* 7.16, 7.19, 9.29. The character translated here as “anxiety” is *you* 憂.

<sup>20</sup> See my “On Anger: An Experimental Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology” (forthcoming).

<sup>21</sup> *Mencius* 4A:27: 樂則生矣 生則惡可已也 惡可已 則不知足之踏之手之舞之

<sup>22</sup> Zhu Xi *Lunyu Huowen* 11.12a: 顏子之心 從容自得 而無適不樂 不待以道為可樂 然後樂也

<sup>23</sup> Zhu Xi *Mengzi Jizhu* 4.15a-b: 樂則生矣 謂和順從容 無所勉強

<sup>24</sup> I am indebted to a comment by Roger T. Ames that alerted me to adding this qualification.

<sup>25</sup> After completing a draft of this paper, I read Griswold (1995). The way Griswold characterizes what he calls happiness is in several respects similar to the way I characterize the Confucian view of equanimity. I have benefitted from reading his discussion.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the use of *ming* in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, see Shun (1997), pp. 15-21, 77-83.

<sup>27</sup> For elaboration on these other postures, see Botros (1983).

<sup>28</sup> For an elaboration on this way of viewing the use of “fate”, see Solomon (2003).

<sup>29</sup> In Williams (1981), Bernard Williams discusses how a precluded option maybe unthinkable in one of two senses: one can edge up to it and dismiss it, or one might not even think of it as an option. While what I literally cannot do is something that I cannot even do unintentionally, what I ‘cannot’ do because of this kind of incapacity of character is something that I could have done unintentionally out of ignorance.

<sup>30</sup> See Shun (1997), pp. 49-52, for a discussion of *bu ren* 不忍 and other terms related to *ren* 仁.

<sup>31</sup> See Shun (1997), pp. 58-63, for a discussion of *chi* 恥 and other terms related to *yi* 義.

<sup>32</sup> Because of the two different kinds of constraints involved, I distinguished in Shun (1997), pp. 15-21, 77-83, between a descriptive and a normative dimension of the use of *ming* in early Confucian texts. However, it is likely that, from the perspective of the early Confucians, they did not draw this kind of distinction that we would draw nowadays. Thus, according to Tang (1978), pp. 500-527, while the different dimensions of the use of *ming* were already present in early Zhou, they were not fully separate. In relation to the conjunction of *ming* 命 and *yi* 義 in *Mencius* 5A:8, he makes the point that, when one faces what we would call descriptive constraints, there is a distinction between a proper and an improper way of responding to the situation, and so there are also what we would call normative constraints on how one should respond. For him, one difference between Confucius’ and Mencius’ use of *ming* is that, while Confucius focuses more on the attitude of acceptance as a response to unfavorable conditions of life, Mencius focuses also on the need to cultivate oneself so that one can consistently so respond to one’s environment.

<sup>33</sup> Wang Yangming *Chuanxilu*, no. 290: 七情順其自然之流行... 但不可有所著. My numbering of passages from the *Chuanxilu* follows Chan (1983), and my translation follows, with occasional modification, Chan (1963).

<sup>34</sup> Wang Yangming *Chuanxilu*, no. 167: 噉如明鏡... 隨物見形 而明鏡曾無留染 所謂情順萬事而無情也

<sup>35</sup> Zhu Xi *Zhuzi Yulei* p. 2445: 但當怒而怒 便中節 事過便消了 更不積

<sup>36</sup> Wang Yangming *Chuanxilu*, no. 235: 然雖怒 卻此心廓然不曾動些子氣.

<sup>37</sup> The Confucians idealize an ‘ethical’ form of anger, which they contrast with a ‘physical’ form of anger. See my “On Anger: An Experimental Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology” (forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup> Wang Yangming *Chuanxilu*, no. 292: 須是大哭一番了 方樂 不哭便不樂矣 雖哭 此心安處即是樂也.

<sup>39</sup> Here, I am referring implicitly to, and agreeing with, a point David S. Nivison makes in relation to Xunzi in Nivison (1991).



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<sup>40</sup> In Shun (2010), I also consider a similar picture of the mind as operating at two levels – the direct responses to the situations one confronts, and the reflective vigilance one exercises in relation to one’s responses. These two aspects of the mind’s operations are also inter-connected, as one’s reflective vigilance ensures the appropriateness of one’s direct responses.

<sup>41</sup> I am indebted to Winnie Sung for a discussion that helped my elaboration on this point.

<sup>42</sup> On a certain interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*, the text espouses such an ethical view.

<sup>43</sup> This view probably characterizes certain theistic traditions.